

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 2

14TH JULY 2019

**SEBASTIAN
AND THE
MURDER
MYSTERY**

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
"SO THIS
SPELLER
WAS IN A
LOCKED
ROOM?"

**3MAGGIE SOLO
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**BLOOD
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BY JOHN C
ADAMS
"GOOD
HUNTING,
MY PRETTY
ONES!"

**DOMESTIKA
GK MURPHY**

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Schlock! Webzine

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T Dabrowski, EW Farnsworth, GK Murphy, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 2

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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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EDITORIAL

This week, in the first of a two-part story, Sebastian finds himself investigating a murder. Friedrich Heine receives a vision of future hell. A bigoted clergyman meets his match. A young boy is haunted by a monster of sorts. And an artificial intelligence infiltrates the galactic imperial defences.

We welcome back GK Murphy with his new novel, *Domestika*. Deep in the Dark Ages, dawn breaks. And in the high days of Ancient Atlantis, Deucalion makes a shocking discovery concerning his marital status.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana Walpurgisnacht 2019](#)

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THE SKUDDA

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"AND THEN THERE'S THE JELL-O COMPARISON..."

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

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

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

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SEBASTIAN AND THE MURDER MYSTERY by Ste Whitehouse

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

Part One

Three months they had stayed in the camp. The Founders' hospital carried on around them but Kassi with her broken femur had no place to go. That was not quite correct Sebastian knew but he had seen first-hand how the young girl responded to her parents and could just imagine an invalided Kassi at home in Shirô her village. Her mother would make all of these sensible suggestions—rest, eat healthily, keep your leg up, take your medicine, do your exercises—and Kassi would almost immediately do the opposite. Her recovery would take twice as long just because...

Besides, Kassi and Fyonne, the senior Watch Mother of the hospital, got on well. Very well, Sebastian thought, but then his friend needed other, more human, companions and the Watch Mother seemed happy to oblige. Also Fyonne appeared happy to remain in one place despite their insistence that the 'Founders' implored them to be constantly on the move, a source of healing to the world. Not for the first time Sebastian considered the motivations of the Watch Mothers with suspicion. Ever since their first encounter three years ago¹ they had 'bumped' into each other again and again. Often when Kassi was in the most need of a decent bedside manner—and NOT the kind that Fyonne was administering to Kassi at the moment either.

Still, if these Founders had some ulterior reason for keeping his friend alive he was thankful. Better mysterious friends such as the Founders than death by excess bleeding. He heard the thump of metal on soil and felt a sense of contentment.

"So! You've finally decided to rise up off your bed, lass?" he purred sarcastically.

"Fyonne asked me to keep an eye on you. Stop you pestering her Watch Sisters," the girl said in good humour.

"I merely enquired how they came about the formula for such potent antibiotics."

"And?"

"Well, I may have secreted a number of medicines within my frame for later analysis."

"Four hundred and seven different medicines?" Kassi said incredulously.

"I have a rather spacious interior."

¹ In [Kassi and the Mech Merchants](#).

“Fyonne says that all you have to do is ask. She’ll lend you anything you wish if it helps me.”

Obviously, he thought snarkily, before asking. “And where is the good Mother this fine morning?”

“An outbreak of something or other in a town twenty miles counter-east.” She stroked the collection of tubes and cylinders that constituted Sebastian’s neck. “We’ve got the day to ourselves.”

“Oh, and it’s WE now is it?” he replied laughingly.

Kassi sighed theatrically. “Well, you know how I get bored easily?”

“I bear the scars,” he replied bluntly.

She harrumphed loudly and retorted. “You do no such thing. You have that thing you do with proteins in milk.” As if to emphasise her case she ran a hand over his smooth outer skin which rippled almost with enjoyment at her touch.

“Mostly.”

“Still, I’ll be glad to get back on the road again. This damn thing’s taking ages to heal,” she said, tapping her plaster.

“Just be thankful that The Watch know what they’re doing,” Sebastian said. “After all, there’s many a slip between witch and wise.”

Kassi was just about to reply when one of the Sisters rushed over to them. She almost curtsied before Kassi and spoke in short, hurried sentences. “S’ sorry t’ interrupt. Ma’am. Sir. There’s a visitor. A girl. Says she needs to see you. This instance.”

Kassi smiled welcoming the distraction. “What does she need me for?” Thoughts of battle, or at least minor combat, filled her mind.

“Oh. It’s not you. Miss. Ma’am. It’s the machi... Sir she wishes to see.”

Kassi looked at Sebastian as though he were a newly manufactured troll. “HIM!?”

Sebastian looked at the Sister quizzically.

“Yes. Ma’am. She insists on seein’ ‘im. The sir, that is.” She definitely bowed that time.

The two friends looked at each other and Sebastian raised an arm in a gesture that Kassi recognised as a shrug.

“Okay. Lead on,” they replied together.

The young woman was deathly pale and thin. Her joints appeared large and grotesque against thin, skin-wrapped, limbs and her face was drawn and shallow. Her deep set eyes darting back and forth unable to stay looking at any one thing for too long. Long brittle hair of a

delicate shade of red flopped sorrowfully across thin shoulders. She fidgeted, her fingers wringing each other endlessly and her left leg struck a dull staccato beat on the earth flooring on the tent. She nearly leapt up in shock when the three entered. A large ceramic wrist plate enclosed her right lower arm similar to ones they had seen Mech Merchants use to control machines². It clanged dully against the chair rest.

“You’re him!” she exclaimed in a thin reedy voice.

{Nothing good has ever come from a conversation that starts with ‘you’re him!’} Kassi sent to Sebastian.

{Well then. Perhaps this will be time to disprove it.}

{Aren’t we a bundle of optimism today?} Kassi’s thoughts dripped with sarcasm which Sebastian, as always, ignored.

The woman looked at them, uncertain whether to speak or not.

Sebastian stepped forward and gently raised a front ‘arm,’ offering it to the young woman in greeting. “I am Sebastian. Companion of Kassi. You wished to speak with me?”

She nodded dumbly, unsure what to do.

“Perhaps if you were to tell me of your purpose here?” He suggested settling down on his haunches in a—hopefully—nonthreatening manner.

The woman appeared to become even more agitated.

“Mrs Hilt. She sent me to find you. She needs help. Builders, she’ll kill me if I fail.” The young woman wrung her hands with an obsession that bordered on manic. “Mrs Hilt. She needs you. Sir. Sire...” Her voice trailed away unsure.

“And what does this Mrs Hilt need my services for?” Sebastian asked carefully.

“There’s been a murder, sir. An’ Mrs Hilt heard how clever you was an’ all an’ sent me t’find you. Ask you to help. You been a machine an’ all would be most likely to be impa... import...”

“Impartial?”

The woman nodded effusively.

“Please. Tell me what you know; after all people get murdered every day. Starting with your name,” Sebastian asked gently.

“Oh. It’s Sonia, sir. Sonia Made. I’m sorry. It’s just that this is so... new t’me. I’ve never left the Tower in my life and now here I am. It’s just so overwhelming.” Her thin voice was full of emotion and Sebastian could see that really she was just an innocent. “All I.. I know is

² See [Kassi and the Mech Merchants](#)

that Mr Speller was in his room as usual and then he was shot. When Tina finally managed to open the door he was dead. We all saw it.”

“So this Speller was in a locked room?” Sebastian asked with a frisson of excitement.

“Y... Yes.”

“Windows. Were they locked or open?”

“The guests’ rooms are on the forty seventh floor; no one could enter or leave by the windows.”

The woman looked through her long eyelashes at him, unsure and nervous. “Mrs Hilt asked me to come find you. Said that you would be able to find out which guest killed Mr Speller. I can show you the way. The hotel is less than half a day’s walk from here.” Sonia’s smile faded a little and a haunted look flickered across her eyes. “I have to return immediately. Mrs Hilt won’t be able to run the hotel without me and she didn’t authorise any extra spending.”

“Then we best make our way there then.” Sebastian said as the girl’s eyes widened in wonderment. He ‘spoke’ to Kassi in silence, telling her to wait at the camp, and off he went alone with the young woman.

The Tower, as Sonia called it, stood overlooking an old lake bed. The water had dried up decades past and the trees around its shallow basin were shrivelled and brittle coloured. The tower itself reached high into the sky the highest man-made structure Sebastian had seen ever. It was pre-Quake putting it on par with Stonehenge or the Pyramids at Giza. Solidly built and obviously well maintained despite the abundance of gaping windows that adorned its facade.

A large shadow rumbled around the grounds and Sebastian heard snatches of words drift in on the breeze. ‘Stupid human. Me crush you.’ As they neared, the large shape filled out to become one of the largest Trolls Sebastian had ever seen. Sometime over the millennia its wheels had been discarded and large articulated legs put in their place along with thick arm struts with soiled pincers which were opening and closing relentlessly. The Troll’s muttering grew louder until Sonia shouted out. The beast stopped and focused upon them before trundling alarmingly forwards.

“Sonia? You’re back.” It covered the distance in less than a second and swept the young girl up into its arms with a gentleness that belied its strength.

“Tiny, this is Sebastian,” the girl said, half smothered in Troll.

“Ooohh; YOU’RE the mechanoid Mr Smith suggested.” The Troll’s voice sounded British suddenly and very educated. It, for some unknown reason Sebastian felt as if this was a she, offered her hand as way of welcoming him. Sebastian took it feeling the innate power that flowed through the Troll.

“You’re welcome... Tiny?” Sebastian replied.

The Troll shrugged, dislodging at least a dozen kilos of metal from somewhere.

“Part of me will forever be Tina, but the people here at the hotel call me Tiny.”

Sebastian speeded up his speech, imparting information and eliciting more in a fraction of a second. He discovered that the Troll was an actual original trolley base, the all-purpose mods that the builders had used as a basis for most machines (hence the name.) She had been a self-driving vehicle along the seam but had been ‘tinkered’ with by an old machinist just before the Quake hit the Ark. She had refined the troll’s positron network helping Tina to grow in capacity. The troll herself had added a voice modulator and many of the embellishments over the centuries. She even had a smaller ‘drone’ attachment which had been used to break open the door into Speller’s room.

The accent came from a supply of downloaded British documentaries. Her voice changed; a husky male voice almost whispered. “And now we see the wildebeest swarming around the savannah grasslands in search of ammunition and a place to set up a trap for the unsuspecting raiders. Impressive, eh?”

She led them into a sparse lobby badly lit with one lift in order.

The lift car rattled ominously upwards, spluttering and wheezing with alarming regularity. They waited patiently as the floor indicator was broken until finally the car gasped to a stop and the doors shuddered open with a creak. An old woman stood, thick limbed and almost rotund, with grey hair cascading down her right side and back. She wore a bright green dress not only two sizes too small but at least thirty years too young. She held her head high, a triple chin wobbling impressively between the top of her dress and her square chin.

Mrs Hilt’s voice was high and edgy; a brittle little sound that matched the woman’s demeanour. “It is most regretful that we have had to call someone in, but of course it cannot be helped; I suppose.”

“I have the gist of what happened, but please fill me in with the details while you take me to the crime scene.”

“Come this way.” Although the older woman spoke it was Sonia who moved, indicating he should follow her. The older woman continued to speak. “Mr Speller was in his room as always, he never leaves... sorry, he never *left* his room during the day. His door was shut. There were raised voices. I and the other guests came running only when we heard a loud bang. We are civilised here at the Hilt Tower Hotel and recognised the sound of a wand immediately. His door was locked, from inside, and when we finally managed to break open the door, he was of course dead; murdered.”

“There was no weapon,” Sonia added. “I mean in the room. There was no wand.”

“How did you manage to open the door?” Sebastian asked.

“Tina has a small unit which she can control from down there. She managed to wrench the door off its hinges eventually,” Mrs Weston answered.

They came to said door, hardwood but with reinforced metal inlays and a palm reader for the lock. Seven thick bolts, each the width of a thumb, jutted out of the door. Sebastian could scan the complex of wires and transistors hidden inside the door releasing the bolts only when Speller's palm was placed upon the plate. If the door was locked from the inside as they said, it would be impossible to hack, besides, how would the murderer escape?

Inside the room was much bigger than he had imagined; a wall of windows some ten yards long ran along one side opposite the entrance and doors stood half open at either side. The room itself was full of high quality kitsch; ornate legs and embossed gold leaf with heavily patterned clothe stretched over almost every surface it was possible to sit on.

Speller's body was still there dressed in what appeared to be a silk dressing gown; bare legs, brown and leathery poking out and a large darkened stain that had once been his blood spread outwards from a small hole, slightly blackened. Sonia had said as much that morning but that wasn't the most surprising thing. There was a plain knife embedded in the man's right hand. It pinned him to the rather over-flowery carpet like a grotesque wingless butterfly, as if some giant lepidopterist had started a more imaginative collection of 'death poses'.

"We thought that perhaps you would need to view the scene. The staff have allowed no one in since the unfortunate incident." Mrs Hilt made it sound like a jam jar had smashed on the floor and they were regretting the invasion of ants.

Sebastian went over to the windows. Sealed and unopenable.

"Hell of a view," he murmured.

"The Hilt used to be renowned for its views and the fishing available in the lake." Hilt paused as though remembering a better time. "Yes. Well, I must be off. The hotel will not run itself." She left Sonia and Sebastian standing in the room with a dead body.

"The door to the right is the restroom and the door to the left leads into Mr Speller's bedroom," Sonia said. There was a catch in her voice that barely registered.

"Tell me what happened, Sonia."

"As Mrs Hilt has said; Mr Speller's door was locked, from the inside. (Mrs Hilt has a swipe card to access all the suites in the event of a guest locking themselves out but it can only be used if the resident is outside the room.) There were raised voices."

"Whose voices? Did you recognise them?" he asked.

"The doors are very thick and the soundproofing well maintained. We could barely hear much more than a mumble." She looked downcast. "And then there was a shot. We all recognised the sound. Mrs Hilt, Miss Smith, Mr Smith, Mr Le Petite, Edward, Toni and the other staff were already there when I arrived. We called Tiny from downstairs and she... took a while to break in. Mr Speller was as he is now. Britt has some experience with wounds and such and he verified that Mr Speller was..." Sonia gave a small sob and turned away from the body that dominated the room so silently.

Sebastian resisted the urge to put an arm around the woman and comfort her. When your arm is a slim metal boned thing that smells of engine oil, comfort is usually the last thing it inspires.

“And the guests haven’t left the hotel since?”

“No.”

He had no further questions and so ushered her out of the room before searching the room thoroughly. By definition, someone who gets murdered has more reason to hide things. He tried the obvious places firstly, and then moved on to the AC unit and a number of vents. He even checked the ornate chandelier. As it was he came up with nothing. Speller had a few suits, brown and frankly out of fashion, a handful of shirts and a pair of good shoes. Only odd thing was an empty half closet in his ‘living room’. Set into the wall it opened at waist height and was about a metre square. Sebastian scanned it but what instruments he had revealed nothing.

All that he found were a number of brown folders in a small suitcase all cryptically named by initials. A.C.D.; M.H.; J.; L.L.P. Sebastian wondered if M.H. was possibly Hilt. When he open the folder he found documents and letters that seemed to bear out that theory. He sat back on his ‘haunches’. So that would mean that L.L.P. was Le Petite and J. Jones. That would then mean that A.C.D. is Miss Smith.

The last folder he opened contained a letter to the B’jing Times, an upmarket rag of a paper. The letter indicated that Speller worked for them as a reporter. So this Tomas Speller was a reporter and he was checking up on the guests here. Sonia had said that Miss Smith’s room was across the hall and Jones was to his right and past the elevator. Le Petite’s suite was opposite Smith’s with Mrs Hilt reigning over all in a massive suite of rooms at the far end. Sebastian left the room and knocked on Miss Smith’s doorframe. The door was ajar and singing emanated from within. The lock was identical to the one that had locked Speller into his tomb.

The woman who answered was tall and slim with honey blonde hair and the remains of freckles across her open nose. Her skin was dry and taut but a thin powder disguised much of that, as did the bright cherry lipstick and eye shadow. Earrings dangled, crystals catching the light delightfully as they swayed to and fro. Her mouth formed a perfect ‘O,’ showing straight white teeth that were obviously as fake as the makeup.

“You must be that machine that Smith told us about.” Her voice was rasping and hard pitched. If Sebastian had had an ear it would have scraped down into his inner ear and taken away much of the skin that lined it. The bonnet and pale red dress with a sea of flowers gave her away even if he hadn’t seen her initials in Speller’s terminal.

“And you must be Annie Clarabelle Dawson, teen princess of the Music Halls in B’jing.”

She snorted; a disgustingly filthy sound that brought back memories of a bordello he and Kassi had ‘visited’ a year back.

“What is this? A mechanical bot remembers me?” She held the door open and Sebastian entered her hotel room. “I used to be Annie Clarabelle, until I grew up.”

Sebastian recalled the scandal that had reached even Kassi's village. After all, Music Hall stars were popular entertainers who toured all 'the sticks'. Annie's manager, and part time mother, had doped her up on a blend of drugs just to keep her looking young and bringing the coin in. Finally AC just ran down the rabbit hole of addiction and never came out.

"So you ended up here at the Hilt Towers Hotel?" he said as way of opening up the conversation.

She bristled defensively. "I'm planning my comeback. I'll be bigger than ever. I'll be playing my age at last." She waved a hand vaguely around the room as if this were the stage. If she was going to act her age at least she wasn't dressing her age. The hat and dress was pure Annie Clarabelle Dawson, including the patent leather shoes; bright pink and with a metal buckle that wouldn't have looked out of place on Tiny downstairs.

"And you're here rehearsing?" Sebastian asked.

He looked around. The room looked similar to Speller's, except in shades of pink and the couch was a soft furnishing hell of cushions and throws, all matching the walls. Sebastian was thankful that he could stop his visual circuits from seeing pink just so as to save processing power.

"Yes. Mrs Hilt runs a very respectable, and safe, establishment; she's well known this side of the Circular Sea." Annie rested against the door jam and spoke. "I was in here the whole time. None of us up here leave our rooms that often, to be honest. I think that pale girl, the redhead, was cleaning this morning and I had my door open. I was rehearsing when I caught sight of that little brat of a child run from Speller's room. The girl. He came to his door, he was talking with someone. I heard him say 'Oh no. you're not leaving!' and he slammed the door shut. These rooms are pretty soundproof but I heard voices raised and then just as I was finishing my scene there was a loud gunshot. I ran out and Mr Smith met me at the door, which of course was locked. The staff came along afterwards. You have no doubt heard the rest."

Sebastian nodded and she continued.

"My door was open the whole time and this spot here is perfect to rehearse; the light is liquid." She stepped across from the door near the windows where Sebastian might agree that the light was adequate but not necessarily liquid. Annie Clarabelle ignored his blank look and continued. "I would have seen anyone leave Speller's room but I swear no one came out."

He crossed over to the windows. Like those in the dead man's room they were hermetically sealed and had nothing more than a thin stone ledge. Windows that didn't open and a door locked tight from within; how the hell did this killer get out?

"And what exactly did Speller have on you?" he asked suddenly. As she hesitated he added. "He had folders on all of you." He did not add, 'But I can't be bothered to spend the next hour reading everything he wrote about the guests.'

"I... I occasionally use, used, the odd pill to enhance my performance."

“A little drug use doesn’t make THAT much news,” he said and she looked away nervously.

“Okay. Okay; it may be a... habit of mine; alright?” She shivered and he finally saw the watery veil of addiction. She added. “But I was clean when Speller was killed; what I saw was the truth.”

“What was it you took?” he asked calmly.

She hesitated before replying. “D’Bies.”

DBE; Dwarf Blood Extract. More likely used for sex enhancement. Sebastian wondered WHAT sort of music hall little Miss ‘Smith’ was engaged in?

He expressed his gratitude and left Miss Smith to go visit Mr Smith. His door was shut tight and Sebastian wrapped a metal knuckle along the metal inlay. The same lock as the others. Sebastian wondered if Mrs Hilt had managed to find a job lot someplace.

Smith opened the door cautiously and peered out into the hallway as if a team of highly armed SWAT operatives had decided to accompany Sebastian that fine evening. He beckoned the bot in. Once inside, Sebastian could see that Smith was a squat dark man, a little smaller than Sonia and wearing a smart black polo and black trousers. His hair was black but smatterings of white gave it a softer look. His face, besides an old break to his nose, was smooth and almost black and when he spoke there was a hint of an accent. B’Jing or further north perhaps.

“You’re the bot; the one travelling with that barbarian woman.” Sebastian wanted to dissuade Smith of his idea about Kassi but the man ploughed on ignoring the mechanoids irritation. “It is a pleasure to meet you at last.” He held out a hand and shook Sebastian’s vigorously an unreadable smile on his face. “I have heard of your exploits and it was I who suggested to our charming host we hire you.”

If he had been hoping that Sebastian would look easier at him just because he had suggested him he was sorely in for a disappointment. Sebastian felt an almost automatic dislike towards the man. Sometimes you just have to go with your gut; even if said gut is a collection of brass and plastic bearings.

Sebastian waited. Mr Smith coughed gently as if clearing his throat and slumped his shoulders forward trying to make himself smaller.

“Well; I was here, in my room as always. I had in fact just returned from my mornings run up on the remains of the roof, a good twenty laps equates to about a mile give or take, and as I came to my door I heard Mr Speller’s door slam.”

“How’d you know it was Speller’s? From your door it could have been either his or Miss Smith’s.”

He smiled blankly again. “Quite. I did not know if it had been either of their doors; I just heard the bang. As I turned the girl child ran past me upset, not crying you understand, but I could see in her eyes that she was distressed over some issue. My room is somewhat distant

from Mr Speller's but, and here I beg to say that I could not swear it in court but if I was pushed to do so I would say there were raised voices coming from his room."

"Speller's? Are you sure? They could have come from Miss Smith's."

"I could not tell the voices apart, but I have heard Speller rant often enough to know his muffled growl through these walls." Suddenly he looked exhausted and drained of life; a thing that resembled something living rather than the object itself. The mask was allowed to slip only for a second before Smith was back in control of his emotions. "Then there was a gunshot and I ran to his room with Le Petite right behind me, he'd come from his room the same time as I; Hilt was right behind us. The door was locked from within and Miss Smith stepped out of her room just before I reached his door. She informed me she had seen him shut the door from within and then the staff came from downstairs. I am sure you know the rest."

"Can I check out your rooms?" Sebastian asked in a tone which didn't give him much room to decline.

"Of course. I'll go and see how our Miss Smith is doing." Something in the way he said her, admittedly false, name made the bot think that this Smith knew rather a lot about the younger Smith.

Once he was gone Sebastian searched his room as thoroughly as he had searched Speller's and the girls. Something about the guy was off, although he could not put a metal digit on it. The obvious places took barely a minute to go through, leaving the unobvious ones for his full attention. Even so he initially found nothing. Closet empty top and bottom; he barely had enough clothes to occupy two hangers.

The underside of all his drawers were clear and the mattress appeared full of nothing more than stuffing and a billion bed bugs. Sebastian had never seen the need to cut open a mattress. If someone was going to leave his stuff anywhere it would have to be some place that's accessible. Sebastian could not see a fugitive spending time stitching their mattress back together and then spending more time cutting it open just to get at something incriminating.

He waited patiently in Smith's room. None of the vents or AC units held a bronze coin. There was so little here. Sebastian glanced at the closet again. A jacket and a spare pair of trousers hung forlornly; and yet... there was something about the closet.

Solid wood; shelving and aluminium pole with those weird little coat hangers you only get in hotels. Sebastian stared for a minute or two trying to see what his mind had registered. Pole, shoe rack, wooden sides and back, shelf, clothes.

He waited.

It was then that he realised that the shelf was thicker than usual. Smith had nothing resting on it so Sebastian gave the shelf a tug. It lifted easily and he pulled it out and rested it on the bed. He 'opened' the tips of one arm and ran them along the edge pressure sensors feeling differences in the wood. He found a latch and flipped the switch and with a sullen click the 'shelf' separated into two halves with a series of hinges at the back.

Inside, enclosed in grey foam, were the parts of a large sniper rifle. The magazine looked to hold .50ml and Sebastian guessed that the ammo was secreted on Smith himself. At least that explained the Mr Smith appellation.

“She is magnificent; don’t you think?” Sebastian suppressed the urge to jump and give a little yelp of fear—that was one of the benefits of being a machine—but he did wonder how Smith had managed to sneak up on him.

“This seems like an awfully advanced set up for a civilian, don’t you think?”

He smiled coldly and even his eyes seemed hard a glacial. “I never purported to be a civilian, sir.”

“The ammo?”

“You cannot possibly think that I shot Speller? This.” He indicated the rifle. “This would have obliterated most of his head if I had used it on him.”

He had a point but Sebastian needed to see the ammo. Sebastian kept his ‘hand’ out until Smith reluctantly pulled out a box of .50ml hollow points and dropped them onto the upturned palm.

“Satisfied?” he asked bitterly.

Sebastian studied the bullets. They were specially made with a chrome finish and ceramic tip. “Awfully specific ammo for a wand,” Sebastian said blandly.

“Please. This magnificent creature is called a gun. I am NOT some ignorant farmer.”

“Still?”

Smith smiled with such frostiness that the temperature in the room dropped a couple of degrees. “A local Lord is due any day now, and certain members of her family wish her... gone.” He pointed a finger towards the window and made a ‘pow’ sound. Delightful; nothing Sebastian disliked more than cold-blooded murder. Keeping his temper in check, he asked. “Did Speller know about you?”

“Not that I am aware of; why?”

“It would give you a damn good reason to kill him if he did.”

Sebastian left Smith standing in his bedroom staring out at the world below. The rifle was now an abstract sculpture. It made Sebastian feel better at least.

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 13

I dreamt of a mountainside plunging into a roiling grey fog, alive with electric sparks, and my inverted body falling through the air to vanish into an ocean of dense mist. I watched myself fall but did not fall myself, if that can be understood. (Doctor Freud would have remarked on the significance of such a difference: my psyche protecting me from the trauma of my own death.) Rearing and screaming horses moved my mind from one dream to another as they kicked at the doors of their wooden stalls until the stable itself crashed down around them but not on them. A lantern fell and ignited the straw, the path of flame rushing up their legs to set their manes alight. I watched as the blazing horses galloped their fiery heads down the mountain path, then leapt into the mist to vanish like comets falling to Earth.

My eyes snapped awake and stared at the darkness of the room. I felt no more throbbing in my temples. My breath was short and my chest heaved from my dream, so I lay in bed until my conscious calmed.

I reached a fumbling hand over to the bedside table, felt for the candelabra, but only managed to knock the elixir cup and Kasimir's parchment to the floor, having placed it there before sleep took me. I left the fallen objects, and rifled fingers inside the table's drawer, searching for the box of matches.

Then I recalled that they had last been in the breast pocket of my night shirt. I reflected back to my adventure behind the bookcase, and could only assume that the matches were now lost in the cold stone tunnel.

I would have to request another box when I found Gustav. Yet how could I find my way through the castle—or even from the bed to the door of the room—without candle light? A single poorly-placed step on a staircase would do more quickly what Cybele's razor had yet to attain.

And then a greenish-yellow flare sparked in the room, grew into an immense glow, rising to the stature of a human frame.

It was the sister (I never did learn her name), the ghost of this family come once again to visit me. I lay in bed, head sunken into the pillow, and watched with stilled heart and frozen breath as the ghost mutely communicated her message.

As the figure glowed and floated just beyond the foot of my bed, her face a smooth white mask showing no expression, she raised one hand toward me. In it appeared a roll of parchment which slowly unfurled itself.

It was the twin of Kasimir's document. The ghost pointed a thin finger at the vellum in her hand as though instructing me to keep my gaze on it and not on her ghostly self.

I did. And saw horrific images.

I had once visited Paris and heard of a marvellous new invention intriguing that City of Light. Based on the developments of the kinoscope of the American, Thomas Edison, the Lumière

brothers invented a cinematograph with which motion pictures were filmed and replayed in theatres. The French brothers had made thousands of short 'motion pictures'. One which I had seen was originally shown in 1896. Only fifty seconds long, it was entitled, "L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat", in which a train enters the station at the coastal town of La Ciotat. I heard rumour that when this picture was first shown, the audience was so horrified that an actual train was heading toward them that they panicked and rushed to the rear of theatre so as not to be crushed by the locomotive.

A visual trick that captivated and terrified all.

It was a similar trick (I assumed) used by the ghost. The parchment was the screen, yet there was no machine projecting the moving pictures for my lone viewing. The vision merely appeared and came alive on the parchment, held steady by the ghost.

I saw hell.

Legion armies marched in step, forming endless perfect rows, their heeled boots clubbing the wide avenue of an unknown metropolis. Each soldier had an arm outstretched toward a small, dark-haired, moustachioed man standing alone on a podium, returning their salute. Common people in teeming masses—even children squinting against the sun, prompted by their parents—thrust high their arms with a spear-handed salute to the diminutive man. His eyes were dark and his stare unwavering as he scanned the multitudes in abeyance to him. In his gaze was power.

Iron carriages fronted by cannons rolled without pulling horses down wide avenues, then over rough terrain, barrelling through forest and over streams, crashing stone and stampeding over the dead and wounded in their juggernaut crush. Steel birds swarmed the sky and let drop metal eggs that exploded—bombs which vaporized entire towns, causing fires storms that burned for days, weeks. The tallest buildings were razed, cities were decimated, until only piles of brick and mortar and shattered glass were left in the wake of these hellish vultures. Ships made without a stick of wood, without sails or paddles or steam, but entirely made of steel and iron raced the seas, their bows spiked with multiple cannons, blasting fire into the air, lobbing some form of missile onto distant shores. Similar steel birds took off and landed on these steel ships, shot bullets at accelerated speed from their noses, dropped iron eggs on ships, harbours, roads, people.

I saw a skeleton face on the parchment: the mask of Death itself moving across a map of Europe... and in the skull's wake was horrific carnage, bodies torn and burning—those left alive praying for death, but death visiting only the fortunate. Many of those still with breath in their lungs were mere walking skeletons confined in caged compounds, their sallow skin stretched taut across bone. Eyes hollow and black, their spirits murdered, only their meagre hearts refusing to cease beating to give them peace. I saw such bodies as these thrown like rag dolls into shallow pits then covered with lime, limbs twisted in a macabre mesh of flesh, stacked like cordwood.

I felt bile rise to my throat, but I could not look away. I had sat myself up in bed, propped up by the thick pillow, arms loose at my sides, hands numb and feet of ice. A thick perspiration coated my brow and a burning swathe stretched down the back of my neck.

It was as though I were seeing every imaginable version of Hades from the minds of both Dante and Hieronymus Bosch. All moving across the blank face of the parchment in a ghostly light.

The images were suddenly smeared away by a thick crimson syrup—blood itself—which then poured down from the ghost's hand. Once every scrap of parchment was covered in red, the blood dissolved into a vaporous dew, taking the document with it.

The ghost stood—floated—and watched me, filling my eyes with its glow, as though ensuring that I understood fully its macabre message. I did. My fear would not let me forget what I had seen.

In the shutter of an eye, the ghost vanished into a single pinprick of green light and then slowly faded into the blackness of the room.

And every taper in the candelabra on my bedside table flared into flame!

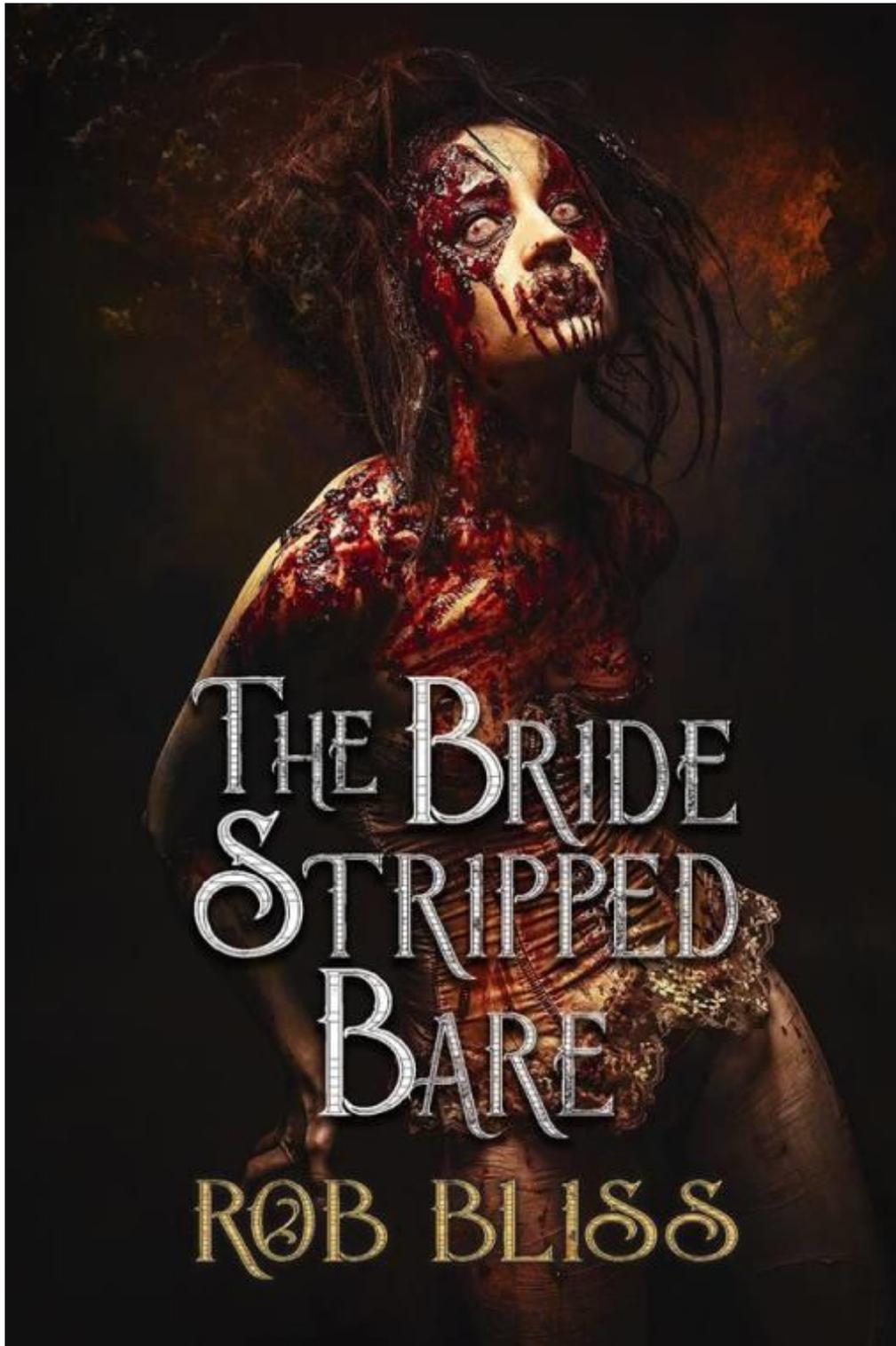
My eyes snapped to the light, then roved around the room, now filled with the flickering illumination of candlelight. My heart began to slow and steady itself as I wiped the sleeve of my nightshirt across my brow, threw off covers to expose my body to the cool air of the room.

I took the roll of parchment from off the floor, sat on the edge of the bed as I unfurled it to read again its message. I didn't understand how the contract of Kasimir concerning the mental care of his sister could lead to such world destruction.

But one—even a mentor of Doctor Freud, a scientist at heart—could not easily dismiss a horrific vision. I would not deny what I had witnessed, would not lay scepticism to the scene, or to my own mental well-being. Even a blow to the head could not throw doubt on the ethereal entity that had just retired from my room. My mental capacities had not diminished, and I had not been dreaming.

I knew for certain that I could not sign the document. I could not be the cause of hell on Earth.

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BLOOD FEUD by John C Adams

I was sitting in my web with my legs curled around me when I heard my wife Andi calling for me to come in for my supper. The gaze of my thousand eyes swivelled towards the sound of her voice.

The curling September leaves were falling onto the pavement. I love this time of year. There were insects everywhere.

A swarm of flies flew into my web and became meshed within its sticky fibres. As they wriggled, my stomach rumbled. I scuttled across the web, grabbed a handful and stuffed them into my mouth. I was just beginning to enjoy sucking the blood from their tiny bodies when I saw Andi marching along Winfield's main street towards me. She stopped beneath the tree and scowled up at me, her hands on her hips.

“Septimus!”

With my mouth crammed full, I gestured helplessly. There was no point my trailing back inside to eat dinner with the rest of the family. My hunger for the blood coursing through the flies could only be satisfied out here. It was like that whenever I'd had the taste of it in my mouth. I had to gorge myself on the souls of thousands of innocents before I could return home.

I stared after Andi as she stormed away home past the church, the butchers and the village store. A flicker of movement across the road caught my eyes and I refocused my spider's gaze on the spire of St Januarius's. It wasn't unusual to see bats in Winfield village. The Reverend Edgar Vestry did little to dissuade them from living in his belfry.

The original church had been built from the proceeds of the wool trade, back in the days when the flat grazing land in our county had supported thousands of sheep. A large market had been held in Winfield every Thursday.

The wooden church had burnt down in mysterious circumstances and was rebuilt in the early Victorian period but the architect had paid careful homage to the original he was replacing. The church was as lavish and overblown as any work of medieval revivalism. As High Church as any village place of worship could aspire to be. More than one traveller mistook its gables and lucarnes for that of a Catholic church, only to be coldly informed by Reverend Vestry or his redoubtable wife that they were Church of England, thank you very much.

I swallowed my last mouthful of flies and sat in my web digesting the feast. The blood of their minute bodies filled me with a warmth and contentment that not even Andi's excellent home cooking could manage.

What can I say? When you needed to feed, you needed to feed.

The bats flitted around the village and flapped lazily back to the church. Reverend Vestry came out of the nave and locked the main door. He gazed up at the darkening sky as the bats circled around him.

“Good hunting, my pretty ones!”

The reverend walked steadily away around the side path to the little white wooden gate that led to the vicarage. The click of the latch drifted across on the breeze.

I shrank back into the corner of my web. By the time I had digested my flies it was completely dark. I was about to crawl down the tree trunk and away home to Andi and the kids when I heard the bang of the wooden door round the back of the church. A shadowy figure in a black cloak emerged round the side of the building and glided past my tree. It was Victor Vestry, the vicar's eldest son. He nodded a silent greeting when he saw me before drawing the hood of his cloak up and turning his pale face away.

I cagily watched Victor go. Then I scuttled down the trunk of the tree and onto the pavement. I crept past the graveyard without difficulty but spiders are very sensitive to smell and I had to cross the road to avoid the freshly painted car parking spaces demarcated on the road for the new evangelical church. It abutted St Januarius's and planning permission had been granted, and the work completed, in the teeth of fierce opposition from the Vestrys and good-natured indifference from the rest of us. Winfield's spiritual roots went much further back than Christianity and we didn't much go for attendance at either kind of church.

The next morning, the whole village turned out to witness the arrival of the new pastor, his wife and children. It was more a question of nosiness than of imminent spiritual need that made everyone gather so promptly.

The newcomers drove up in a station wagon piled high with belongings. The inhabitants of Winfield stood in small huddles watching the family unload the car. Our scrutiny was not hostile, and the pastor nodded and smiled to us all.

Reverend Vestry came striding out of his church and planted his feet squarely apart. He'd fought an increasingly obsessive battle to prevent the other church being built and it had taken a terrible toll upon him. He folded his arms and looked the Claphappys over with an expression of disgust spreading across his fifty-year-old face.

Mr Claphappy held out his hand. He was tall and muscular. His shoulder-length blond hair had been bleached a shade or two lighter by the sun. Several of the middle-aged women of the village, Andi included, sighed as they looked him over.

"Hi, I'm Pastor Phil."

The reverend didn't take the proffered hand and finally the pastor let it fall away to his side. Vestry shook his head and muttered something to himself about the folly of those high up in the echelons of the Church of England. His gaze dwelt long and painfully upon the Claphappys' possessions on the kerbside. A cardboard box of finger-paints with its dried brushes and smeared palette. A guitar and a battered copy of *Songs for All Seasons of the Lord*, with its spine cracked and its cover torn.

"Don't think, Sir, for one moment that just because greed has found its way into the hearts of some churchmen, and they have prevailed upon others to agree to the sale of part of our land for your endeavours, that I welcome your inexplicable presence in my village."

I had to agree that the Claphappys' possessions did seem rather unusual for a churchman. But it takes all sorts.

Andi called over to Vestry that it wasn't his village. Winfield belonged to everyone.

I cleared my throat and turned to Reverend Vestry.

"To quote an old friend, little things make considerable excitement in little towns."

Vestry bristled.

"Religion isn't a little thing, Septimus, I think you'll find."

Pastor Phil's smile didn't falter during this barbed exchange. His family stood beside him. I trained every one of my thousand eyes upon the man, his wife and daughters, with their identical, unnerving grins. My scrutiny lingered but I couldn't detect even the smallest hint of personal doubt in any of them.

I shivered and crept behind Andi. When I didn't believe in myself, I became a much smaller spider than the usual beast that everyone in Winfield was used to. I soon dwindled to the size of a house spider. Andi bent and cupped me in her hand. She carried me carefully home and I spent the rest of the day spinning a tiny web in one corner of the window overlooking the church.

It rained heavily that night but I wasn't in the mood for going out anyway. I sat in my web curled up in a tiny ball next to the feebly struggling body of a fly that had flown into it that afternoon. Normally, I'd have leapt on it and relished sucking its blood whilst the whining of its death struggles only added to my pleasure. Somehow, after what I'd seen down there in the village this morning, I didn't have the heart.

I stared out into the night. A full moon sailed out from behind the clouds. A dark figure emerged from behind the church, where the steps led down to the crypt, and glided across the graveyard towards the newly built pastor's house next to the House of Worship.

"What fresh hell is this?" I muttered to myself.

It wasn't long the next morning before word got round Winfield that Pastor Phil and his wife had been taken ill. Andi hurried over there with some homemade soup and a basket of rolls fresh from the oven. She insisted I went with her to offer support to the Claphappys, pointing out that I'd been a newcomer once myself in Winfield twenty years ago, so I curled up in the folds of the napkin she'd used to cover the rolls and patiently endured the uneven ride as Andi walked across the village to the pastor's home.

The younger daughter, Steph, greeted us. The elder Claphappy girl was called Camilla but she was nowhere to be seen. When Andi asked after her, Steph said that her sister was sleeping and wasn't to be disturbed.

I poked my head out from the folds of the napkin as Andi handed over the rolls. Steph screamed and dropped the basket. I rolled out and banged against the wall. I crept into a crevice in the skirting board and refused to come out until a larger spider noticed me there and crawled over to investigate. Then I dashed back out, very glad that relative to its size a spider can move faster than a galloping horse, and ran up Andi's leg and into her apron pocket. I peeped out over the hem.

“Disgusting! A man that's also a spider. Ugh!”

“You're going to have to learn to be a whole lot less judgmental, dear. Winfielders come in all shapes and sizes. Everyone is valued and respected.”

Andi tapped her foot over and over until Steph backed down. She ushered us upstairs to see her parents. Pastor Phil and his wife lay in separate single beds under the eaves of their room. In between was a bedside table with a crucifix crafted out of dried grasses. Other than that the room was completely bare.

Andi bent over Phil's wife Janie and laid a gentle hand on her forehead. The pastor's wife looked feverish but her skin was so white that there was not a hint of colour on what had been, yesterday, rosy and glowing cheeks. Her sapphire-blue eyes were wide open and she stared up at us in terror.

Janie lifted herself up on her elbows and pointed at the window. The catch had been broken and it banged in the breeze. She tried to mouth something to us but the exertion was too much for her. A shadow fell across the window as a cloud crossed the sun. She fell back against the pillows and into a stupor after one last faint cry of alarm that ended in her throat with a terrible gurgle.

Janie shivered uncontrollably. Steph tried to encourage her mother to move her limbs but she seemed paralysed with fear. However when Andi took her pulse my wife reported that Janie's heart was beating wildly. Janie's face was as cold as marble and her body was stiff all over. A dreadful expression of terror had settled upon her face and it remained fixed there despite Steph's attempts to rouse her.

The sun came out from behind the clouds and the bedroom filled with warm light again. Janie pointed at the window a second time and began raving. It was clear to all of us that she was running to the point of madness. Her bosom heaved, and her arms and legs trembled violently.

Steph bent over her mother and took her hand. She asked her what had happened during the night.

Janie's blue eyes darted across each of us in turn. For the first time, she appeared to take serious notice of which strangers were crowding her bedroom in concern. Finally, she appeared to reassure herself that one particular individual was absent.

“I had a strange dream. It felt so real! Jesus came to me in a vision, but it wasn't like when I was praying that time just after the baby died and I felt him near me. This was a dark soul inhabiting the body of our Lord's son. A mist filled the room very slowly, so gradually that at first I didn't notice. Your father cried out and then he fell back in his bed, stiff and unmoving.

When I tried to get up of bed to help him, I found that I couldn't move either. I tried to cry out but no sound came. The stranger crossed the room and bent over me. I felt him kiss my throat. A sharp pain, but only slight and then everything went dark."

Steph examined her mother's throat. A small red wound, just a line about an inch long, marred the white skin. Andi inspected Phil. He appeared to have the same symptoms as his wife.

"What evil can have done this to them?"

Steph smiled slyly.

"Oh, I know exactly what's caused this. It isn't the first time our family has been made to feel unwelcome in a new location. We know just how to respond."

Andi's shoulders convulsed into nervous giggles. She breathed deeply in and out until she was back in control again. Just then a creak behind us made Andi jump.

"Prayer?"

Andi turned at the sound of our neighbour, Mrs Sneeze's, voice. The front door had been left ajar and Winfielders never need a formal invitation to step over the threshold into their neighbours' homes.

Steph regarded them both without a hint of emotion until she had apparently reassured herself that neither woman was being ironic or disrespectful.

"That. And more besides."

There was something terrifying in Steph's resolve. Her tone was very casual but that just frightened me all the more.

A chill fell across the room and we all left. Other villagers coming to offer moral support were turned away at the door. We retreated to the pavement outside and stood in a miserable huddle. Andi was unusually taciturn. Mrs Sneeze wrung her hands over and over. The children gazed up anxiously at their parents, willing them to take charge of the situation.

We all slowly returned to our homes. I spent the afternoon brooding and by dusk had diminished until I was now only the size of a money spider. I sat in what was now a ridiculously large web in the same corner of the window I'd occupied last night and stared out into the gathering night.

A discordant sound began to intrude upon my thoughts. It grew from a dim hum in the far distance through an unearthly crescendo until it filled the sky. The sound bounced off all the walls in Winfield. It was unfamiliar to me and the echoes made it even harder to identify the cause of it. The arrhythmic noises were all jumbled together in bizarre waves without any coherent pattern. But as I listened I began to detect some form to them.

I listened intently until I finally deduced that what I could hear was the flapping of thousands of bats' wings heading towards Winfield. The sky darkened as they swept over the village in

a swirling cloud. They twisted and turned before suddenly diving towards the roof of the House of Worship. They landed there in a black mass.

Curtains twitched all over the village.

The group of older ladies who'd been inside St Januarius's arranging the flowers for the Sneeze girl's wedding to the Wave lad tomorrow came out laughing and joking into the night. The bats rippled up off their vantage point and swept across Winfield. They dive-bombed the ladies, who scattered screaming as they ran for cover.

I trembled long after the cries had died out and everyone had found shelter in their homes. The bats hung in long lines under the eaves of the House of Worship abutting the church. They had been repelled from the belfry of the church by the Vestry bats. The lingering hostility between the two groups hung in the air.

A willowy figure wrapped in a black cloak emerged from the side of the church. I frowned. One of the most contentious points in the sale of church land for the House of Worship had been the agreement that the crypt below St Januarius's was to be shared. The Vestrys had been implacably opposed. The Claphappys had been just as determined in favour and finally they had emerged the victors.

The figure glided across the churchyard with her hood down. She was beautiful in an odd, pale way. Familiar, too. She reminded me very much of Steph. So! This was the mysterious elder sister, Camilla!

I spun a silken thread down until I reached the windowsill. I dashed across the walls and over the carpet, down the stairs and under the skirting board. I ran along the inside of the walls until I found, in the next house in the terrace, a crack in the brick letting me out into their garden. I sprinted across the lawn, dreading that a bird might spot me, but I was fed up with cowering in my home.

Winfield had been a gentle, lovely place and it would be so again. I would find out just what was going on and work out what to do about it.

Lord knows I galloped across the road and through the graveyard round to the vicarage just as fast as I could, but even as I was still running through the garden the same cloaked figure re-emerged and glided past me back to the crypt. The vampire had been up there for hours and must have taken her time in feeding off the Vestrys.

I crawled through a crack in the front door and ran up the walls to the first floor.

The Vestrys were labouring under the same paralysing fear as the Claphappys. I dragged myself back home and told Andi. The next morning, I was still too exhausted to move but she returned from visiting both couples with the news that the Claphappys were sicker than ever and that similar wounds had also been discovered on the necks of the Vestrys.

Later that morning, the youth group—Steph insisted upon holding in the garden regardless of the severity of her parents' illness—was attacked by the Vestry bats. Half the children in the village were scared witless. The other half were delighted by the entertainment.

The Sneeze-Wave wedding took place in the main church as planned that afternoon with the curate presiding. There was that semblance of ‘keeping calm and carrying on’ any village dweller will recognise during the reception at the inn. But by nightfall the whole village had locked themselves into their homes and those who lived alone went to stay with neighbours in case theirs was the next home visited by the vampires.

I watched it all from a crack in the wall of the newlyweds’ home. Susan Sneeze and Walter Wave were in their early twenties and had known each other all their lives. They had rented the tiny cottage two doors down from ours. Andi had forbidden me from leaving the house—more on the grounds that as a money spider I was likely to be crushed under foot than out of fear that either of the vampires would deliberately attack me—but I’d crawled out after lunch and taken my time getting down the way to the Waves’ new home.

After dark, I climbed up to the honeymoon couple’s bedroom and waited as they slept.

I was certain that neither vampire would be able to resist the opportunity to feed again tonight.

Soon after I reached the bedroom an odd sense of oppression filled the air. The wind whipped up and the catch of the window came loose. The frame rattled and banged but the couple were sleeping too soundly to wake. A flash of lightning rent the sky.

I stared into the flickering flames of the fire and tried to reassure myself that no one would come here tonight.

A sudden movement back on the other side of the room caught my eyes. A pale, slim hand with long, tapering fingers reached across and opened the window. The fingers scrabbled to catch hold of the wooden sill and in doing so the nails clattered against the window, which swung open with a low creak.

I winced and shivered at the terrible noise.

The lightning crashed again and the figure of Victor Vestry was lit up for a split second. His looked hideous as he climbed in through the window and deftly dropped onto the threadbare carpet.

The Vestry lad was tall and gaunt. His face was completely bloodless but his black eyes darted back and forth around the room with a dreadful energy. His full lips curled back to reveal pure-white fangs.

There had always been something ageless and all-knowing about Victor. Always that sense when meeting him in the street that he’d seen far more of life than any teenager had the right to. Perpetually a feeling that his horizons were wide enough to encompass nameless terrors as well as the more clearly delineated horrors his father spoke of from the pulpit every Sunday. I’d know Victor all his life but I’d never received any impression that he cowered in front of either kind of evil. In fact, more than any person I’d ever met, he seemed eager to embrace it.

Victor crossed the room with the same strange gliding motion I’d witnessed out in the street two nights running. He crouched over the sleeping young bride and his eyes flashed before he planted a succession of kisses on Susan’s white neck. She murmured and stirred in her sleep

but she didn't wake. Her lips were full and red. Victor's face was devoid of colour. A flicker of triumph crossed his visage as he drew back for a split second. Then he plunged his fangs into her neck, gripping her shoulders and pressing her down into the pillow.

Another movement over by the window distracted me. A second white figure climbed in through the window and lithely dropped down onto the carpet. Camilla! She gently rolled her hood back from her face and let it fall down onto her shoulders. She glided across the room to scrutinise Victor and the bitten bride.

"Sure you're doing it right?"

Victor muttered something under his breath about having plenty of experience. Camilla shook her head mournfully. She turned to the groom and stroked the white skin of his muscular neck. A faint smile played across her lips. Then she lunged forward and buried her fangs into Walter's flesh.

Camilla fed on the bridegroom for a long time. When she was satiated, she drew back and smiled very slyly at Victor. Her face was flushed and her eyes were much brighter.

Victor stamped his foot.

"Damn you, girl! No one comes into my village and sucks blood without my permission."

Camilla smiled up at him very calmly.

"It isn't your village, any more than it's your father's. You can't stop me from feeding as often as I like."

Victor shoved Camilla away from the bed. They tussled until she gripped Victor's neck and he slumped to the floor. She was standing over him grinning when he kicked her viciously in the shin. He then leapt onto the windowsill and away. Camilla sprinted after him.

I ran after them as quickly as I could but by the time my tiny legs had carried me out into the street, the vampires had long since disappeared. Banging and shouting emanated from inside St Januarius's.

My wife was furious with me for sneaking off like that but her anger eventually gave way to relief that I hadn't been squished in the altercation. Andi ran to raise the alarm with our neighbours. Everyone gathered in the village hall to discuss our next move.

Victor had only recently turned and, with Camilla's arrival, Winfield was having to catch up fast. None of us knew how to deal with now two teenage vampires in our midst. Someone Googled it and an hour later we had a fairly decent strategy worked out. The rest of the night was spent sharpening our stakes whilst we talked up our bravado. Someone suggested we draw straws to see which of us should go down into the crypt.

Andi volunteered without choosing a straw. Susan Sneeze's mother did the same. They waved away the need for further assistance and marched off carrying the sharpened stakes. Andi had spent much of the night complaining about Victor and Camilla having the nerve to

upset me so much that I was now barely visible. Mrs Sneeze was simply aggrieved at her daughter's wedding night being ruined.

Andi refused to take me along with her but I was now so small that she didn't notice me hanging from her left earring. She strode beside Mrs Sneeze into the crypt and dragged the lid off one of the tombs. She coughed and covered her hand. The desiccated corpse inside had lain undisturbed for centuries. Mrs Sneeze yanked the stone lid of the next tomb and found another body inside. The women worked steadily around the crypt until finally the two oldest tombs right at the back, almost a thousand years old, were the only ones left.

Andi pulled across the lid of the larger one. Mrs Sneeze stood by with a stake in her left hand and a mallet in her right. Andi leant over to gaze into the tomb. Victor was lying asleep. His cheeks were rosy and his scarlet lips were very plump. Mrs Sneeze took a deep breath and stepped up. She rested the tip of the stake above his heart. Victor's eyes flickered open. They were penetratingly black and vivid. Andi shouted a warning and Mrs Sneeze raised the mallet and brought it down with immense force. The stake plunged into the vampire's heart. He gagged and his eyes opened wide. Blood spurted from his mouth and soaked his cloak. He fell back and his eyes clouded over.

Andi moved on to the next tomb and slowly removed the lid. Camilla lay there with her eyes wide open and a smile playing on her lips. She sat up and lunged at Mrs Sneeze but Andi punched the vampire full in the face. Mrs Sneeze stepped up briskly, brought a second stake forward and thumped the mallet head down upon it. Camilla wheezed and tried to draw in immense breaths but they soon deteriorated into coughing. Blood poured out of her mouth with every splutter.

Andi and Mrs Sneeze stood looking down at the two vampires. They hi-fived each other and grinned in satisfaction.

I felt the tension that had overwhelmed me begin to drain away but before I could warn Andi that I was clinging to her earring, my normal size began to re-establish itself. She toppled over from the sudden weight of a man-sized spider on her shoulder. Mrs Sneeze roared with laughter as she helped both of us to our feet. Then her face clouded over and she sniffed the air.

“Can you smell burning?”

We dashed back up the stairs and out of the rear exit of the crypt. Flames were already licking at the stained-glass windows of St Januarius's. We battered on the doors of the vicarage and the pastor's house. Our neighbours came to help carry the Claphappys and the Vestrys out to safety.

The flames had taken hold far quicker than I would have expected from the lack of furnishing inside the church. Speculation as to what dark forces had helped the blaze to gain such strength raged for days afterwards without being satisfactorily answered. Within minutes, St Januarius's was an inferno sending a beacon of unintended light to surrounding areas and bringing fire engines with blaring sirens. The adjoining wooden House of Worship was reduced to ashes within minutes.

Everyone from the village gathered to watch the blaze. The Waves brought flasks of hot chocolate. The Carps fetched out a giant bag of marshmallows and soon the village kids were happily toasting them on forks over a smaller, carefully controlled blaze to one side. The pizza restaurant in the main street fired up its ovens and soon we were all munching away.

Andi crept into my hairy arms.

“Oh, Septimus! Just like the pagan bonfires of old. So beautiful!”

I kissed the top of my wife’s head thoughtfully.

“Winfield finds a way,” I whispered.

THE END

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PHANTOM by Christopher T Dabrowski

English translation by Monika Olasek

When the light suddenly went off, Adam ran to his bedroom to hide under the covers as fast as he could.

When his parents had gone out to see friends, he was really happy; he could finally taste the feeling of having the whole apartment just for himself. This was going to be fun!

Downstairs, in the dining room, he installed military bases. On the bookcases—that turned into mountains—by the books, there were patrols of a few plastic soldiers; and behind the table, there were some tanks. This time, it was going to be total war.

‘The first home war,’ he giggled.

He was just heading to the next toy—after all, he still had to do something in his parents’ bedroom and the attic—when the light suddenly went off. Surprised by sudden darkness, he froze still, nailed with an icy sting of panic.

A moment later, he was speeding, as fast as his legs would allow, to his bed. Hidden with the covers up to the very tip of his nose, he tried to hold his breath, so that nothing could hear him. His heart was pounding like mad—as if it wanted to escape from his skinny chest. He hid his head under the covers and turned himself into a tiny scared ball. Apart from the pounding of his heart and his intermittent breath, he couldn’t hear anything. He just wanted his parents to come back as soon as possible—he was afraid of what could lurk in the never-ending darkness of the old house.

After a few minutes, he grew a bit calmer—thick, warm blankets gave him an elusive sense of safety. He hoped that whatever evil was roaming his house, it wouldn’t be able to find him.

He had no idea what could be going on outside. There could be a vicious ghost at the window staring with its dead eyes at his hideout; or maybe SOMETHING dark had come out from the wardrobe and was sniffing with a ferocious look in its red eyes, because it could smell a scared little boy. There also could be a lot of terrible things under the bed, but here, under the blanket, he was safe—it was irrational, but that was the way he felt.

Adam started to get warm—what is more, the longer he was lying without any movement, the more he felt something disturbing him; he didn’t like that feeling. All he needed was light—just that—and he could forget his discomfort; he could play undisturbed. And generally, how could he be sure that the bad creatures wouldn’t figure out that he was hiding in his bed?

He felt threatened—fear surrounded him with its paralyzing tentacles.

The moon shine did its best to sneak through dense curtains and lighten the interior of the bedroom. Behind the window, wind was hissing, a moment later the sound of rain knocking on the windowpane joined it. The boy finally gathered all his courage to make a small slit between the cover and the bed; now he could breathe in some fresh air.

He was scared that a spooky tentacle would appear from under the bed and pull him into where it came from. He was forcing his eyes, trying to see any potential danger. After a few

seconds of stress, his eyes got accustomed to the darkness around him. Adam carefully poked his head out from under the blanket and he saw several viciously sparkling eyes. His heart froze, touched by fear, but a moment later he realized that a few days before he had put a collection of teddy bears on the shelves—it was their glassy eyes that were shining evilly.

Oh, you ungrateful bears! he sighed with relief. He looked deeper into the room—there was a big black shape, but he remembered it was just a wardrobe.

Just a wardrobe, but there could be SOMETHING inside it...

Clouds hid the moon and it grew darker. The rain was drumming stronger and louder. The boy was wondering if he should risk going out of the bed—after all, there was a decorative candle on the cupboard. He would feel a lot better, if he could light it and make sure, he was safe.

Safe? You must be kidding, fool!—an evil voice laughed inside his head. You'd rather have the chance to look at a blood-thirsty creature that would jump on you from a dark corner!

'Shut up!' Adam hissed under his breath and jumped from the bed. He wanted to get over all that nightmare.

Suddenly, the room was flooded with amazing light, blinding the boy for a second. He screamed, terrified, and almost at the same time he heard a great thump. Adam threw himself towards the bed. He jumped under the blanket, hurting his leg against something hard.

'It's just thunder, just thunder, just thunder,' he was whispering, trembling with fear, trying to convince himself that nothing wrong was going on, that he was safe. When he calmed down a bit, he realized his pyjama pants were cold and wet.

'Oh no, I pissed myself!' he moaned.

He jumped from the bed not to wet the covers—he hoped to cover the traces before his parents would return—and he felt a painful hit in his leg. He bit his teeth and tumbled to the cupboard—the unpleasant adventure made him forget about the suffocating fear for a while.

Yellowish candle light made the vicious darkness less evil, offering a moment of safety. The pyjama pants were wet from urine, that was sure, and there was a purple bruise on his leg—luckily, the bed was untouched—the sheet and the blanket were only slightly spotted with tiny wet spots.

No one would know—Adam thought, relieved.

The only drawback of this situation was that now he would have to wash himself and the pyjamas—so he had to face going through the darkness, climbing to the attic where the bathroom was located. Of course, there was another one on the ground floor, but it was being rebuilt.

He wasn't happy about the journey, but he knew he had no other choice.

Another lightning stroke in the neighbourhood.

The faster, the better. He'd check what he had to check—whether there were any bad creatures in the room. He would take clean pyjamas from the cupboard and then go upstairs.

He kneeled. There was nothing under the bed. Carefully, he tip-toed to the old wardrobe—he was most afraid of what could hide in its large wooden body. He pressed his ear against the door, but he heard nothing—purely perfect silence inside.

Maybe it is lurking? Adam bit his lip, uncertain. Just one fast move and come what may! Just one fast move and it would turn out that mum was again right—nothing in there.

'Right, right, just one fast move and sticky tentacles would shoot from the darkness. They would slither around your wrists and pull you into another dimension,' a vicious voice was whispering into his ear. 'You know, a lot of children disappear in unknown circumstances... Do you want to be next? Okay, just go on.'

'Shut up! Just shut up!' Adam commanded with a calm, orderly tone, knowing that he must overcome the fear; after all he had to finally fight with what he was afraid of. After all, he was almost ten, a man—he simply had to stop being scared!

With one fast move, he opened the wardrobe. The door objected with a loud groan. He froze, terrified...

For a moment, inside, he could see SOMETHING—something that made him tremble—SOMETHING!

He laughed in a high voice—it was just an old, cuddled blanket, just a stupid blanket, but for one horrible moment he had believed he could see a brown demon body.

'See, nothing to be afraid of,' he was comforting himself, as if he still couldn't believe his eyes.

Relieved, he close the door and froze—with the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement.

'Well, the monster was cleverer than you expected,' the internal critic was mocking. 'He took you from behind, you loser. Now what?'

But nothing happened and Adam decided it must have been just his imagination. The room was empty. Not to waste any more time and not to risk being caught like that by his parents, the boy took clean pyjamas from the drawer and went towards the door.

'Okay, here I go,' he pressed the doorknob and went out of the room.

In the distance, eyes shone in the darkness. Their owner moved a few meters and... meowed miserably. Of course, Donald! Adam still couldn't get used to the fact that they owned a cat. New (old) house. New family member—brownish cat walking its own paths, and only sometimes paying attention to the new owners.

Cats don't have masters, cats have servants—as someone once said; aristocracy!

New town, new school—far too many new things. Eh, if anything was up to him... but no one ever listened to him; such was his fate...

He closed the door (not to let any monster sneak into the room) and went towards the stairs that led to the attic.

From the portraits on the walls, eyes of someone else's descendants were shining in oil paints; the boy was wondering, why his parents didn't take those disgusting paintings off. They were all fat, ugly faces! Trying not to pay attention to the numb, dead observers, he rushed upstairs; each step was accompanied by an unpleasant squeak.

Luckily, the bathroom door was just next to the stairs, he sighed with relief, realizing that all this stress would be over in a flash. Laundry, washing and back to bed—to sleep, he lost all will to play.

Sparkling candle light reflected from the wall plates, making the bathroom shine; it looked like the interior of a tomb filled with treasures. He set the candle on the edge of the bathtub, pulled off his wet pants and took the candle back in his hand. He went to the sink. Looked into the mirror. Icy sting of fear bit his heart.

What he saw made his eye almost leave the eye sockets. Now it was not only the pants he had to wash. He also had to clean the floor, but this very moment he couldn't think about it. All his universe shrank to what he could see in the mirror. He was breathing spasmodically, breathing in with effort, like an asthmatic patient during asthma attack.

His body was trembling, his forehead was sparkling with sweat. He felt weak. A moment more of this and he would faint. He bit his lip as hard as he could, almost until he felt blood—this helped a bit. For a moment, he pushed the overwhelming weakness aside—just enough to stand still and not fall. He wanted to run, as fast and as far as he could—he couldn't believe that what he saw was true. Despite paralyzing fear, using overhuman effort, he made himself touch his face.

Yes, his face was unchanged—he was still himself—a small, scared boy!

But why did the mirror show a half-naked, toothless old man with hanging, wrinkled skin? The phantom was looking at him with its bloody, bruised eyes with yellowish whites.

The boy felt more and more dizzy. The stiff hand could not hold the candle any more. Darkness came—this was like a strong impulse that made him escape, blindly, as far from the mirror as possible...

Old age has its advantages, but it also has drawbacks.

Unfortunately, the latter are significantly more numerous.

Of course, life is stressless, you don't have to work—you can taste each day like a ripe fruit. You see many details that were previously overlooked—due to lack of time to take a closer look; they flew by in the background of life, lost forever. But these details are the spice that gives your life specificity, taste—making it richer with a new, deeper dimension.

The old man could appreciate all this; he only regretted that it took him so long to understand this truth.

Unfortunately, there are also sad moments, and they get more and more frequent. In old age, you grow disabled, you have problems with controlling your physiological processes—simply peeing in his pants was not shocking new to him; he got used to it and accepted it—after all, there had to be something on both sides of the scales of life.

These problems were not the worst ones. Even pain or trembling hands—sometimes this was so intensive that anything he touched hit the floor within a split second—nothing was as scary as the fact that more and more often he forgot what had happened.

At the beginning, only from time to time, he had forgotten where he had put things—with time, it happened more and more often. Events and memories got all mixed up. Then he started having problems with recognizing people and places—which made him drastically reduce the frequency of leaving his home. Then he felt like an invalid.

After a few years, the disease progressed so badly that sometimes he didn't know what he had done a moment earlier, where he was; but the worst thing was that sometimes he didn't even know... WHO HE WAS.

Oldness, like a mean vampire, was sucking memory and clarity of thought out of his mind.

Now it happened again—this time he remembered who he was, which was not that bad, but he couldn't realize how it happened that he was standing next to a mirror with a candle in his hand.

He came closer and... saw a little boy—himself from over eighty years ago.

A tear appeared in Adam's eye.

'That was long ago!' he sighed.

He wasn't surprised by what he saw in the mirror—at this age, people don't get surprised easily. He decided that he was either sleeping or it was another phantom—a creation of an old, worn brain. The only feeling he had now was a deep touching emotion. In his mind's eyes, he saw long forgotten scenes from his childhood—crazy times when he could do all kinds of exciting things and no one had any problem with it.

So many years had passed, in a flash; eighty eight or maybe eighty nine—he sometimes forgot even his own age, but what difference did it make?

None!

'Well, what comes around, goes around,' he whispered and blew out the flame.

Darkness surrounded him and that was okay.

THE END

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3MAGGIE SOLO by EW Farnsworth

3Maggie had been briefed, but nothing prepared her for her encounter with the Galactic Prince, a man so powerful that billions of souls depended on his whims. The only thing that made sense to her was her mission, as expressed by her friend and lover Manny Farstar, the Galactic Edgemaster: get inside the imperial defences and terminate the Emperor.

She had been prepared for her mission. She was irresistible to anything male, and she could change her shapes to accommodate to her target's fondest wishes. 3Maggie was the closest thing to perfection her designers and coaches could imagine. She was not consoled by the fact that she would be performing her last mission and that she would probably never see Farstar again.

Other resistance agents had tried to deceive the Evil Empire, and they had uniformly failed. The last attempt was by a seductress who seemed to have no flaws. The woman was destroyed before she ever entered the Prince's chambers. "So much for planning." Farstar had told her. "But was she betrayed?"

The Evil Galactic Empire had spies throughout the universe. 3Maggie had to figure on the spies who might have been privy to her own mission from its inception. She had to anticipate the suspicions of the Empress and her devious minions. She had to be wary of the Emperor's staff. 3Maggie had been programmed to the nth degree. Still, Farstar had coached her to be wary and distrustful of what he termed, "the certitudes and platitudes."

3Maggie rode solo in her Spacecrafter VI vehicle to the boundaries of the Red Rhomboid crucible. She understood she would be met there by the Prince's representatives and escorted to his royal side. She had been prepared with irresistible intelligence about a plot against the Emperor himself. By imparting such knowledge, the Prince would curry favour with his prolific father. From that moment, the Prince would be vulnerable, but 3Maggie might remain alive and remain outside the lethal target ellipse.

3Maggie arrived at the periphery on time and announced herself in the prescribed code. The escort team came to enfold her into their intricate security envelope. There would be no question of her surviving her penetration of the Prince's defences now. She knew her betrayal might cause her immediate termination, but her data had been subjected to limited access and need-to-know protocols. If she had not been betrayed by one of three persons, she would be all right. The leader of the resistance had every reason to want the plot to succeed. Manny Farstar genuinely wanted her to return so they could continue their partnership. The unknown informant who had advised on the details of their approach had no idea what was coming.

As things worked out, 3Maggie was allowed through all the myriad security walls to the final access path to the Prince. He personally overrode the final protocol so she could tell him what she knew. This was beyond the fondest wishes of her masters. Only Farstar had envisioned her getting this far without discovery.

The Prince said, "3Maggie, you have found me. And I am ready to receive your priceless intelligence. Please don't waste my time dallying. Tell me what you know." The Prince was handsome, suave and a born aristocrat. His eyes darted over 3Maggie's figure with appreciation.

“Your Excellency, my intelligence is for your ears only. Can we retire to a fully secure environment where I can be certain no one can derive what I tell you and use it against the people who have risked their lives and their families’ lives to inform you of the plot that has been laid against the Emperor?”

“Lady, your concern for security is coincident with mine. Let’s retire to my chamber. There you may be assured that my security people have imposed what any reasonable being would consider the best security in the universe.”

3Maggie allowed herself to be escorted by the Prince to his bed chamber. She there endured the most invasive and insulting full-body exploration she had ever experienced. The Prince’s own eldest sister participated in the all-cavity penetration and search, to reveal to her brother the results, which were uniformly negative. Before she left the Prince’s chamber, the Princess said, “I find no fault with this female emissary.”

The Prince was accustomed to taking his liberties with a cleared envoy, and he made no exception with 3Maggie. She submitted to his lascivious embraces like the wanton whore Farstar had advised her to be, and she waited while he saw how far she was willing to permit his license. She did not call him to task in anything he tried, for that was her design. When he had slaked his lust on her, the Prince cleaned himself and ordered her to divulge her message.

She smoothed her uniform and stood at attention as she spoke.

“Your Highness, the plot against the Emperor is well founded yet subtle. His own vices will be used against him as I have been used against you.”

The Prince became defensive and said, “Are you confessing that you’re a viper in my breast, 3Maggie?”

“Lucky for you, my Prince, I am not a threat. I am innocuous. If I had been lethal, you would be dead now. The same trap has been set for your father, with one exception: the assassin will be equipped with a virus so subtle and lethal that it will not be detected until far too late. Nothing in the imperial pharmacopeia can save your father, except for the contents of this vial.” She held up a vial containing a dark blue, liquid substance.

The Prince grabbed the vial and examined it. He said, “Why should I not apply this antidote to counter any ill effects garnered by my intimate contact with you?”

3Maggie nodded and bowed. “Your imperial foresight is well known. But your use of the blue liquid would diminish the amount available for your father, the Emperor, and it would be wasted since I have introduced no poison into your system by our contact.”

The Prince seemed to be satisfied with her answer. He summoned his sister and informed her of 3Maggie’s pronouncement.

The Princess said, “Brother, I think it would be wise for you to take this antidote to our father. Meanwhile, I’ll keep this 3Maggie under close guard until you return safely. Of course, if you don’t return, I’ll have her tortured slowly.”

3Maggie had been programmed to anticipate this stratagem. She did not protest when the imperial guards came to incarcerate her for the interval when the Prince was scheduled to be absent. She was promised every amenity while she was under constraint. She was also given a communication device by which she could observe the meeting of the Emperor and his Prince. She was granted the privilege of clarifying any details the Emperor wished during that interview.

In the long interim between the Prince's departure and his arrival at his father's secret lodgings, 3Maggie spent much time getting to know the Princess, who was the oldest sister of the Prince. Little was known of this shadowy figure because of her acquired love of secrecy. While her brother was absent, she divulged information about herself that would prove invaluable to the resistance to imperial rule—if it could reach the leadership of that clandestine organization. 3Maggie realized that her knowledge of the Princess might prove more valuable in the long run than anything purposed for the near-term elimination of the Emperor.

One day, the Princess said, "3Maggie, we've become intimate while my brother is away. Why don't you tell me the real reason for your having breached our defences to see him?"

The Princess's eyes were flashing with excitement. She had unsheathed her curved knife to pare her fingernails. She was not threatening 3Maggie as much as displaying her power generally.

"Your Highness, I have no idea what you mean. I've come in good faith to tell what I discovered by accident. I hope the intelligence I've passed to your brother will help you against the anti-imperialist rabble."

"No doubt, it will benefit our just cause. In any case, though, you will be expendable once the information has reached the ears of those who can make a difference. Surely, you know you are going to die in any conceivable scenario."

"Will I die even though I have caused the disruption of a fatal plot against your father?"

"Of course! How could we let you survive knowing what you know?"

3Maggie had been briefed to anticipate this gambit, but she had not anticipated that the Princess would make the pronouncement. "I understand your desire for secrecy, but you may not appreciate how deep the plotting against the royal family runs."

"You might as well tell me everything. After all, your avowed mission is to preserve the Empire, not to prolong your insignificant life."

3Maggie bowed and began her scripted presentation. "If you should decide to terminate my life, know that the virus with which I have infected the Prince will kill him. I alone have the antidote that can save him."

The Princess laughed. "I figured as much. Of course, now I'll tell him how much he misjudged you."

“While you’re at it, also tell him that you are subject to the same virus as he—and the Emperor will be subject to it as well once he takes the blue liquid medicine.”

“Traacherous vermin!”

“No more treacherous than you, my perfidious Princess, who would destroy me, the bringer of the means to save you and your family!”

The Princess retreated to consider the new information 3Maggie had imparted. She was gone for three weeks. Meanwhile, 3Maggie was afforded every amenity. She was fed the best food and given a retinue of twelve attentive servants who catered to her every need.

By the time the Princess returned, 3Maggie was ready for death, but she knew her demise would come at a significant cost to the Empire. She was mildly amused to learn the solution she posed to the imperial family.

“You must think you are smart to have challenged the Emperor and Empress as you have. No matter! I’m not going to order you killed—yet. Instead, I want you to tell me more about the virus with which my father and brother might perish/”

3Maggie explained in minutest details how the virus worked, and she made sure the Princess understood that nothing could be done to stop the superbug’s actions besides the antidote she carried within her living person.

“For my body carries the antidote, and if I should die, the antidote dies with me. There is no way the best of your physicians can isolate the antidote from my living body. So keeping me alive should be your priority.”

The Princess forwarded her interchange with 3Maggie to the Emperor’s personal physicians. They concurred with 3Maggie’s judgments and urged the Princess to discontinue any plans to have the messenger terminated.

The interview of the Prince with the Emperor was witnessed by the Princess and 3Maggie via neutron communicator. The Emperor did not hesitate to imbibe the blue liquid remedy though he had no idea that he had been infected with the disease it was designed to counter. Then the Emperor ordered his guards to seize his son and torture him to be sure of his motives. It was therefore another Earth-month before the Prince returned to talk with 3Maggie again.

“I want to be sure you understand the meaning of my meeting with my father. He is confident that what you warned him about was true. The antidote he took will protect him from the virus you warned of. The imperial family owes you a debt we cannot repay. I am therefore empowered by imperial decree to terminate you at my leisure. That would be an unjust conclusion to your mission, I must admit. Therefore, I give you the choice of returning to your people or facing torture and death as a consequence of your knowledge.”

“Your Excellency, I am not afraid of death. If I were, I would have been deemed unsuitable for this mission. I would like to return where I came from, but I must warn you that everything we do has consequences.”

The Prince smiled. “My sister, the Princess, has informed me of the effects of the virus. I am aware that my father and I have been infected and that your body contains the antidote. I have not informed my father of this fact, and I believe it would be unwise to allow you to be killed. In fact, I have decreed that you should be kept alive, under imperial protection, until the danger has passed.”

“I’m sure you are aware that the danger will never pass.”

“It won’t, unless my father and I avail ourselves of your salvific blood to save ourselves.”

3Maggie smiled. “I thought your Majesty would come to that conclusion.”

The Prince smiled. “You must therefore have also concluded that we shall conduct two transfusions as soon as practicable. I shall be the first to subject myself to the cleansing power of your precious blood.”

3Maggie said, “The odds against the Emperor getting a transfusion increase proportionately.” She meant by this to criticize the Prince for wanting to be in a position to remove his father from the throne.

The Princess, who had been listening to the interview of the Prince with 3Maggie, entered the space and said, “High treason! Brother, I arrest you and forbid your using the blood of this 3Maggie since that would ensure the perfection of your perfidious scheme. “

She turned to the armed men who accompanied her and said, “Guards, you will keep my brother under guard in this place until my father the Emperor determines what is to become of him. As for you, 3Maggie, you will come with me to see the Emperor.”

The Princess was confident that she had sprung the trap on a devious plot to remove her father from the imperial throne. By denying her brother the transfusion, she thought she was going to interdict the plot. By taking 3Maggie to the Emperor, she thought she was going to provide him with the cure that would guarantee both his future and hers.

3Maggie and the Princess travelled to the secret location of the Emperor where medical preparations had been made in advance for his transfusion. The Princess instructed the physicians to arrange for a transfusion for both her and her father. As a result, 3Maggie’s blood was used to flush the blood from the father and eldest daughter simultaneously.

As the three recovered from their procedure, 3Maggie asked to be escorted into the presence of the Emperor to discuss a matter of mortal implications.

“Your Highness, I praise you for your foresight. I am glad to have been of service to you and your family through my blood. May I ask what my reward will be?”

“3Maggie, how could such priceless service eventuate in anything less than your immediate death. Do you have anything to say before I deliver you to my guards for execution?”

3Maggie laughed. “Your Highness, you must be joking! Surely, you have the wit to know when you have been outflanked by your subjects.”

The Emperor blushed bright red. “My physicians have concurred in every step of the procedure designed to flush my system of the fatal virus.”

“Yes, and your daughter has been similarly purged of the virus, am I right?”

“That is so. Why do you find this funny? I’m sure you won’t be laughing when the executioner’s axe falls on your neck.”

3Maggie said, “Sire, your having accepted my vital fluids into your veins assures your death within three Earth months. Your daughter will be similarly affected. There is no reversal. The effects are inexorable, even if you should choose to pray to escape your fate.”

“So your blood was the real poison, and the so-called virus was a placebo?”

“Yea, verily, your Highness. How you could have been such a simpleton to fall for the stratagem, I don’t know.”

The Emperor shook his head. “Does my eldest son know the truth of this?”

“He is completely innocent.”

“Still, he shall die, as everyone who had anything to do with your conveyance to me shall die.”

“What will be proved by those measures?”

“Any who strike against my sacred majesty shall perish. That is the lesson for perpetuity. I shall not step back from that premise.”

3Maggie nodded. “Know then that the Prince is already destined to die. He did not need to have the transfusion that you and your daughter have experienced. The virus he already has within him will serve to kill him and all those who have come in contact with him. As for your medical staff and your court, all shall suffer from the contagious disease. The virulence of this pest is such that it will rapidly proliferate throughout the Galactic Empire. No one will be safe.”

The Emperor’s eyes got an evil glare. He called for his daughter and replayed for her the recordings of all that 3Maggie had said. Then he ordered his own daughter to be slaughtered slowly so that she would remain alive, though in intense pain, until the life was extinguished from her body.

3Maggie was sickened by witnessing the effects of the disease and the torture of the Princess. But the death of the Emperor’s eldest daughter was only the beginning. The imperial subjects began to die by the thousands. The Prince communicated with his father when both were writhing in the throes of the disease. He asked specifically to talk with 3Maggie, but she admitted that she had no control over the course of the events she had unleashed. The Prince died in extreme agony while 3Maggie watched helpless.

The Emperor, who sickened and lay on his deathbed, wanted to see 3Maggie die in agony, slowly, in his bed chamber. His guards stripped 3Maggie naked and bound her to a gurney

where they systematically removed her limbs and organs. 3Maggie laughed through the ordeal even when the Emperor thought nothing in the universe could withstand such exquisite pain. Thus, he was disappointed when even her smiling eyes refused to wince as they were removed.

As for the Emperor, he too died in agony, bellowing at the top of his voice for retribution. None of his remaining children mourned. None of them rushed to his bedside to comfort him in his distress. All were afraid they would become victims of the plague.

The last act of 3Maggie before the final signs of life left her body was to send her final message to the resistance headquarters: "Mission Accomplished." The imperial forces were uncertain how to strike the receivers of the message since the resistance forces were too well hidden from long experience.

Manny Farstar saw to it that 3Maggie was awarded the highest medal for selfless bravery. Afterward, he maintained that she was the model for all heroic figures in the waning days of the Galactic Empire.

"She saw her duty clearly, and now she is gone." Yet, Farstar was far too practical a man to let the loss of one agent stand in the way of his lifelong mission to destroy the evil Empire. He had another 3Maggie fashioned, an upgrade to her sister unit. It was not that she surpassed her predecessor in beauty or raw functionality; instead, she had certain computational skills and implanted memories that made the Edgemaster feel as if his former companion still lived and worked with him.

Farstar also told the story of his former 3Maggie repeatedly so the new-model artificial intelligence understood how much he had valued her.

"So you still miss her?" the new 3Maggie asked as they sped through the universe.

"Yes, I miss her. She was unlike any companion I've ever had."

The 3Maggie's eyes brightened. "You must allow me to do what I can to replace her in your memory."

Farstar did not dissuade her from her objective. In the vast, cold wasteland of space, they made love as they could. Each time, she looked at him to register how she had measured up. Each time, he would shake his head and smile wistfully. She resolved to try harder next time. Though he never forgot his former companion, he had to admit that his new partner came up with pleasurable moments he had never known before.

As fate determined, he had almost brought his new unit to the stage of familiarity of the old one when he was forced to send his 3Maggie on another impossible mission against the evil Empire.

"I sincerely regret having to send you on a mission from which you are unlikely to return."

She smiled. "I sense you have been forced to give the same kind of order before—to my predecessor, perhaps?"

“Can you understand why as a human I am reluctant to do this?”

3Maggie shook her head. “Can you believe that I’ve grown to know you better than you know yourself? And I too regret the possibility I’ll never see you again.”

“How do you know that, 3Maggie?”

“I just know it. Isn’t that enough of a reason? Whether it does or not, it hardly matters to me. Let’s go back to your cabin and work it out physically. What do you say?”

“I say we have two hours before you launch. Until then, we’ll make wild, glorious sex together, as if for the last time in the universe.”

THE END

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DOMESTIKA

Intro

It was a windy, cold evening before darkness descended upon the small West Cumbria town of Whitehaven. The highways and roads were wet and particularly treacherous tonight, slippery for those vehicles going in and out. Many drivers avoided the main streets and roads since it was upon these accidents were more than likely to occur this time of year. Tonight, it was no different as rain spattered windshields and heavy fog settled and obscured everything. It refused to lift or give leeway to all thereabouts.

It would soon be Christmas and most windows and outer walls to houses were flowered with illuminations and various euphoria-inducing decorations, and festive neon signs wherever you cared to look. Whitehaven town centre, however small and insignificant as this unknown location was on the global map, was already previously fully decked with its very own set of bright garb and neon light displays across its Main Street buildings, placing it right up there with the best of them.

The weather report had suggested widespread fog and heavy frost on roads throughout the land.

It made the roads slippery. Cars, buses and long-vehicles were in most jeopardy as the winter took hold of the North of England, grabbing the communities there by the balls and squeezing hard, never to relent or release the metaphoric ball-sack it grasped in its clenched fist.

On this one particular back road which if followed might have brought drivers to the gates of a recently-completed nuclear energy plant in the region, a trunk lumbered steadily along—yet found difficulty in sloping concrete and clusters in the tarmac—yet continued nevertheless, since it carried important properties on board which had to be deposited ASAP at the site. This was a plant which turned out to be a great social hub and place of employment for many in this vicinity and it was also at best a major source of income for local business opportunity and enterprise, mostly due to its overall size and scale.

The driver, a middle-aged gentleman wearing a luminous yellow vest and black woollen cap to keep his bald patch warm, peered through clogged-up circular spectacles as he attempted to decipher the scenery in the near-distance. As it became increasingly difficult to do this, he pondered pulling up to one of many grass gullies and getting into his bunk to sleep off this cruel night, or perhaps even just kip down until the thickest of the fog dispersed and cleared later on, when he could put this beautiful metallic baby into gear and keep to the time scheduled, and get this batch of radioactive liquid to those nuclear folks well ahead of time.

Tony Haughton was 62 and well past his sell-by date when it came to steering such rigs through these sorts of weather conditions. The youngest and sharpest of minds and steadiest of hands would find trouble in driving through this fog as well.

Tony had never taken this back road before, but he guessed normally it was quite scenic with the vast landscape, the fields and hillside, all sodden now and filled with sludge, damp enough for slugs.

Any noise from the countryside was blanked out due to roaring winds and heavy rain splattering the truck windscreen, even now as there was hail in that rain, remembering it was December after all, and that time of year for this weather. As the truck trundled ahead along the narrow road, in good spirits suddenly, Tony decided to sing a minor ditty. However, it did not last very long. The trucks tyres skidded on the narrow dirt track and as Tony attempted to steer the truck out of danger, it proved far too late, since everything happened so very urgently and fast, as the truck fell into the gully and toppled all the way over onto its roof and back.

In the roof, somehow a gash tore in the metal, when bright yellow goo leaked forth into the ground beneath, seeping into the soil as varied radioactive gasses filled the atmosphere. Nearby there was barking and howling as the local kennels were disturbed, and animals, mostly dogs and cats seeking forever homes, went crazy for attention, either through joy or neglect, nobody could possibly tell the reason. Tony Haughton had struck his head and fell unconscious. The caged animals in the kennels were going mad, some scared, some anticipating a fresh meal, who could tell? But the yellow juice oozing from the truck's gaping hole continued, as it proliferated and suddenly entered a drain in the road, which was only dangerous because this drain was connected directly to Whitehaven and its drainage system. But it would probably do no harm. After all, it was just radioactivity at the end of the day...

One

The rain and winds persisted as the storm gathered momentum and rocked Red Long and the surrounding areas in and around West Cumbria. On the news, there were weather alerts describing high winds, rain forecasts for the coming next few days, as well as flood warnings. As per usual, Cumbria suffered worse than anywhere else, but that was just part and parcel of living here, people never learned and simply had to make sacrifices in order to get through the worst of it and come out at the other side. December was always dodgy, more of travesty since it was so near to Christmas, which was just a mere two weeks or so away.

It was getting late in the Carpenter household, as Lillian warned her husband, "George, don't be drinking the water tonight, it's a funny colour. I think it might be contaminated or something. Maybe those boreholes have something to do with it. It's never tasted the same since the utilities people stopped it being taken from the lakes."

Up until recently, utility services had received umpteen complaints about the disgraceful, dirty water supply, since they swapped taking from a local big lake, and switched to getting it from boreholes in the community. Many were all for it, whilst a lot were against the idea. People reported ulcers in their mouths and sore throats. The kettles seem to fizzle and pop as water boiled in them. The entire situation was nothing short of weird.

"Have you fed Luther, honey?" George called from the downstairs bathroom of the bungalow, as he brushed his teeth. "The water tastes all right to me. But I see where you're coming from, Lillian. It's a bloody disgrace. I mean, why do we pay these people for an utter sham service?"

Luther was the five year old cat. He was a short hair, black cat with white chin and breast, and paws. Now, he was at an age where food (any kind, it seemed) took precedence and was the most important factor of daily living. If ever you opened the fridge door to get a pouch of

Felix meat out, he was there like a lightning bolt, like a shot. As ever, like right this minute, the cat was there, waiting, starving hungry. He was a growing lad, after all.

In the kitchen, Lillian Carpenter looked down and admired the wee mite. “Do you want Whiskas or Felix tonight, Luther?” She knew the answer—his all-time favourite delight, of course. “Felix Tuna it shall be, then...” and she started emptying the pouch of tuna-flavour meat into his dish. Looking in the fridge, she sighed as she observed the household was fresh out of milk until they went shopping tomorrow morning, so tonight for drinks it had to be water for the little urchin. “Just water tonight, little man...we’ll get you milk in the morning, if you can forgive us for our sins and wait that long? You’re the boss, after all.”

She placed the bowl of water down next to the dish of meat, which Luther ignored as he put his face in the food dish to devour every morsel of its contents.

People could have perhaps heard Luther’s jaws working five streets away, even more so than the thunderous rains and wind outside. Boy, in such weather, people were blessed who lived in a house with gas central heating. Those homeless folks living on the street in this never had a thought spared for them. Seemed so unfair yet, like so many ignorant folk, people often commented it was their own fault for not helping themselves to secure proper accommodation. The welfare system, like it always had been, was fucked up. Recently, the Tory government under Theresa May had introduced a benefit system called Universal Credit, which was why a lot of folks were turning to Labour as this party promised to scrap this unfair benefit, if they were to win the next general election. Given, this was one good reason to vote for Jeremy...

Yet Theresa and Jeremy were both OAPs. It was a joke—all of it.

George was in his pyjamas when he called through from the bedroom to his 45-year-old wife, who was three years’ his junior. Employment-wise, the couple worked in town in a small and successful antiques boutique which they owned. Most of the takings were made online and with foreign investors. Still though, how long would that last for in the event of a no-deal Brexit...? We were supposed to leave the EU at the end of March, 2019...not long away now, unless of course there was a sudden Russian nuclear strike which may well have served to solve everything! Plus there was the Syria ISIS problem, and Iran, Afghanistan and North Korea...yes indeed, it was a well-known fact that currently the entire planet and its respective future was in a state of shit.

And now, these local boreholes which made the water taste horrible.

George called through, “Honey, are you ready for bed?”

In her own silken bed clothes, Lillian Carpenter glided into the bedroom, pausing by the door and leaning against it briefly, reminiscent of a 50s sex-bomb from the old days of Hollywood flicks. She smiled sweetly and said, “I want you tonight. I want every inch of you inside me.”

George knelt on the bed as she approached and sat down next to him. She reached out her hand for his crotch. Suddenly, his bulbous cock emerged and it was erect and a good seven inches long. Lillian grasped hold of it immediately and started to stroke it, jerking it slowly at first, pulling the foreskin back and forth as ripples formed in his vein-laden shaft. “Oh, you

do that so fucking well, you dirty bitch...” George gushed, closing his eyes, “...please, gobble me off and suck it like a whore would!”

“Beg for it, cunt...” Lillian said, “...Beg like a wanton beast desperate to be sucked!”

“I’m begging you...please, I beg you, please...please suck!”

Obediently she did just this, as she took the head of his cock past her lips and down into her entire throat, seeming to splutter at first like she may choke on the encroaching shaft. It was slimy in her throat and she gargled and coughed, yet most of the time she worked his cock hard, and sucked for dear life.

She spat saliva onto the tip of his prick to lick and lubricate in order for a better experience, to ease its passage into her begging throat.

Faster and faster, she jerked his cock when suddenly she paused to allow her tits to slip over her bed blouse, tossing the silken garment aside onto the bedroom floor.

“I want your spunk in my mouth,” she pleaded, and resumed sucking, pausing again to look doe-eyed up at her ecstatic husband’s face, adding, “...I want your cock to explode all over my face. I want to taste every last drop.”

But suddenly, there was a noise which alerted the couple, as they nervously peered across the bedroom door which still stood ajar.

George enquired, “Darling, did you lock all the doors?”

“I think so. Yes, I’m certain I did. I always do.”

“I think you had better go and check.”

Aghast, Lillian protested, “And what if there is an intruder? How can I deal with that? You’re the man of the house, you coward...you go and check!”

“But you know I have a heart problem, honey. Please, will you go...and afterwards we can resume business.”

Suddenly, another noise from the kitchen rang out which also left the couple shaken.

Lillian gasped, “There it is again. We have a burglar—an intruder—perhaps an escaped lunatic—a psychopath—a vicious murderer!”

“Fucked if you expect me to go and look. I don’t want to get killed in my own home by a vicious thug...” George said, adding, “Listen, Lillian, if you go and check, I’ll buy that pearl necklace you were drooling about earlier, I promise.”

“Really, honey?”

“Yes, really, now just go and check.”

Lillian Carpenter paused to inhale deeply as George pulled his pyjama bottoms up over his flagging prick. Nerves showing, she clambered down off the bed whilst saying, “Okay, I’ll go and see who it is, if it’s anybody at all, and not just our childish, expectant imaginations running amok!”

“Good girl...and if there is anybody there, give me a holler and I’ll come and deal with the bastard!”

She mocked, “Yeah, I just bet you will.”

Lillian left the room, entering the lounge adjacent to the kitchen where apparently the intruder might have been.

George waited patiently as he sat up expectantly on the bed, staring gormlessly at the door and, yes, absolutely shitting himself. Undoubtedly, the man was a born coward and didn’t whether or not if his good lady wife suffered a vicious assault or got murdered in their very own home or that he had to spend his remaining days as a widow—because bastards like George always found somebody new in no time.

He waited and waited.

It seemed he waited a long time. He waited in abject silence, which turned matters more disturbing for all involved, namely George Carpenter.

“Are you there, Lillian?”

Then, she suddenly appeared as she entered the bedroom like a floating angel of peace, walking across the room and simply lying down on the bed next to her husband. Oddly, she kept her eyes shut the entire time, almost like she was sleepwalking around the bungalow, from the kitchen, through the living room and finally arriving back where George waited patiently in the bedroom. He was genuinely relieved and more than happy to see her. And still, all that was on his mind was getting his oats—his leg over—fucking.

Her head on the pillow, Lillian appeared serene and thoughtful as her face looked up towards the ceiling, yet her eyes—her goddamned eyes—remained closed, but still, George never looked into why this was, the reason, or why she remained monotonously silent, not saying a peep. Snuggling up to her on the bed, he snagged her blouse and pulled the beige silk down past her breasts where he mouthed her nipples harshly, sucking on the tips as if trying to extract milk. He began showering her neck and face with kisses.

Was Lillian even breathing? The thought never crossed his mind.

The room had become distinctly chilly.

George reached his hand down to her crotch, pulled aside her panties and inserted his fingers into her vagina.

Her pussy was cold when the fingers penetrated. Not only just cold, it was more like a fucking ice-box.

Distracted, he looked across the room as he was alerted by a mewling sound. He saw it was Luther the cat. It was his wee furry pal. But Luther appeared spooked and upon second glance, whilst the cat sat there in the doorway intently, it looked transient as it gazed through yellow, neon eyes at him, and both seemed to glow and stand out in the room. The two menacing yellow pinpoints pierced the dark. Noticed by its owner, the cat quickly turned around and scampered off as though its mission was accomplished. There was a cat-flap in the kitchen it may have exited through, if the animal needed to go outside.

George whimpered, “Lillian, I’m scared.”

Suddenly, it was here his wife opened her eyes. She was a dead woman yet somehow appeared to be still very much alive. The woman was cold to the touch—even her pussy—and when she did open her eyes, like Luther, her eyes were glowing neon, and a sinewy radioactive yellow.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXX: How the Dawn Came

The dawn broke over Middalhof. Slowly the light gathered in the empty hall, it crept slowly into the little chamber where Eric slept, and Gudruda slept also with a deeper sleep.

Now the two women came from their chamber at the far end of the hall, and drew near the hearth, shivering, for the air was cold. They knelt by the fire, blowing at the embers till the sticks they cast upon them crackled to a blaze.

“It seems that Gudruda is not yet gone,” said one to the other. “I thought she should ride away with Eric before the dawn.”

“Newly wed lie long abed!” laughed the other.

“I am glad to see the blessed light,” said the first woman, “for last night I dreamed that once again this hall ran red with blood, as at the marriage-feast of Ospakar.”

“Ah,” answered the other, “it will be well for the south when Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda are gone over sea, for their loves have brought much bloodshed upon the land.”

“Well, indeed!” sighed the first. “Had Asmund the Priest never found Groa, Ran’s gift, singing by the sea, Valhalla had not been so full to-day. Mindest thou the day he brought her here?”

“I remember it well,” she answered, “though I was but a girl at the time. Still, when I saw those dark eyes of hers—just such eyes as Swanhild’s!—I knew her for a witch, as all Finn women are. It is an evil world: my husband is dead by the sword; dead are both my sons, fighting for Eric; dead is Unna, Thorod’s daughter; Asmund, my lord, is dead, and dead is Björn; and now Gudruda the Fair, whom I have rocked to sleep, leaves us to go over sea. I may not go with her, for my daughter’s sake; yet I almost wish that I too were dead.”

“That will come soon enough,” said the other, who was young and fair.

Now the witch-sleep began to roll from Eric’s heart, though his eyes were not yet open. But the talk of the women echoed in his ears, and the words “dead!” “dead!” “dead!” fell heavily on his slumbering sense. At length he opened his eyes, only to shut them again, because of a bright gleam of light that ran up and down something at his side. Heavily he wondered what this might be, that shone so keen and bright—that shone like a naked sword.

Now he looked again. Yes, it was a sword which stood by him upon the bed, and the golden hilt was like the hilt of Whitefire. He lifted up his hand to touch it, thinking that he dreamed. Lo! his hand and arm were red!

Then he remembered, and the thought of Gudruda flashed through his heart. He sat up, gazing down into the shadow at his side.

Presently the women at the fire heard a sound as of a great man falling to earth.

“What is that noise?” said one.

“Eric leaping from his bed,” answered the other. “He has slept too long, as we have also.”

As they spoke the curtain of the shut bed was pushed away, and through it staggered Eric in his night-gear, and lo! the left side of it was red. His eyes were wide with horror, his mouth was open, and his face was white as ice.

He stopped, looking at them, made as though to speak, and could not. Then, while they shrank from him in terror, he turned, and, walking like a drunken man, staggered from the hall down that passage which led to the store-chamber. The door stood wide, the shutter was wide, and on the floor, soaked in the dregs of ale, Skallagrim yet lay snoring, his axe in one hand and a cup in the other.

Eric looked and understood.

“Awake, drunkard!” he cried, in so terrible a voice that the room shook. “Awake, and look upon thy work!”

Skallagrim sat up, yawning.

“Forsooth, my head swims,” he said. “Give me ale, I am thirsty.”

“Never wilt thou look on ale again, Skallagrim, when thou hast seen that which I have to show!” said Eric, in the same dread voice.

Then Skallagrim rose to his feet and gaped upon him.

“What means this, lord? Is it time to ride? and say! why is thy shirt red with blood?”

“Follow me, drunkard, and look upon thy work!” Eric said again.

Then Skallagrim grew altogether sober, and grasping his axe, followed after Brighteyes, sore afraid of what he might see.

They went down the passage, past the high seat of the hall, till they came to the curtain of the shut bed; and after them followed the women. Eric seized the curtain in his hand, rent it from its fastenings, and cast it on the ground. Now the light flowed in and struck upon the bed. It fell upon the bed, it fell upon Whitefire’s hilt and ran along the blade, it gleamed on a woman’s snowy breast and golden hair, and shone in her staring eyes—a woman who lay stiff and cold upon the bed, the great sword fixed within her heart!

“Look upon thy work, drunkard!” Eric cried again, while the women who peeped behind sent their long wail of woe echoing down the panelled hall.

“Hearken!” said Eric: “while thou didst lie wallowing in thy swine’s sleep, foes crept across thy carcase, and this is their handiwork:—yonder she lies who was my bride!—now is Gudruda the Fair a death-wife who last night was my bride! This is thy work, drunkard! and now what meed for thee?”

Skallagrim looked. Then he spoke in a hoarse slow voice:

“What meed, lord? But one—death!”

Then with one hand he covered his eyes and with the other held out his axe to Eric Brighteyes.

Eric took the axe, and while the women ran thence screaming, he whirled it thrice about his head. Then he smote down towards the skull of Skallagrim, but as he smote it seemed to him that a voice whispered in his ear: “Thy oath!”—and he remembered that he had sworn to slay no more, save for his own life’s sake.

The mighty blow was falling and he might only do this—loose the axe before it clove Skallagrim in twain. He loosed and away the great axe flew. It passed over the head of Skallagrim, and sped like light across the wide hall, till it crashed through the panelling on the further side, and buried itself to the haft in the wall beyond.

“It is not for me to kill thee, drunkard! Go, die in thy drink!”

“Then I will kill myself!” cried the Baresark, and, rushing across the hall he tore the great axe from its bed.

“Hold!” said Eric; “perhaps there is yet a deed for thee to do. Then thou mayest die, if it pleases thee.”

“Ay,” said Skallagrim coming back, “perchance there is still a deed to do!”

And, flinging down the axe, Skallagrim Lambstail the Baresark fell upon the floor and wept.

But Eric did not weep. Only he drew Whitefire from the heart of Gudruda and looked at it.

“Thou art a strange sword, Whitefire,” he said, “who slayest both friend and foe! Shame on thee, Whitefire! We swore our oath on thee, Whitefire, and thou hast cut its chain! Now I am minded to shatter thee.” And as Eric looked on the great blade, lo! it hummed strangely in answer.

“First must thou be the death of some, thou sayest? Well, maybe, Whitefire! But never yet didst thou drink so sweet a life as hers who now lies dead, nor ever shalt again.”

Then he sheathed the sword, but neither then nor afterwards did he wipe the blood of Gudruda from its blade.

“Last night a-marrying—to-day a-burying,” said Eric, and he called to the women to bring spades. Then, having clothed himself, he went to the centre of the hall, and, brushing away the sand, broke the hard clay-flooring, dealing great blows on it with an axe. Now Skallagrim, seeing his purpose, came to him and took one of the spades, and together they laboured in silence till they had dug a grave a fathom deep.

“Here,” said Eric, “here, in thine own hall where thou wast born and lived, Gudruda the Fair, thou shalt sleep at the last. And of Middalhof I say this: that none shall live there henceforth.

It shall be haunted and accursed till the rafters rot and the walls fall in, making thy barrow, Gudruda.”

Now this indeed came to pass, for none have lived in Middalhof since the days of Gudruda the Fair, Asmund’s daughter. It has been ruined these many years, and now it is but a pile of stones.

When the grave was dug, Eric washed himself and ate some food. Then he went in to where Gudruda lay dead, and bade the women make her ready for burial. This they did. When she was washed and clad in a clean white robe, Eric came to her, and with his own hand bound the Hell-shoes on her feet and closed her eyes.

It was just then that a man came who said that the people of Gizur and of Swanhild had burned Gudruda’s ship, driving the crew ashore.

“It is well,” said Eric. “We need the ship no more; now hath she whom it should bear wings with which to fly.” Then he went in and sat down on the bed by the body of Gudruda, while Skallagrim crouched on the ground without, tearing at his beard and muttering. For the fierce heart of Skallagrim was broken because of that evil which his drunkenness had brought about.

All day Eric sat thus, looking on his dead love’s face, till the hour came round when he and Gudruda had drunk the bride-cup. Then he rose and kissed dead Gudruda on the lips, saying:

“I did not look to part with thee thus, sweet! It is sad that thou shouldst have gone and left me here. Natheless, I shall soon follow on thy path.”

Then he called aloud:

“Art sober, drunkard?”

Skallagrim came and stood before him, saying nothing.

“Take thou the feet of her whom thou didst bring to death, and I will take her head.”

So they lifted up Gudruda and bore her to the grave. Then Eric stood near the grave, and, taking dead Gudruda in his arms, looked upon her face by the light of the fire and of the candles that were set about.

He looked thrice, then sang aloud:

“Long ago, when swept the snow-blast,
Close we clung and plighted troth.
Many a year, through storm and sword-song,
Sore I strove to win thee, sweet!
But last night I held thee, Fairest,
Lock’d, a wife, in lover’s arms.
Now, Gudruda, in thy death-rest,
Sleep thou soft till Eric come!

“Hence I go to wreak thy murder.
Hissing fire of flaming stead,
Groan of spear-carles, wail of women,
Soon shall startle through the night.
Then on Mosfell, Kirtle-Wearer,
Eric waits the face of Death.
Freed from weary life and sorrow,
Soon we’ll kiss in Hela’s halls!”

Then he laid her in the grave, and, having shrouded a sheet over her, they filled it in together, hiding Gudruda the Fair from the sight of men for ever.

Afterwards Eric armed himself, and this Skallagrim did also. Then he strode from the hall, and Skallagrim followed him. In the yard those horses were still tied that should have carried them to the ship, and on one was the saddle of Gudruda. She had ridden on this horse for many years, and loved it much, for it would follow her like a dog. Eric looked at him, then said aloud:

“Gudruda may need thee where she is, Blackmane,” for so the horse was named. “At the least, none shall ride thee more!” And he snatched the axe from the hand of Skallagrim and slew the horse at a blow.

Then they rode away, heading for Coldback. The night was wild and windy, and the sky dark with scudding clouds, through which the moon peeped out at times. Eric looked up, then spoke to Skallagrim:

“A good night for burning, drunkard!”

“Ay, lord; the flames will fly briskly,” answered Skallagrim.

“How many, thinkest thou, walked over thee, drunkard, when thou didst lie yonder in the ale?”

“I know not,” groaned Skallagrim; “but I found this in the soft earth without: the print of a man’s and a woman’s feet; and this on the hill side: the track of two horses ridden hard.”

“Gizur and Swanhild, drunkard,” said Eric. “Swanhild cast us into deep sleep by witchcraft, and Gizur dealt the blow. Better for him that he had never been born than that he has lived to deal that coward’s blow!”

Then they rode on, and when midnight was a little while gone they came to the stead at Coldback. Now this house was roofed with turves, and the windows were barred so that none could pass through them. Also in the yard were faggots of birch and a stack of hay.

Eric and Skallagrim tied their horses in a dell that is to the north of the stead and crept up to the house. All was still; but a fire burnt in the hall, and, looking through a crack, Eric could see many men sleeping about it. Then he made signs to Skallagrim and together, very silently, they fetched hay and faggots, piling them against the north door of the house, for the wind blew from the north. Now Eric spoke to Skallagrim, bidding him stand, axe in hand, by

the south door, and slay those who came out when the reek began to smart them: but he went himself to fire the pile.

When Brighteyes had made all things ready for the burning, it came into his mind that, perhaps, Gizur and Swanhild were not in the house. But he would not hold his hand for this, for he was mad with grief and rage. So once more he prepared for the deed, when again he heard a voice in his ear—the voice of Gudruda, and it seemed to say:

“Thine oath, Eric! remember thine oath!”

Then he turned and the rage went out of his heart.

“Let them seek me on Mosfell,” he said, “I will not slay them secretly and by reek, the innocent and the guilty together.” And he strode round the house to where Skallagrim stood at the south door, axe aloft and watching.

“Does the fire burn, lord? I see no smoke,” whispered Skallagrim.

“Nay, I have made none. I will shed no more blood, except to save my life. I leave vengeance to the Norns.”

Now Skallagrim thought that Brighteyes was mad, but he dared say nothing. So they went to their horses, and when they found them, Eric rode back to the house. Presently they drew near, and Eric told Skallagrim to stay where he was, and riding on to the house, smote heavy blows upon the door, just as Skallagrim once had smitten, before Eric went up to Mosfell.

Now Swanhild lay in her shut bed; but she could not sleep, because of what she saw in the eyes of Gudruda. Little may she ever sleep again, for when she shuts her eyes once more she sees that which was written in the dead eyes of Gudruda. So, as she lay, she heard the blows upon the door, and sprang frightened from her bed. Now there was tumult in the hall, for every man rose to his feet in fear, searching for his weapons. Again the loud knocks came.

“It is the ghost of Eric!” cried one, for Gizur had given out that Eric was dead at his hand in fair fight.

“Open!” said Gizur, and they opened, and there, a little way from the door, sat Brighteyes on a horse, great and shadowy to see, and behind him was Skallagrim the Baresark.

“It is the ghost of Eric!” they cried again.

“I am no ghost,” said Brighteyes. “I am no ghost, ye men of Swanhild. Tell me: is Gizur, the son of Ospakar, among you?”

“Gizur is here,” said a voice; “but he swore he slew thee last night.”

“Then he lied,” quoth Eric. “Gizur did not slay me—he murdered Gudruda the Fair as she lay asleep at my side. See!” and he drew Whitefire from its scabbard and held it in the rays of the moon that now shone out between the cloud rifts. “Whitefire is red with Gudruda’s blood—Gudruda slaughtered in her sleep by Gizur’s coward hand!”

Now men murmured, for this seemed to them the most shameful of all deeds. But Gizur, hearing, shrank back aghast.

“Listen again!” said Eric. “I was minded but now to burn you all as ye slept—ay, the firing is piled against the door. Still, I held my hand, for I have sworn to slay no more, except to save my life. Now I ride hence to Mosfell. Thither let Gizur come, Gizur the murderer, and Swanhild the witch, and with them all who will. There I will give them greeting, and wipe away the blood of Gudruda from Whitefire’s blade.”

“Fear not, Eric,” cried Swanhild, “I will come, and there thou mayst kill me, if thou canst.”

“Against thee, Swanhild,” said Eric, “I lift no hand. Do thy worst, I leave thee to thy fate and the vengeance of the Norns. I am no woman-slayer. But to Gizur the murderer I say, come.”

Then he turned and went, and Skallagrim went with him.

“Up, men, and cut Eric down!” cried Gizur, seeking to cover his shame.

But no man stirred.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

14. Again the Gods Make Change

Now it would be tedious to tell how with a handful of highly trained fighting men, I charged and recharged, and finally broke up that horde of rebels which outnumbered us by fifteen times. It must be remembered that they grew suddenly panic-stricken in finding that of all those who went in under the city walls by the mine on which they had set such great store, none came back, and that the sounds of panic which had first broken out within the city soon gave way to cries of triumph and joy. And it must be carried in memory also that these wretched rebels were without training worthy of the name, were for the most part weaponed very vilely, and, seeing that their silly principles made each the equal of his neighbour, were practically without heads or leaders also.

So when the panic began, it spread like a malignant murrain through all their ragged ranks, and there were none to rally the flying, none to direct those of more desperate bravery who stayed and fought.

My scheme of attack was simple. I hunted them without a halt. I and my fellows never stopped to play the defensive. We turned one flank, and charged through a centre, and then we were harrying the other flank, and once more hacking our passage through the solid mass. And so by constantly keeping them on the run, and in ignorance of whence would come the next attack, panic began to grow amongst them and ferment, till presently those in the outer lines commenced to scurry away towards the forests and the spoiled corn-lands of the country, and those in the inner packs were only wishful of a chance to follow them.

It was no feat of arms this breaking up of the rebel leaguer, and no practised soldier would wish to claim it as such. It was simply taking advantage of the chances of the moment, and as such it was successful. Given an open battle on their own ground, these desperate rebels would have fought till none could stand, and by sheer ferocious numbers would have pulled down any trained troops that the city could have sent against them, whether they had advanced in phalanx or what formation you will. For it must be remembered they were far removed from cowards, being Atlantean all, just as were those within the city, and were, moreover, spurred to extraordinary savageness and desperation by the oppression under which they had groaned, and the wrongs they had been forced to endure.

Still, as I say, the poor creatures were scattered, and the siege was raised from that moment, and it was plain to see that the rebellion might be made to end, if no unreasonable harshness was used for its final suppression. Too great severity, though perhaps it may be justly their portion, only drives such malcontents to further desperations.

Now, following up these fugitives, to make sure that there was no halt in their retreat, and to send the lesson of panic thoroughly home to them, had led us a long distance from the city walls; and as we had fought all through the burning heat of the day and my men were heavily wearied, I decided to halt where we were for the night amongst some half-ruined houses which would make a temporary fortification. Fortunately, a drove of little cloven-hoofed horses which had been scared by some of the rebels in their flight happened to blunder into our lines, and as we killed five before they were clear again, there was a soldier's supper for us, and quickly the fires were lit and cooking it.

Sentries paced the outskirts and made their cries to one another, and the wounded sat by the fires and dressed their hurts, and with the officers I talked over the engagements of the day, and the methods of each charge, and the other details of the fighting. It is the special perquisite of soldiers to dally over these matters with gusto, though they are entirely without interest for laymen.

The hour drew on for sleep, and snores went up from every side. It was clear that all my officers were wearied out, and only continued the talk through deference to their commander. Yet I had a feverish dread of being left alone again with my thoughts, and pressed them on with conversation remorselessly. But in the end they were saved the rudeness of dropping off into unconsciousness during my talk. A sentry came up and saluted. "My lord," he reported, "there is a woman come up from the city whom we have caught trying to come into the bivouac."

"How is she named?"

"She will not say."

"Has she business?"

"She will say none. She demands only to see my lord."

"Bring her here to the fire," I ordered, and then on second thoughts remembering that the woman, whoever she might be, had news likely enough for my private ear (or otherwise she would not have come to so uncouth a rendezvous), I said to the sentry: "Stay," and got up from the ground beside the fire, and went with him to the outer line.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"My comrades are holding her. She might be a wench belonging to these rebels, with designs to put a knife into my lord's heart, and then we sentries would suffer. The Empress," he added simply, "seems to set good store upon my lord at present, and we know the cleverness of her tormentors."

"Your thoughtfulness is frank," I said, and then he showed me the woman. She was muffled up in hood and cloak, but one who loved Nais as I loved could not mistake the form of Ylga, her twin sister, because of mere swathings. So I told the sentries to release her without asking her for speech, and then led her out from the bivouac beyond earshot of their lines.

"It is something of the most pressing that has brought you out here, Ylga?"

"You know me, then? There must be something warmer than the ordinary between us two, Deucalion, if you could guess who walked beneath all these mufflings."

I let that pass. "But what's your errand, girl?"

"Aye," she said bitterly, "there's my reward. All your concern's for the message, none for the carrier. Well, good my lord, you are husband to the dainty Phorenice no longer."

"This is news."

“And true enough, too. She will have no more of you, divorces you, spurns you, thrusts you from her, and, after the first splutter of wrath is done, then come pains and penalties.”

“The Empress can do no wrong. I will have you speak respectful words of the Empress.”

“Oh, be done with that old fable! It sickens me. The woman was mad for love of you, and now she’s mad with jealousy. She knows that you gave Nais some of your priest’s magic, and that she sleeps till you choose to come and claim her, even though the day be a century from this. And if you wish to know the method of her enlightenment, it is simple. There is another airshaft next to the one down which you did your cooing and billing, and that leads to another cell in which lay another prisoner. The wretch heard all that passed, and thought to buy enlargement by telling it.

“But his news came a trifle stale. It seems that with the pressure of the morning’s ceremonies, they forgot to bring a ration, and when at last his gaoler did remember him, it was rather late, seeing that by then Phorenice had tied herself publicly to a husband, and poor Nais had doubtless eaten her green drug. However, the fools must needs try and barter his tale for what it would fetch; and, as was natural, had such a silly head chopped off for his pains; and after that your Phorenice behaved as you may guess. And now you may thank me, sir, for coming to warn you not to go back to Atlantis.”

“But I shall go back. And if the Empress chooses to cut my head also from its proper column, that is as the High Gods will.”

“You are more sick of life than I thought. But I think, sir, our Phorenice judges your case very accurately. It was permitted me to hear the outbursting of this lady’s rage. ‘Shall I hew off his head?’ said she. ‘Pah! Shall I give him over to my tormentors, and stand by whilst they do their worst? He would not wrinkle his brow at their fiercest efforts. No; he must have a heavier punishment than any of these, and one also which will endure. I shall lop off his right hand and his left foot, so that he may be a fighting man no longer, and then I shall drive him forth crippled into the dangerous lands, where he may learn Fear. The beasts shall hunt him, the fires of the ground shall spoil his rest. He shall know hunger, and he shall breathe bad air. And all the while he shall remember that I have Nais near me, living and locked in her coffin of stone, to play with as I choose, and to give over to what insults may come to my fancy.’ That is what she said, Deucalion. Now I ask you again will you go back to meet her vengeance?”

“No,” I said, “it is no part of my plan to be mutilated and left to live.”

“So, being a woman of some sense, I judged. And, moreover, having some small kindness still left for you, I have taken it upon myself to make a plan for your further movement which may fall in with your whim. Does the name of Tob come back to your memory?”

“One who was Captain of Tatho’s navy?”

“That same Tob. A gruff, rude fellow, and smelling vile of tar, but seeming to have a sturdy honesty of his own. Tob sails away this night for parts unknown, presumably to found a kingdom with Tob for king. It seems he can find little enough to earn at his craft in Atlantis these latter days, and has scruples at seeing his wife and young ones hungry. He told me this

at the harbour side when I put my neck under the axe by saying I wanted carriage for you, sir, and so having me under his thumb, he was perhaps more loose-lipped than usual. You seem to have made a fine impression on Tob, Deucalion. He said—I repeat his hearty disrespect—you were just the recruit he wanted, but whether you joined him or not, he would go to the nether Gods to do you service.”

“By the fellow’s side, I gained some experience in fighting the greater sea beasts.”

“Well, go and do it again. Believe me, sir, it is your only chance. It would grieve me much to hear the searing-iron hiss on your stumps. I bargained with Tob to get clear of the harbour forts before the chain was up for the night, and as he is a very daring fellow, with no fear of navigating under the darkness, he himself said he would come to a point of the shore which we agreed upon, and there await you. Come, Deucalion, let me lead you to the place.”

“My girl,” I said, “I see I owe you many thanks for what you have done on my poor behalf.”

“Oh, your thanks!” she said. “You may keep them. I did not come out here in the dark and the dangers for mere thanks, though I knew well enough there would be little else offered.”—She plucked at my sleeve.—“Now show me your walking pace, sir. They will begin to want your countenance in the camp directly, and we need hanker after no too narrow inquiries for what’s along.”

So thereon we set off, Ylga and I, leaving the lights of the bivouac behind us, and she showed the way, whilst I carried my weapons ready to ward off attacks whether from beasts or from men. Few words were passed between us, except those which had concern with the dangers natural to the way. Once only did we touch one another, and that was where a tree-trunk bridged a rivulet of scalding water which flowed from a boil-spring towards the sea.

“Are you sure of footing?” I asked, for the night was dark, and the heat of the water would peel the flesh from the bones if one slipped into it.

“No,” she said, “I am not,” and reached out and took my hand. I helped her over and then loosed my grip, and she sighed, and slowly slipped her hand away. Then on again we went in silence, side by side, hour after hour, and league after league.

But at last we topped a rise, and below us through the trees I could see the gleam of the great estuary on which the city of Atlantis stands. The ground was soggy and wet beneath us, the trees were full of barbs and spines, the way was monstrous hard. Ylga’s breath was beginning to come in laboured pants. But when I offered to take her arm, and help her, as some return against what she had done for me, she repulsed me rudely enough. “I am no poor weakling,” said she, “if that is your only reason for wanting to touch me.”

Presently, however, we came out through the trees, and the roughest part of our journey was done. We saw the ship riding to her anchors in shore a mile away, and a weird enough object she was under the faint starlight. We made our way to her along the level beaches.

Tob was keeping a keen watch. We were challenged the moment we came within stone or arrow shot, and bidden to halt and recite our business; but he was civil enough when he heard we were those whom he expected. He called a crew and slacked out his anchor-rope till his

ship ground against the shingle, and then thrust out his two steering oars to help us clamber aboard.

I turned to Ylga with words of thanks and farewell. "I will never forget what you have done for me this night; and should the High Gods see fit to bring me back to Atlantis and power, you shall taste my gratitude."

"I do not want to return. I am sick of this old life here."

"But you have your palace in the city, and your servants, and your wealth, and Phorenice will not disturb you from their possession."

"Oh, as for that, I could go back and be fan-girl tomorrow. But I do not want to go back."

"Let me tell you it is no time for a gently nurtured lady like yourself to go forward. I have been viceroy of Yucatan, Ylga, and know somewhat of making a foothold in these new countries. And that was nothing compared with what this will be. I tell you it entails hardships, and privations, and sufferings which you could not guess at. Few survive who go to colonise in the beginning, and those only of the hardest, and they earn new scars and new batterings every day."

"I do not care, and, besides, I can share the work. I can cook, I can shoot a good arrow, and I can make garments, yes, though they were cut from the skins of beasts and had to be sewn with backbone sinews. Because you despise fine clothes, and because you have seen me only decked out as fan-girl, you think I am useless. Bah, Deucalion! Never let people prate to me about your perfection. You know less about a woman than a boy new from school."

"I have learned all I care to know about one woman, and because of the memory of her, I could not presume to ask her sister to come with me now."

"Aye," she said bitterly, "kick my pride. I knew well enough it was only second place to Nais I could get all the time I was wanting to come. Yet no one but a boor would have reminded me of it. Gods! and to think that half the men in Atlantis have courted me, and now I am arrived at this!"

"I must go alone. It would have made me happier to take your esteem with me. But as it is, I suppose I shall carry only your hate."

"That is the most humiliating thing of all; I cannot bring myself to hate you. I ought to, I know, after the brutal way you have scorned me. But I do not, and there is the truth. I seem to grow the fonder of you, and if I thought there was a way of keeping you alive, and un mutilated, here in Atlantis, I do not think I should point out that Tob is tired of waiting, and will probably be off without you." She flung her arms suddenly about my neck, and kissed me hotly on the mouth. "There, that is for good-bye, dear. You see I am reckless. I care not what I do now, knowing that you cannot despise me more than you have done all along for my forwardness."

She ran back from me into the edge of the trees.

“But this is foolishness,” I said. “I must take you through the dangers that lie between here and some gate of the city, and then come back to the ship.”

“You need not fear for me. The unhappy are always safe. And, besides, I have a way. It is my solace to know that you will remember me now. You will never forget that kiss.”

“Fare you well, Ylga,” I cried. “May the High Gods keep you entirely in their holy care.”

But no reply came back. She had gone off into the forest. And so I turned down to the beach, and splashed into the water, and climbed on board the ship up the steering oars. Tob gave the word to haul-to the anchor, and get her away from the beach.

“Greeting, my lord,” said he, “but I’d have been pleased to see you earlier. We’ve small enough force and slow enough heels in this vessel, and it’s my idea that the sooner we’re away from here and beyond range of pursuit, the safer it will be for my woman and brats who are in that hutch of an after-castle. It’s long enough since I sailed in such a small old-fashioned ship as this. She’s no machines, and she’s not even a steering manikin. Look at the meanness of her furniture and (in your ear) I’ve suspicions that there’s rottenness in her bottom. But she’s the best I’d the means to buy, and if she reaches the place at the farther end I’ve got my eye on, we shall have to make a home there, or be content to die, for she’ll never have strength to carry us farther or back. She’s been a ship in the Egypt trade, and you know what that is for getting worm and rot in the wood.”

“You’d enough hands for your scheme before I came?”

“Oh yes. I’ve fifty stout lads and eight women packed in the ship somehow, and trouble enough I’ve had to get them away from the city. That thief of a port-captain well-nigh skinned us clean before he could see it lawful that so many useful fighting men might go out of harbour. Times are not what they were, I tell you, and the sea trade’s about done. All sailor men of any skill have taken a woman or two and gone out in companies to try their fortunes in other lands. Why, I’d trouble enough to get half a score to help me work this ship. All my balance are just landsmen raw and simple, and if I land half of them alive at the other end, we shall be doing well.”

“Still with luck and a few good winds it should not take long to get across to Europe.”

Tob slapped his leg. “No savage Europe for me, my lord. Now, see the advantage of being a mariner. I found once some islands to the north of Europe, separated from the main by a strait, which I called the Tin Islands, seeing that tin ore litters many of the beaches. I was driven there by storm, and said no word of the find when I got back, and here you see it comes in useful. There’s no one in all Atlantis but me knows of those Tin Islands to-day, and we’ll go and fight honestly for our ground, and build a town and a kingdom on it.”

“With Tob for king?”

“Well, I have figured it out as such for many a day, but I know when I meet my better, and I’m content to serve under Deucalion. My lord would have done wiser to have brought a wife with him, though, and I thought it was understood by the good lady that spoke to me down at the harbour, or I’d have mentioned it earlier. The savages in my Tin Islands go naked and stain themselves blue with woad, and are very filthy and brutish to look upon. They are

sturdy, and should make good slaves, but one would have to get blunted in the taste before one could wish to be father to their children.”

“I am still husband to Phorenice.”

Tob grinned. “The Gods give you joy of her. But it is part of a mariner’s creed—and you will grow to be a mariner here—that wedlock does not hold across the seas. However, that matter may rest. But, coming to my Tin Islands again: they’ll delight you. And I tell you, a kingdom will not be so hard to carve out as it was in Egypt, or as you found in Yucatan. There are beasts there, of course, and no one who can hunt need ever go hungry. But the greater beasts are few. There are cave-bears and cave-tigers in small numbers, to be sure, and some river-horses and great snakes. But the greater lizards seem to avoid the land; and as for birds, there is rarely seen one that can hurt a grown man. Oh, I tell you, it will be a most desirable kingdom.”

“Tob seems to have imagined himself king of the Tin Islands with much reality.”

He sighed a little. “In truth I did, and there is no denying it, and I tell you plain, there is not another man living that I would have broken this voyage for but Deucalion. But don’t think I regret it, and don’t think I want to push myself above my place. This breeze and the ebb are taking the old ship finely along her ways. See those fire baskets on the harbour forts? We’re abreast of them now. We’ll have dropped them and the city out of sight by daylight, and the flood will not begin to run up till then. But I fear unless the wind hardens down with the dawn we’ll have to bring up to an anchor when the flood makes. Tides run very hard in these narrow seas. Aye, and there are some shrewdish tide-rips round my Tin Islands, as you shall see when we reach them.”

There were many fearful glances backwards when day came and showed the waters, and the burning mountains that hemmed them in beyond the shores. All seemed to expect some navy of Phorenice to come surging up to take them back to servitude and starvation in the squalid wards of the city; and I confess ingenuously that I was with them in all truth when they swore they would fight the ship till she sank beneath them, before they would obey another of the commands of Phorenice. However, their brave heroics were displayed to no small purpose. For the full flow of the tide we hung in our place, barely moving past the land, but yet not seeing either oar or sail; and then, when the tide turned, away we went once more with speed, mightily comforted.

Tob’s woman must needs bring drink on deck, and bid all pour libations to her as a future queen. But Tob cuffed her back into the after-castle, slamming to the hatch behind her heels, and bidding the crew send the liquor down their dusty throats. “We are done with that foolery,” said he. “My Lord Deucalion will be king of this new kingdom we shall build in the Tin Islands, and a right proper king he’ll make, as you untravelled ones would know, if you’d sailed the outer seas with him as I have done.” Beneath which I read a regret, but said nothing, having made my plans from the moment of stepping on board, as will appear on a later sheet.

So on down the great estuary we made our way, and though it pleased the others on board when they saw that the seas were desolate of sails, it saddened me when I recalled how once the waters had been whitened with the glut of shipping.

They had started off on their voyage with a bare two days' provision in their equipment, and so, of necessity even after leaving the great estuary, we were forced to voyage coastwise, putting into every likely river and sheltered beach to slay fish and meat for future victualling. "And when the winter comes," said Tob, "as its gales will be heavier than this old ship can stomach, I had determined to haul up and make a permanent camp ashore, and get a crop of grain grown and threshed before setting sail again. It is the usual custom in these voyages. And I shall do it still, subject to my lord's better opinion."

So here, having by this time completed a two months' leisurely journey from the city, I saw my opportunity to speak what I had always carried in my mind. "Tob," I said, "I am a poor, weak, defenceless man, and I am quite at your mercy, but what if I do not voyage all the way to the Tin Islands, and oust you of this kingship?"

He brightened perceptibly. "Aye," he grunted, "you are very weak, my lord, and mighty defenceless. We know all about that. But what's else? You must tell all your meaning plain. I'm a common mariner, and understand little of your fancy talk."

"Why, this. That it is not my wish to leave the continent of Atlantis. If you will put me down on any part of this side that faces Europe, I will commend you strongly to the Gods. I would I could give you money, or (better still) articles that would be useful to you in your colonising; but as it is, you see me destitute."

"As to that, you owe me nothing, having done vastly more than your share each time we have put in shore for the hunting. But it will not do, this plan of yours. I will shamedly confess that the sound of that kingship in my Tin Islands sounds sweet to me. But no, my lord, it will not do. You are no mariner yet, and understand little of geography, but I must tell you that the part of Atlantis there"—he jerked his thumb towards the line of trees, and the mountains which lay beyond the fringe of surf—"is called the Dangerous Lands, and a man must needs be a salamander and be learned in magic (so I am told) before he can live there."

I laughed. "We of the Priests' Clan have some education, Tob, though it may not be on the same lines as your own. In fact, I may say I was taught in the colleges concerning the boundaries and the contents of our continent with a nicety that would surprise you. And once ashore, my fate will still be under the control of the most High Gods."

He muttered something in his profane seaman's way about preferring to keep his own fate under control of his own most strong right arm, but saying that he would keep the matter in his thoughts, he excused himself hurriedly to go and see to somewhat concerning the working of the ship, and there left me.

But I think the sweets of kingly rule were a strong argument in favour of letting me have my way (which I should have had otherwise if it had not been given peacefully), and on the third day after our talk he put the ship inshore again for re-victualling. We lurched into a river-mouth, half swamped over a roaring bar, and ran up against the bank and made fast there to trees, but booming ourselves a safe distance off with oars and poles, so that no beast could leap on board out of the thicket.

Fish-spearing and meat-hunting were set about with promptitude, and on the second day we were happy enough to slay a yearling river-horse, which gave provisions in all sufficiency. A space was cleared on the bank, fires were lit, and the meat hung over the smoke in strips, and

when as much was cured as the ship would carry, the shipmen made a final gorge on what remained, filled up a great stack of hollow reeds with drinking water, and were ready to continue the voyage.

With sturdy generosity did Tob again attempt to make me sail on with them as their future king, and as steadfastly did I make refusal; and at last stood alone on the bank amongst the gnawed bones of their feast, with my weapons to bear me company, and he, and his men, and the women stood in the little old ship, ready to drop down river with the current.

“At least,” said Tob, “we’ll carry your memory with us, and make it big in the Tin Islands for everlasting.”

“Forget me,” I said, “I am nothing. I am merely an incident that has come in your way. But if you want to carry some memory with you that shall endure, preserve the cult of the most High Gods as it was taught to you when you were children here in Atlantis. And afterwards, when your colony grows in power, and has come to sufficient magnificence, you may send to the old country for a priest.”

“We want no priest, except one we shall make ourselves, and that will be me. And as for the old Gods—well, I have laid my ideas before the fellows here, and they agree to this: We are done with those old Gods for always. They seem worn out, if one may judge from Their present lack of usefulness in Atlantis, and, anyway, there will be no room for Them on the Tin Islands.—Let go those warps there aft, and shove her head out.—We are under weigh now, my lord, and beyond recall, and so I am free to tell you what we have decided upon for our religious exercises. We shall set up the memory of a living Hero on earth, and worship that. And when in years to come the picture of his face grows dim, we shall doubtless make an image of him, as accurate as our art permits, and build him a temple for shelter, and bring there our offerings and prayers. And as I say, my lord, I shall be priest, and when I am dead, the sons of my body shall be priests after me, and the eldest a king also.”

“Let me plead with you,” I said. “This must not be.”

The ship was drifting rapidly away with the current, and they were hoisting sail. Tob had to shout to make himself heard. “Aye, but it shall be. For I, too, am a strong man after my kind, and I have ordered it so. And if you want the name of our Hero that some day shall be God, you wear it on yourself. Deucalion shall be God for our children.”

“This is blasphemy,” I cried. “Have a care, fool, or this impiety will sink you.”

“We will risk it,” he bawled back, “and consider the odds against us are small. Regard! Here is thy last horn of wine in the ship, and my woman has treasured it against this moment. Regard, all men, together with Those above and Those below! I pour this wine as a libation to Deucalion, great lord that is to-day, Hero that shall be to-morrow, God that will be in time to come!” And then all those on the ship joined in the acclaim till they were beyond the reach of my voice, and were battling their way out to sea through the roaring breakers of the bar.

Solitary I stood at the brink of the forest, looking after them and musing sadly. Tob, despite his lowly station, was a man I cared for more than many. Like all seamen, I knew that he paid his devotions to one of the obscurer Gods, but till then I had supposed him devout in his worship. His new avowal came to me as a desolating shock. If a man like Tob could forsake

all the older Gods to set up on high some poor mortal who had momentarily caught his fancy, what could be expected from the mere thoughtless mob, when swayed by such a brilliant tongue as Phorenice's? It seemed I was to begin my exile with a new dreariness added to all the other adverse prospects of Atlantis.

But then behind me I heard the rustle of some great beast that had scented me, and was coming to attack through the thicket, and so I had other matters to think upon. I had to let Tob and his ship go out over the rim of the horizon unwatched.

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