

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

# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 6  
11TH AUGUST 2019

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Gavin Chappell

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Fewer, Steven Havelock, GK Murphy, Edgar Wallace, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 6  
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk) The stories, articles and illustrations contained in this webzine are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain. Schlock! Webzine and its editor accept no liability for views expressed or statements made by contributors to the magazine.

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In Cumbria, Matt Johnson goes looking for a cat that has risen from the dead. Three bright young things meet a mysteriously prescient scientist in a story by Edgar Wallace, early twentieth century writer of, among many other things, the screenplay of *King Kong*. And in Ancient Atlantis, the empress Phorenice's forces storm the Sacred Mountain.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"WELL, YOU PRAYED FOR TEN FINGERS AND TEN TOES  
YOU GOT A LITTLE EXTRA!"

*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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## MANNY FARSTAR'S DREAM by EW Farnsworth

The cloudless sky should have been the tip-off, but Manny was not thinking straight. He lay back in the tepid pool and watched the queen palm's fronds sway gently in the wind. He found the sunshine on his back pleasant and warm. His long arms were spread against the pool's deck, his right-hand fingers wrapped around a non-alcoholic drink—Earth grass, he thought, fresh and sweet. The spa's attendants were fawning all over him, but the more they pressed against him and plied him with hors d'oeuvres, the less he wanted to feel or eat. All he wanted was his old, familiar 3Maggie AI companion, not her replacement but the original. That was not to be.

The Galactic Edgemaster, as Farstar was styled in those days before he became the Universal Edgemaster on account of his work for Admiral Loc Phuket, was recuperating from having sent his beloved 3Maggie on an impossible mission to wreak havoc in the imperial family. She had accomplished her mission at the cost of her life. Farstar had no idea how hard her loss would hit him. She was only a robot with unmatched software. Yet he had loved her to distraction. All he could think of was revenge, but she had destroyed the entities he wanted to kill slowly, with extreme prejudice. The more he dwelled on feeling sorry for himself, the darker his surroundings became.

As if through a rising din, he heard a distant cry of battle. Focusing hard on the rallying cry, he heard his name: "Farstar, this is Greybeard, over." On the third repeat, Farstar saw the blue sky turn to black, and his drink became a communication device. Above, the palm had become a squid copter. The formerly halcyon pool of water had turned to blood.

"Greybeard, this is Farstar, over." The warrior in him felt for his armour and weapons. In his left hand was a long, curved knife, which neatly sliced through a tentacle aimed at his throat. The spa had become a killing field. The wait staff had become assassins wanting to pierce out his life. He shrugged and fought while he waited for instructions. Greybeard was like a father to him. Besides, he owed the figure his life many times over.

A waif who had licked his ear now tried to plunge her dagger into his neck, but he grabbed her dainty wrist and snapped it sideways. She shrieked and shook her useless hand before his upward thrust cut her from the loins to the throat. Her blood and gore joined the liquid in the pool as Manny waded to the edge, slicing to the left and right as he strode. He was like a colossus when he found his laser rangefinder, the device by which he would highlight targets.

"Farstar, this is Greybeard. How long are you going to dilly dally in that ersatz spa? You have work to do, and I have little time."

"Greybeard, this is Farstar, I will be free to spot for air assets once I make the entrance. That will be in FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE. I'm ready for assignment."

The Greybeard did not hesitate. Farstar downloaded the SITREP and saw the target-rich environment. He slid a space mine back into the spa and used his laser to light up targets in the order they had been prioritized. As the air support craft arrived, they assumed control by target, and Farstar witnessed the target-weapon pairing so no errant target got away. In no time, everything in Farstar's line of sight was abuzz with flying craft and zooming weapons. Explosions detonated, making the Edgemaster shift his laser device to new targets until all of them were destroyed.



Farstar made his report: “Greybeard, all targets have been destroyed. Do you desire further action at this time?”

“Farstar, this is Greybeard. Escape your current position and vector toward the coordinates given in your download. Once there, you’ll report to Freeland for further targeting. If Freeland is no longer active, act on your own initiative. Out.”

Farstar sprinted to his spacecraft. His new 3Maggie was already making preparation to launch. He gave her the sign, and she pushed the throttle forward. The fastest small spaceship in the universe jolted and flashed toward the coordinates Farstar punched into its system.

“Welcome back, Manny. Did you have a good R&R?”

Farstar was not yet on familiar terms with his new AI, but he decided to be civil. “I had a few minutes of pleasure before I was called back into service. What did you do to while away the time?”

The 3Maggie smiled. “I was catching up on memories you shared with the unit I replaced. I must say, the memories made me blush—if that’s the right word.”

Farstar shook his head when he saw the twinkle in her eyes. His former robot had been his alter-ego and bosom friend. He wondered whether this replacement would measure up. “It’s probably a good idea you decided to go to school on your predecessor. She and I were quite an item, but human-robot relationships take time.”

“Yes. I have been programmed to be patient. I’m willing to be compliant—to a point. But my tastes are variegated. I want you to feel free to ask whatever you like. After looking into the soul of your 3Maggie, I promise I won’t violate her or your memory of her in any way.”

Farstar nodded. “Are you in a position to set our spacecraft on autopilot for the duration of our trip?”

“Just say the word. Let me suggest that we retire to the cleansing compartment after I’ve done that.”

“Do you think I smell too bad?”

“That is a relative construction, I believe. You smell as if you have been drenched in human blood and offal—mixed with cordite and burning flesh. I can give you a complete rendition, if you like.” She smiled over her shoulder. He sniffed himself and almost choked.

“Go to autopilot. Please. And set this compartment to ‘cleanse’ while we retire to the cleansing unit to rid me of this stench.”

“Perhaps you can return to the pleasant moments you experienced in the spa?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Maybe you can help me dispel the vision of obsequious whores offering expensive drinks by the pool.”

“I can do that. More, I can assure you that you won’t be awakened from your reverie to find yourself up to your neck in slaughter.”

“You have the right idea, 3Maggie, but we have to be realistic about our situation. I can be called to action no matter where I am or what I’m doing. I can’t hesitate to make the transition from rest to full-alert activity. That’s the nature of my job.”

The robot smiled. She tooled with the command array. Then she stood and peeled off her uniform. Manny was charmed by what she revealed. She crooked her finger as she preceded him out of the command module along the corridor to the cleansing unit. She helped him out of his stinky clothes, which she put into the washing machine. She used a soaping hose to wash him from head to foot before she pushed him into the cleansing pod and followed him holding two natural sponges, one in each hand.

One Earth hour later, Manny felt more like himself than he had done in weeks. His 3Maggie knew all his former unit’s tricks to make him relax. She also knew how to adjust her motions to give him maximum pleasure. By the time they emerged from the cleansing unit, they were ready to enter their sleep compartments. She would recharge and keep watch from her unit while he would enter deep sleep with dream inducements. He felt certain the robot would awaken him just before they arrived at their destination.

Manny Farstar was walking down a country road lined with cypress trees. He noticed the only birds were crows and blackbirds, watching him. In school, he had learned those birds were among the most intelligent. If so, they would recall who he was and where he was going. He felt foreboding and was filled with ineffable sadness. His 3Maggie had perished on a critical mission. He was going to lay a memorial wreath on her cenotaph—the marker for which there were no interred remains.

The gated cemetery just to the right of the road was surrounded by a seven-foot wall of stone, topped with iron spikes. It was reserved for heroes and heroines of the secret services—particularly those who had died off-planet under honourable conditions. The smell of hyacinths filled the still air, and the iron gears grated as he pushed the gate open. If the Edgemaster had not turned to listen to a particularly raucous crow, his head would have been lopped off by the ingenious improvised explosive device that was designed to take his life.

Manny laughed and unsafed his weapons. He might have hit the ground, or he might have fled. Instead, he forged forward, intrepid and wary. He recalled 3Maggie’s marker was three rows ahead and then four to the left. He activated his fire finder seeker device, which found no targets within shooting range. He watched his steps to avoid tripwires and false pavement areas—anything that might set off another IED. Then he stood in the place before her memorial. He laid the wreath of white chrysanthemums and felt a tap on his shoulder.

Manny was not easily frightened, but the figure behind him had crept up on him with such stealth as to evade his supernatural sensoria. If the figure were hostile, he would now be dead. Without looking around, he spoke.

“Who are you? And why have you put yourself in danger to converse with me? You must know any encounter will mean your death—and not from me necessarily.”

The mystery figure said, "I am farther away than you suspect. Act naturally, and we can converse without detection. If you understand me, just nod once."

Manny nodded slowly once. He kept his eyes glued on his robot's bronze placard. It shone in the midday sunshine. Beside it hung the wreath that symbolized immaculate death. The imperial family must keep a watch over all such tokens erected for the assassin. Manny knew the voice must be that of a neutral or a friend in the universal tussle for power and glory.

"I have a mission for you if you wish to help us. I'm only going to ask you once whether you are willing to assist. If you shake your head for no, I'll trouble you no longer. If you nod for yes, I'll give your mission parameters. Do I make myself clear?"

"I take no orders except from those who speak the password granting access. I have not heard it yet, and my answer depends on it absolutely."

"The password is *Arcturus*."

"Then my answer must be yes."

"Place your right hand on your 3Maggie's remembrance plaque. Press firmly."

Farstar did as he was told. A small opening above the plaque opened revealing a memory stick. He grasped the stick and inserted it in the receptor built into his belt. His wrist display requested the password, so he entered *Arcturus*. In his earbud the following message reverberated: "Frichtenicht, the trillionaire, wants to meet on the asteroid UBR52498 as soon as possible. You must evade the constant surveillance of that astronomical body and camouflage your landing. Further instructions await you there. In five seconds this device will self-destruct. That is all." Manny heard a soft *fft* sound. The device self-ejected to the ground where it transformed into a black pool that took the shape and colour of its surroundings.

This was not the first such communication Farstar had received as a member of the resistance to the Federation. He had received one that sent him to interdict the imperial plot to wipe all life from designated recalcitrant rebel planets. The trouble was, any such use of biological agents would spread throughout the universe, eliminating all life forms without discrimination. Another had eventuated in his destruction of an imperial fleet guarding a secret chemical weapons cache in the Milky Way. The agents were cleverly disguised as single organic compounds that only became lethal when they were mixed in a specified way. The immensity of the cache should have been a sign of malevolent intentions, but propaganda defanged rebel attempts to get the truth out. Then, too, Farstar had been the key figure in neutralizing the imperial nuclear and radionuclide weapons stores. Such weapons could not be neatly deactivated, so he had pooled them intact in a collection point at the edge of the universe not far from the place where he would later lead the Spaceship *Arcturus* and the rest of the rebel fleet past the boundaries of the known.

Farstar completed his mourning exercise before he flipped down his visor to discover his current situation. The skies turned from blue to black, and all around him like red eyes of spiders the threats were ranged, poised for attack and awaiting the order to close in from all sides. The Edgemaster pushed his target priority button and summoned his hypersonic

chariot. Then everything happened at once. He blinked the automated fire signal, and the first wave of his personal arsenal flew to the nearest targets. Above him hovered his spacecraft, but only for the moment it took him to launch himself into the pod extension below it. As the pod jerked him to safety, he saw the threat lunge toward his former position with uncanny accuracy. Since he was no longer present, the targets were focusing only on a point in space wherein the Edgemaster had left a nuclear device that detonated when Manny's spacecraft had travelled a suitable distance from the site.

Manny switched on his plasma display to see a squid copter hovering above the cemetery that had held the remains and memorials to heroes and heroines. Then in the heat and blast, he saw the vicinity atomized. For numerous half-lives that place would now be known by its radionuclide signature. Farstar knew a nearby command centre was monitoring what was happening, so he expanded his sensor range to its widest scope. There at the boundary of his field of view hovered an imperial surveillance drone. The Edgemaster was not sure whether the drone had transmitted its payload to its headquarters, but only one course of action lay before him. He steered directly toward the imperial vessel, jamming all its communications on strategic and tactical networks. Neatly, he fired space mines to hem in the drone in case it was ordered to flee. Surrounded, the unmanned ship remained in its location, as if inviting attack.

Manny devised a labyrinthine course for a space torpedo—one that masked the position of the unit that fired it. When he pressed “fire,” he followed the device to its target. The detonation had greater effect than he had planned. The drone exploded and cast out explosives to all sides, which exploded in cascades like intricate fireworks. The Edgemaster did not take his spacecraft on the trajectory nearest to his objective. He rather anticipated trickery in his enemy. He launched his own drone along the path that would draw maximum attention from the imperial forces. He waited until the drone had done its job of planting a pattern in the enemy's sensoria. Then he took a course orthogonal to the axis between the enemy surveillance platform and the nearest known imperial base. As he flew stealthily towards a waypoint he had pseudo-randomly selected, his sensors detected an enormous explosion of his drone.

The Edgemaster laughed when he thought of the enemy platforms that had massed to defeat a worthless, unmanned drone. Now they had been destroyed by the unit they had been pursuing. Feeling relatively safe, he sped to his waypoint with all his passive sensors fully alert. He reflected on the advantage his spaceship had because of his not needing to communicate with any higher authorities. Indeed, the inverse was also true—a silent vessel was undoubtedly a rebel and therefore expendable.

Farstar sang to himself as he played out scenarios for his rendezvous with the asteroid. He also brainstormed about the nature of his secret mission. Above all, he had to defeat a large contingent of imperial forces while effecting a clandestine meeting. He also had to escape after the meeting. As he played out his games, he became nostalgic for the 3Maggie he had lost. Serious games had always been fun when they played together. Now he had to play alone a game of lethal solitaire.

After his third rope-a-dope manoeuvre by which he did a 360-degree turn to catch anything following him, Farstar was convinced no imperial flea was dogging his spacecraft from behind. He thought, “It's possible that imperial headquarters has guessed I am dead. It's also possible they suppose that if I had lived, I would not be speeding towards the asteroid but

rather running for cover anywhere else. Even if they know my objective, they may be confident their defences are impenetrable to such as me. In any case, those dullards will be scheming by their dim lights while I take out-of-box approaches for which they are wholly unprepared.”

His solutions came to Farstar in a dense matrix of designs. He saw that he needed a diversion so his spacecraft could land camouflaged on the asteroid. That meant firing a pattern of space drones and torpedoes that travelled from his destination outward in all directions. In the time and space window created by this counter-intuitive pattern, he would reach his meeting place undetected. His second pattern, almost identical to the first was to cover his exit. He had no idea what his subsequent movements might be, but he set a rendezvous point for his spacecraft where he might hide while his enemies searched for him on and around the asteroid.

When his spacecraft slowed, Manny launched his wide area space mine vehicle. As he prepared for executing his first pattern of feints, the space miner knit its weapons around the outer scouts of the imperial guards. Farstar was patient until the miner had finished its work. Then he launched his first feint and stood by to enter the sacred precincts of the asteroid.

Again waiting, the Edgemaster recalled the information he had stored on the asteroid. It was a unique combination of gold, rare earth elements and silver. He thought of it as an enormous, three-dimensional coin with two quadrillion credits. Hanging in an otherwise empty volume of space, this flying sample of precious materials was the kind of prize only the most powerful forces could presume to manage or control. What uses the empire attributed to this island of wealth, Farstar could not guess. He therefore had no idea why it was guarded as closely as the imperial nuclear arsenal had been.

The way was finally clear for Farstar to cloak his vessel and prepare to descend to the surface of the mysterious asteroid. He avoided the pattern he had created, so as his outward bound torpedoes became visible to the imperial guardians, he snuck inside the sensor net to land on the surface of the asteroid, his camouflage effectively masking his presence. He enjoyed watching the fireworks display of exploding imperial vessels all around the asteroid. His passive sensors indicated the imperial panic as the surviving forces searched frantically for the attacker.

A special rebel battle circuit became active with encrypted traffic wrapped in an open envelope with ARCTURUS as its header. Farstar decrypted the message and established communication with the trillionaire he was looking for.

“Farstar, this is Frictenicht. My password is ARCTURUS. Welcome to my private cache.”

“Your cache, indeed, Frictenicht. If this giant rock is yours, why is it surrounded by a bevy of the empire’s best troops?”

Frictenicht laughed, and his face looked like an ancient mask of pain. “Can you think of a better way to protect my wealth than to have the imperial forces guard it?”

Farstar’s eyes squinted as he pondered this revelation. “Still, if the empire surrounds it, how can you consider it as yours at the same time?”

“It’s a long story, but the short version is that this and five score other such asteroids hold minerals worth the entire value of the universe. I am only one of the trillionaires who allow the empire to hold our riches in proxy for us.”

“I don’t understand why the subterfuge.”

“What do you think would happen to the economy of the universe if all the precious content of the hundred and one asteroids were to be poured into the so-called banks all at once?”

“All current values would be reduced to almost zero, and we’d see the greatest inflation ever conceived.”

“Come now, Farstar. You know the ravages of inflation have already beggared the lesser players. Why do you think that happened?”

Manny tried to understand what the ancient man was saying. “Let me guess. The empire is already using the value of these asteroids because they are presumed to be imperial assets.”

“Now you are thinking like a member of the imperial treasury staff. I knew you could grasp the scope of what has happened. Yes. In his imperial wisdom, the emperor has decreed that all extrinsic repositories of value be used as collateral for his galactic and universal wars.”

Farstar nodded. “I begin to see why the empire knows no boundaries for its military exploits. What about all the currencies that have sprung up? How do they relate to the larger economic factors that roil the empire?”

“As you know, the cryptocurrencies were initially part of the rebel movement. They were postulated to have an alternative to existing currencies whose values were being decimated by political accidents.”

Farstar shook his head. “But suddenly all currencies had to be based on precious metals.”

“It was the only way to stabilize the economy in the face of what was fast becoming a freefall of values.”

“I’m sure you are aware I’m not at all interested in being rich.”

“That I am. I wouldn’t have accepted you as my emissary if it were otherwise. Greed has no place in the future universe.”

The old man hesitated to let the implications of this thought sink in.

“Yet you are richer than old Croesus was in Classical times.”

“That’s true enough, but I don’t wield my fortune to play for increasingly large possessions. I have enough to buy whatever I like. When I sneeze, the Empire catches a cold.”

“So why am I here? You seem to have everything figured out to your satisfaction.”

“You are here because only you can perform the miracle I require.”

“Maybe you should have asked one of the priests to meet you. I am not one of the charlatans who pretend they can wave their hands and make miracles occur.”

The old man said, “Tsk, tsk. Don’t become unpleasant with me. You managed to disguise your presence well enough to meet me here. I suppose you might also be able to disguise an asteroid well enough to make it disappear from the cosmos.” Again, the old man let Farstar contemplate what he had said.

The Edgemaster laughed. “Let’s for a minute suppose that your mad vision is correct—and I can make your ball of value disappear. What then?”

The ancient trillionaire said, “Then perhaps you’ll have your original 3Maggie again, just as you knew her before you sent her on her final, fatal mission.”

Farstar’s eyes blazed with hatred. “Were you the one whose orders led to her death?”

“I can see by your eyes she meant a lot to you.”

“She may have been merely a machine to others. She meant the universe to me.” A tear coursed down the Edgemaster’s cheek.

“You loved a robot.”

“In a word, yes.”

“And she loved you?”

“Who can ever know the answer to that question?”

The old man said, “Unfortunately, I’m beginning to like you, Farstar. You may be the only creature in the universe who believes in love and the old values.”

“Since you won’t be able to deliver my original 3Maggie, what do you offer for my service in cloaking this asteroid from the imperial surveillance?”

“Young man, you’d be surprised what I can do. I am not a god, but I’m close enough to being one for government work.”

“Are you an agent for the imperium?”

“Not hardly, though I know enough about court politics to carry significant influence.”

“And if I should decide to cloak the asteroid and kill you? What then?”

“What has it been like for you to avoid death under the current decrees of the imperial court? I’ll answer my own question: it has been a form of continuous hell.”

“I asked you a question. Please answer it, or I’ll terminate our conversation.”

“Well enough. Do your job. Then come after me if you think you can. I’ll only promise I won’t strike back if you decide to kill me. And if you do what I ask, I’ll do everything I can to make your replacement 3Maggie better than your wildest imagining.”

Farstar was caught in a matrix of anger, anticipation and bewilderment. His choice seemed to him to be fore-determined.

“I need your answer now. The imperial forces can be fooled for a while, but they’ll discover your feint before long.”

“I agree to your terms though I have no idea how I could say otherwise.”

“Good. When you have completed your mission, I’ll find you. Then you’ll receive your reward.” The discussion was terminated on the other end. Farstar was left wondering whether it had happened at all. Then the surface of the asteroid became pitted with hostile fire.

Farstar executed his second feint. The torpedoes ran out from the asteroid as before, and the imperial guards were wholly engaged in pursuing them. In the chaos of the moment, Farstar snuck back from the asteroid and took position where he had planned to wait out the battle he had incited. A ghost track indicated where the trillionaire’s vessel was located during its retreat. Like Farstar’s spacecraft, the old man’s took position to observe while the battle raged.

Manny decided it was not against the rules for him to send a surveillance harpoon toward the old man’s craft. The harpoon successfully lodged in the port side of the trillionaire’s spaceship. It subsequently fed a continuous position and intended movement read-out to Manny’s ship via its neutrino communicator. Until the harpoon was removed, it would give Manny a continuous track and make it easy to target any time the Edgemaster chose to engage it.

“The problem,” Farstar mused to himself, “is not to make the asteroid disappear but either to hide it in plain sight or to make it untouchable—by anyone. The sphere is already hidden in plain sight. It therefore must be made untouchable. And if that happens, I’d better be prepared to kill the old trillionaire immediately. Before I do those things, I’d better find out where the other hundred asteroids are.”

Farstar had learned early in his career that sometimes it paid to get distance from a problem to discover its solution. So it was that he sought refuge on the wisdom moon, called Phobos. There lay the largest repository of information in the universe. Since imperial forces hated learning in all its forms, Phobos was one resource they avoided. Farstar checked into a spa next to the library. He consulted with the head librarian and his assistants in charge of economic volumes. He also resorted to the virtual baths to deal with his stress. Daily, he checked on the position of the trillionaire’s spaceship.

The Edgemaster was importuned often by the beautiful humans who sported on Phobos. They seemed gifted in body and mind. Yet Manny Farstar kept his mind on his quest. He did not find answers in the normal way. Not only were answers not available to those searching in linear fashion, but also the secrecy of the answers made them encrypted in riddles and further questions, ad infinitum.



A particularly gifted nymph led Farstar to the sequence of resources that gave him answers. She was a qualified universe asset, and her tricks of persuasion were like nothing Manny had encountered before—except through his 3Maggie. He felt sad on account of his robot's loss, but Hygeia sympathized.

“Manny, I know what you seek. I cannot restore your 3Maggie, but I can help you get to someone who can help.”

Manny shook his head. “No one can help me. I have been promised things by a person who has more resources than anyone in the universe, but his promises seem hollow to me.”

The next day Hygeia took Manny on a labyrinthine journey through the library. She expertly picked up details from manuscripts and analyses, all open to every universal citizen. No one had put together such complex information into a seamless whole like she did. That evening, she came to Manny's room at the spa and laid out what they had discovered together.

“You see,” she said as she showed him her drawing of the locations, “the hundred small bodies in the universe that are known to contain the precious substances you seek.”

That night, the two talked late. One thing led to another, and Manny had the best physical experience of his life since 3Maggie's death. He memorized every expression on Hygeia's face. “You are the marvel I've been looking for.”

She shook her head. “I'm afraid I'm not what you're seeking, Manny Farstar. But I now know what that is.”

Before dawn, she had given him the precious knowledge he desired. Then he fell asleep and she disappeared before the sunrise.

Manny was not a neophyte at dealing with classified information. He was acutely aware that Hygeia had given him was priceless. She had been the perfect lover and friend, and she knew that she was missing something he lacked—and needed desperately. She was found hanging from a Corinthian pillar in the library portico just before noon. She had left a note, “I have done what I can in the way I know best. Long live the resistance.”

Manny knew he had to leave Phobos—and he had gathered everything he needed. He felt ill about Hygeia's suicide, if that's what it was. That afternoon, he got into his spaceship and launched for a distant waypoint on the way to the least well defended of the precious asteroids that Hygeia had identified. Behind him, Phobos became a black crisp from simultaneous nuclear explosions all over its surface. So the greatest repository of wisdom in the universe was destroyed in a day. Copies of the information lay scattered in other libraries, but none as complete and expansive as the one on Phobos was.

Manny's voyage to Carinos subsumed three great sleeps, but it allowed him to get some distance from thoughts of Hygeia. He wondered whether he could use his memories of the librarian to compose a new 3Maggie. He corresponded with friends in the resistance about this matter, but none gave him the satisfaction that what he sought was practicable.

Carinos was styled, “Goat Planet,” since it was rugged and populated by goats and goatherds. Under the rough surface of the asteroid were the precious metals every powerful person in the

universe coveted. It was one of a dozen such goat planets—two of which were located in the same solar system as Carinos, and Manny saw an opportunity in that fact and seized it.

The Edgemaster knew the processes by which individuals could register ownership of planetary bodies in the universe. He claimed the two planets adjacent to Carinos as well as Carinos as his own. His stated reason for the claim was “goat farming,” but he claimed all mining rights as well.

Imperial agents at the claims registry recognized Farstar’s name, and they reported what he was doing to the imperial court. An edict went out to arrest Farstar with a large credit reward for this simple service. Still, the legality of his claim was sound, so they processed it speedily. Thus Manny Farstar became the owner of three goat planets near the edge of the universe. Further, the few imperial forces who had been designated to guard Carinos were detached from their duties so they could make the arrest.

The imperial soldiers approached Farstar while he was herding goats in the foothills of the smallest goat planet. He had no trouble dispatching the guards and burying them in a meadow where he had previously dug fresh graves for twelve bodies. Searching the imperial vessels gave him a treasure trove of information about Carinos. In fact, he now had enough intelligence to answer all the trillionaire’s questions. He waited for the old man to make his approach.

Word of the demise of the guardians of Carinos never reached imperial headquarters. In fact, with the demise of the Phobos archives, there reigned total confusion about the solar system in which Carinos fit. Of all the treasure-laden asteroids and planets, this one was the least concerning from the imperial point of view. Farstar thought it might take centuries for the imperial court to investigate what had happened to Carinos. That was fine with him. As far as he knew no trillionaire had made a claim to that particular rock in the universe, and according to the official records, it was now the property of Manny Farstar, the self-styled Galactic Edgemaster. The imputed value of the gold, rare earths and silver beneath its surface was thirty-two quintillion credits. And that was a conservative estimate.

Manny Farstar for a while divested himself of his uniform and weapons and wore goat skins. He drank goat milk and made salads with goat cheese. He lived like a rustic hermit, alone and cut off from the empire and everyone in it. He was taken by surprise when an ancient visitor broke his reverie.

“Life has treated you well, Manny Farstar.”

“It’s hard to tell, Frictenicht. You’re looking better in the open air. I was worried you might perish before we met again.”

“Since you are here and alive, I assume you accomplished your mission for me.”

“As a manner of speaking, I have. But it may not be according to your lights.”

The old man sat in the grass and chewed on goat curd that Manny offered him. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“First, we are equals, you and I. You have your orb of wealth, and I have mine. You are sitting on mine right now. The difference between our fortunes should be clear to you. I can harvest the goods of my store, and you cannot. Where you have mortgaged your value to the Empire, I have mine intact. Yours is surrounded by imperial forces while mine may never be acknowledged as imperial by any construction for the next few hundred years.”

The old man laughed. “It seems you’re leaving a few facts out of your construction.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the brilliant and beautiful woman I dispatched to give you the keys to the kingdom on Phobos.”

“So Hygeia was your agent?”

“More properly, she was an agent for both of us.”

“Why did she have to die?”

“She died to protect the secrets she divulged only to you.”

“And did you order her death?”

The old man nodded. “Why not? It served both our interests well.”

“Bastard.”

“And your point is?”

Manny Farstar looked out over his flock of goats and gritted his teeth. He wondered what made men like the old trillionaire. He invited the old man to tour his estate.

“I have to be careful how I walk over uneven ground. Age is not kind.”

“Just follow me a few paces. This won’t take long.”

They walked over the next hill and, below them, a small graveyard lay. Eleven graves had been filled but remained unmarked. A twelfth lay open.

Farstar said, “Tell me what you see.”

The old man brought out a weapon and trained it at the Edgemaster’s head. “I see an almost full graveyard with an empty grave for you or me.”

“Whose body should that last grave contain? I wonder.”

“We had a bargain. Tell me how you satisfied that, or die.”

The Edgemaster nodded. “You wanted me to find a way to make an island of wealth disappear entirely. That I have done—and you are standing now on the result. You’re right

that Hygeia was the genius who led me to the solution, but you had a hand in that. And I had no hand in her death. So I have, with help I acknowledge, accomplished my mission.”

“In whose name is this property registered?”

“You know the answer to that question, or you would not be here.”

“By right, I should be the owner of this property, not you.”

Farstar shook his head. “Hygeia should be the owner.”

“She was my daughter.”

“And you had her killed! You monster.”

“Yes. I admit I am a monster. But I am an exceedingly rich monster, am I not?”

“Not half so rich as you had meant to be. You foresaw that I would select the least protected asteroid or planet in the universe. I predicted that you would come to me when I accomplished that. Why are you here?”

“I like to deliver full payment in person for a job well done.”

“So where’s my payment?”

“Like you, I must circumambulate. So let’s sit on the edge of this empty grave and talk.”

The two men sat on the edge of the grave, and the old man kept his weapon pointed at Farstar’s head.

“You’re calling the shots, old man. What do you have to tell me?”

“I brought you what I promised. Are you ready to receive her?”

“I have all the records you require to re-register the precious planet in your name.”

“Are you going to give up a fabulous fortune so easily as that?”

“I told you that I am not greedy. Didn’t you believe me?”

“I wasn’t sure. Wealth changes a man.”

Farstar nodded. He tugged at his goatskin garment. “Do I look like I was changed?”

“You aren’t wearing your uniform or your weapons as you used to do.”

Farstar laughed. “One difference between us is that I never assumed I was really the owner of anything. What the Empire deems as ownership one day can the next day become an imperial possession.”

“Son, it all depends on how you play the game.”

“And if you don’t intend to play the game?”

“We’ll see who decides to play and who does not. Call the name of my daughter, please. Use your goatherd voice. She’s back over the hill.”

Farstar called, “Hygeia!”

Over the hill in a flowing robe came the beautiful librarian, looking as vibrant as the last day Farstar saw her. He stood up, his eyes wide open. He heard the old man chuckling.

“Hygeia, is it really you?”

The young woman smiled and shook her head slightly. “No, Manny. I’m your new 3Maggie, but I’ve learned a lot about what you really require. Is it true you are paying a fortune to gain me as your companion?”

“If this old man will agree that we have a deal for that, yes.”

Frictenicht said, “I suggest we get on with our business. It’s late in the day. And you can count on the imperial forces—they surely followed me here.”

“What more do we need than to check to be sure that we have received what we bargained for?”

They retired to Farstar’s rustic cabin so he could give Frictenicht the documents he needed. Farstar checked out his 3Maggie, a version of the robot capturing the features and motions of Hygeia. The two men shook hands. They went to their separate spaceships, and they managed to launch into space just before the imperial guards arrived.

As he drove his vehicle to the rendezvous point at which he would loiter until the situation clarified, he watched his new 3Maggie fall into her role as if she had been made for it. The Edgemaster wondered how the old man had managed to integrate his own daughter’s soul into the AI software of the robot.

She saw him puzzling. She smiled shyly. “Manny, it’s really me. Relax.”

“It’s really you—but who are you?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Neither am I.”

For a while they watched the displays as the imperial storm troopers occupied the rock they had recently left. They also saw Frictenicht’s spacecraft hovering before it departed.

“Do you think your father is satisfied, now that he has doubled his wealth in an afternoon?”

“Is anyone ever truly satisfied?”

“Put the ship on autopilot and come with me.”

“Why?”

“We’re going to test your hypothesis.”

“What hypothesis?”

“Whether anyone can ever be truly satisfied.”

“Are you propositioning me?”

“Is that all right with you?”

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment.”

He offered her his hand. The two walked back to the sleeping compartments where he opened the door and as they cleaved together, he fell awake.

THE END

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## THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

### Chapter 17

I returned Cybele to her bedroom and beneath the sheets as quickly as my pounding heart and speeding adrenaline could carry her slight frame down the floors. No sound of footsteps echoed through the halls pounding up to the second floor toward me. I checked Cybele's vital signs and they remained normal. She would emerge from her rest in due time.

I had to eradicate the signs of the clandestine adventure from which Cybele and I had returned. To latch the shutter, to cover the corpse of Anders, to somehow lock the door I had forced opened, hoping Kasimir's curiosity to investigate would only come when Cybele and I were far from the mountain.

Holding my ear to the hallway, I was reassured once more that I could complete my task since I heard no steps climbing the stairs, no voice calling from below.

On the balls of my feet, I sprinted along the corridor to the steps up to the third floor, took the stone stairs two, sometimes three, at a time, until I felt the cold waft of air against my skin. I had forgotten to bring a candle, but I recalled the path recently taken and found the circular room easily. I touched the lock, having difficulty to see in the poor light, and it felt as though I hadn't snapped it too badly. It would hold the door shut, which was all I needed to waylay Kasimir's discovery of the compromised room.

I entered and the corpse of Anders still held my gaze. Looking away, I picked up the fallen sheet and cloaked the corpse back beneath its white silk womb. Quickly scanning the room for anything further out of its place, I calmed my breathing. Only the shutter needed to be fully closed and latched.

I peered through once more before closing the view, felt that the rain had increased, and thought I heard again the clatter of horses' hooves, but the rain disguised the sound with its pelting noise.

My ear focused on the sound since there seemed to be not one but two or three sets of hooves beneath the rain. With eyes trained on the roof edge of the portico, over the shoulder of a gargoyle, I waited to see the courier appear, galloping on his trek down the mountain, perhaps with Kasimir joining him on horseback.

But I had been focusing my sight in the wrong direction.

A coach and four swam out of the dense grey curtain of rain as it headed up the road, the horses galloping hard for the shelter of the portico. A driver lashed the reins, his black top hat doing little to keep rain from his eyes, and the coach bouncing on its springs over the uneven cobbles.

It was a pristine black velvet coach with a gold emblem decorating its sides. I hadn't much of a view of it before it reached shelter and was gone from my perspective. But I saw enough.

A golden Ouroboros emblazoned the panels of the coach.

I held fingertips on the stone window ledge and chanced opening the shutter further to better my hearing. The stone of the portico offered ample enough acoustics, even with the rain, for me to distinguish multiple voices exchanging the occasional words of greeting with Kasimir.

My mind raced between confusion and worry. Who were these men stepping down from the coach? Was it chance that brought them here, or had my host sent off more than one telegraphic message? If they were carried up the mountain in a coach bearing the familial insignia of Kasimir, were they his associates? The cabal of the Brotherhood?

Quickly, I closed the shutter, flicked down the latch, sped from the room, ensuring that the damaged door was closed behind me.

With trepidation, I sped to the second floor and immediately halted. With fingers, I combed back my wet hair as the sound of rain rose in volume. Soon replaced by multiple voices echoing against stone as the front doors of the castle were opened and the travellers of the coach entered. Joyous voices, as though a grand meeting were scheduled for that rainy night.

With my pace slowed, I tiptoed down the hallway, pressing close to the wall, keeping my sight on the end of the hallway from where the curving stairs rose, though my steps lead me toward Cybele's room.

While Kasimir was preparing a party of his own, Cybele and I would make good to exit the castle while he was distracted by his duties as host. Fortune favours the brave, so neither she nor I could falter now.

I entered her room and turned my eyes from the hallway to her bed. To a tangle of loose sheets, but with no fair form wrapped within them. My eyes flickered around the room in a panic—I took a lit candelabra from her bedside table and pushed its light into every shadowed corner.

But she was gone.

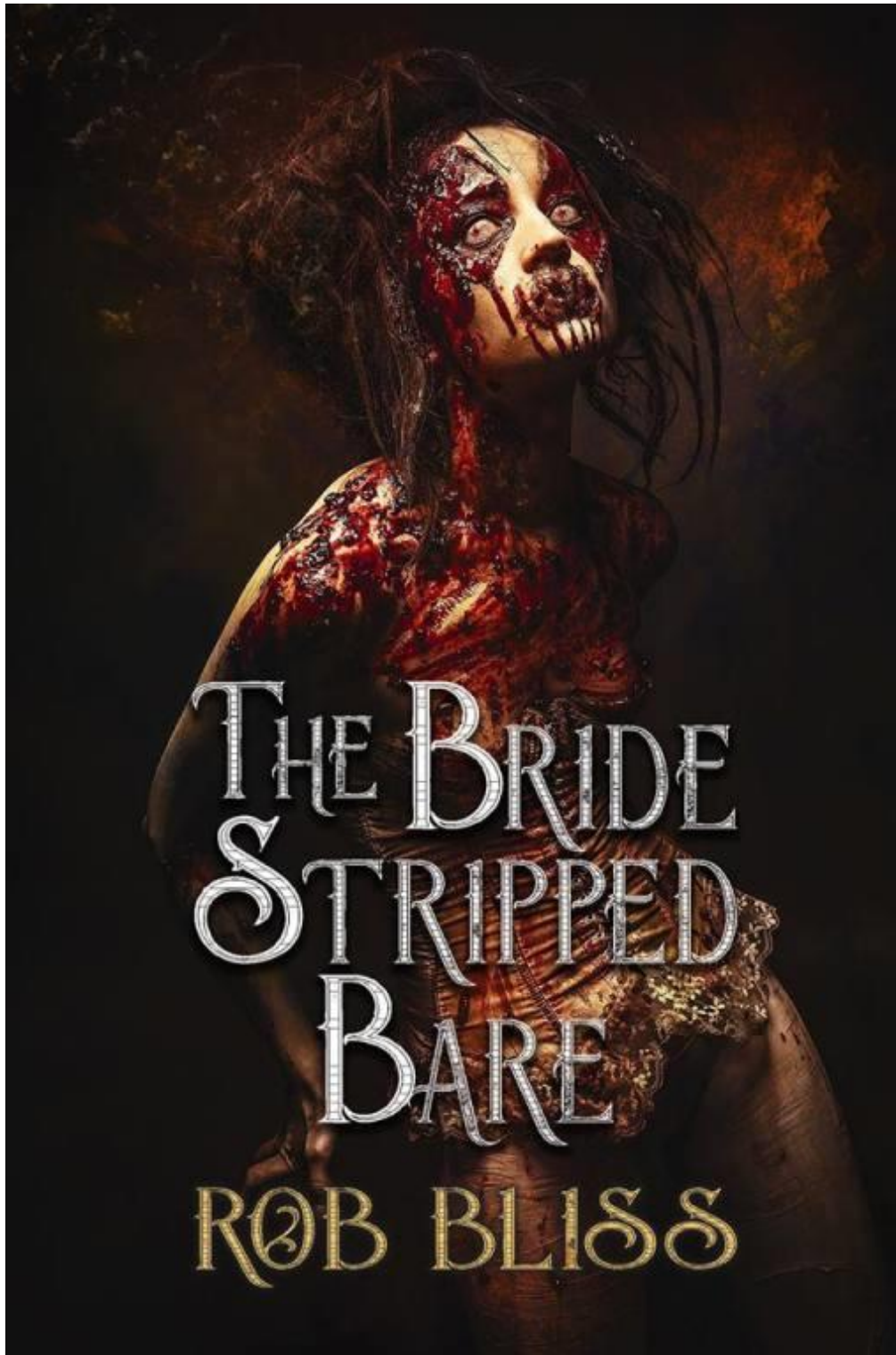
Heart racing, my hands numb, my mind could think up no more lies, no more solutions to an increasingly convoluted puzzle.

I sat slumped on the edge of her bed, the candelabra set down on the floor, as I sunk my worried head into my trembling hands.

And saw on the hardwood floor a trail of wet boot treads that entered the room, strode to where I sat, and left the same way from which I had entered.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK





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SUPERHAIR by Carlton Herzog

In Tijuana, they rarely spoke her name aloud, and when by chance they, they did so in whispers, such was the sheer terror she inspired among the Mexican drug gangs. That she was barely five feet tall and weighed a mere hundred pounds did not offer them any comfort. To them, she was ten feet tall and bulletproof. And judging from her record of late, she loved to kill drug dealers. She was Maria Conchita Guadalupe Gonzalez, chief of police and scourge of wrong doers.

Maria had not always been so formidable. Nor bloodthirsty. When she took the job as chief of police, she refused to carry a gun or wear a vest. To everyone this seemed most unusual insofar as her predecessor—and his—had been gunned down in cold blood outside their homes. Maria believed that if she adopted a less threatening posture, she might survive long enough to do some good. But a series of intervening events completely changed her law enforcement policies.

Maria came from a long line of farmers. She had the plain look and manner of a peasant albeit with a sharp mind. After she was appointed chief of police she decided that needed to look and act more cosmopolitan since she would be rubbing elbows with important people.

She travelled to Mexico City. She intended to upgrade her wardrobe. As she wandered up and down the streets passing the various shops and bodegas, she noticed a blinking neon sign. It advertised various medicinal and grooming substances. Something about the place, perhaps the odour of burnt ochre or the resplendent coloured knick-knacks in the window drew her inside.

As she browsed the shelves looking at the various snake oils and potions, a gnarled old woman approached her. She looked positively ancient, as if she had lived during the time of the Aztecs. She smelled of mushrooms and tequila.

“I have what you need right here,” she rasped and then handed Maria a small jar. The label read “Super Fantastic Hair Gel—Guaranteed to Change Your Life.” Maria looked at her quizzically. She took the jar and rotated it in her hand. Then she opened it. The contents were lime green and smelled of pine.

“Go ahead, take it,” the old woman urged. “No charge.” Maria questioned her “No charge?” “Si—you’ll be back for more when that’s gone,” the crone promised. Maria took it.

Maria wanted to look her best on the first day. After she showered, she slathered the gel on her hair. Only now it didn’t smell like pine. Rather it smelled like some exotic perfume, pleasantly alluring and calming at the same time. She noticed that it made her hair look fuller, shinier, bouncier. And it made her look prettier. She chalked this up to her imagination and headed to the office.

But it wasn’t her imagination. Everyone from the police officers to the staff commented on how beautiful she looked. And she caught one or two of them looking at her with more than aesthetic admiration. But she chalked it up to a placebo effect. She was the same person, but somehow the old lady’s words had given her a new confidence.

After the formalities had been concluded, she decided to do a ride along with Officer Juan Tax. Little did she know that the drug gangs had already decided to kill her on her first day.

The patrol car was less than a mile from the station when a hail of bullets shattered the glass and killed officer Tax. Maria ducked below the dashboard. The gunfire stopped after the car rammed into a pole. The hitmen came up to the car and dragged Maria out of the car with the intention of executing her. Two carloads of gang members watched.

What happened next happened very fast. Maria had been pulled from the car and was being led to a pole where she would be tied. A makeshift firing squad was checking its weapons while two amateur cinematographers were making ready to film the event for the media.

They tied her to the pole and started walking back. That's when Maria's hair took over. It shot out of her head and attached itself above and below where her hands were tied and snapped the telephone pole in two. It took the upper portion and wielded it like a club, smiting the gang members. A few began shooting. That's when more of her hair shot out and formed a wall between her and the oncoming hail of bullets. Still more hair shot out and strangled the gun men and camera men to death.

But it didn't stop there. The presumed bosses who sat in their cars observing the tableau were sauce for the goose. After the enlivened hair finished with the lackeys it attached itself to the roofs of the cars and split them in half, then extracted the kingpins and tore them in half.

In twenty seconds or less, Maria's hair had killed twenty men and she hadn't so much as worked up a sweat. She felt as though she were in a waking dream but was not so dumbfounded that she couldn't muster a sardonic observation "That old bag was right; that's some kick-ass hair gel." Thus, began the reign of Super-Hair.

Over the next year Maria began to purge the state drug dealers, drug users, and every other kind of criminal. But like Robespierre during the French Revolution, she only had one solution: death. At first, she had qualms about it, but reasoned that she couldn't afford to leave witnesses, because once her secret was out, it would be just a matter of time before somebody found her kryptonite.

That was of course nonsense. She was invulnerable. Several times she had been completely unaware that snipers had her in their crosshairs. Were it not for the fact that Super-hair had super-hearing and super reflexes, Maria would be dead. Likewise, the various attempts at bombing her, gassing her, and poisoning her. Each time Super-hair took the defensive action necessary to save her life.

Maria didn't want to admit to herself that Super-hair had a mind of its own. It was calling the shots as to who lived and who died. It made her stock up on gel. And it had ambitions.

Maria wanted to know more about Super-hair. She returned to the shop and questioned the hag, whom she suspected to be a *bruja*, or witch.

The old woman said this: "It is a living thing as old as the earth itself. We call it Caltiki, the Immortal Protector of the Mexican Peoples. It is said that one day Caltiki will rise again. And it has through you."

“Where did you get it?”

“It lives deep within the ground, and every so often it pools on the surface where it can take stock of things. The last time it did so was when Montezuma ruled the land. It didn’t like what it saw, so it exterminated the Aztecs, and made it look as if the conquistadors had done so.”

Maria said, “How do you know that?”

The crone smiled, “Because it told me to take it from the ground, spread it into my hair and go into the city. I can still see the faces of those Aztecs it tore apart. It didn’t touch the conquistadors. Maybe it didn’t like slavery and human sacrifice.”

“But when it came to slavery, the Spanish proved far worse than the Aztec rulers.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t think like us. How could it? It has no solid body. Maybe it just likes to kill.”

“How do I get rid of it?”

“You can’t. When it’s ready, it will leave you. Until then, enjoy your Super-Hair. You’re a god now. Do some good with that power.”

Maria left the shop resigned to her fate. As she walked, she considered that her biological clock would run much slower, probably as slow as the hag’s.

“And for a woman, that’s a mighty good thing!” she mused.

THE END

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## LITTORAL RENDEZVOUS by Greg Fewer

For years, the old man would sit near the water's edge with his female companion. He now sat alone. The man was frail—it was hard for him to carry his fold-up chair and set it up on the bank.

As he settled onto his seat, I saw the metal stick he beat me with fall and slide downslope into the water. Cursing, he crouched down on rickety legs and reached for his stick. Finally! I torpedoed towards him, clamped his hand between my jaws and dragged him, flailing and screaming, beneath the water where I feasted upon him.

THE END

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THE NIGHTMARE by Steven Havelock

Lucy awoke.

*Sirens. I can hear sirens in the distance!*

Then she heard something else.

*A rushing sound, like the sound of intense waves smashing themselves against rocks on a shore! It's coming from the next room.*

She looked around the room by the light of the bedside lamp. Just then her cat Sammy leaped off the bottom of the bed and stood by the closed bedroom door. Lucy got out of bed, slightly dizzy and unsteady on her feet.

*God! I feel like crap! The room is spinning.*

She steadied herself by placing a hand on the wall.

“Meow!”

Lucy slowly staggered over to the closed bedroom door. With shaky hands she opened it.

*Sirens. I can hear the sound of sirens and they are getting louder! Smoke? Is that smoke I can smell?*

Sammy gave another meow, and walked across the landing to the other closed door from which the sound of crashing waves was coming.

“Meow.”

*I feel so nauseous, like I'm going to pass out.*

Lucy slowly but determinedly staggered over to the door. She pushed it open very slowly. The sound of waves increased.

*Burning? I can smell burning?*

Inside the room, it was dark except for a rectangular door made of white light.

*What the hell is that?*

“We are waiting for you, Lucy.”

*The sound is coming from that door.*

She stared at it a short while, unsure what to make of it.

*It's pulsating.*

Lucy awoke. She looked to the sleeping body of David, her partner. She heard his soft gentle snores and felt reassured by them.

*What a horrible nightmare! I can still hear the sound of sirens, how odd.*

She saw by the clock on the bedside draw that it was 6 AM.

*Best let Sammy out.*

When she got to the kitchen door, she saw Sammy sitting next to it.

“Meow.”

She let Sammy out.

The sun could just be seeing rising over the horizon. Sammy quickly disappeared into the early morning light of dawn.

After breakfast, Lucy sat at the kitchen table, switched on her laptop and started to write. A short while later David descended down the stairs and she made him breakfast as he got ready for work.

Whilst eating, Lucy asked him, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That...The sound of sirens?”

“No, I don’t.” David looked at her quizzically. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“Look, I don’t have time to talk about it now,” said David, perplexed, “We’ll talk about it later when I get back from work.”

Lucy awoke.

*Sirens, I can hear sirens in the distance!*

Sammy jumped off her bed. Then she heard the sound that she had heard before, the sound of waves crashing against rocks on a shore.

Sammy sat by the closed bedroom door. She looked at Lucy.

“Meow.”

Lucy got out of bed, feeling unsteady on her feet.

*Smoke! I can smell smoke!*

She managed to open the door, and then pushed open the door from which the sound was coming from.

*Burning! I can smell burning!*

Like last time she saw the bright white shimmering door, pulsating. Then she heard it again, but the sound was lower, less audible.

“We are waiting for you, Lucy.”

*The door is not as bright as before, like it's losing power?*

Sammy sat in front of the door.

“Meow.”

Sammy looked straight at Lucy then stepped through the pulsating doorway and disappeared.

*The sirens in the distance are getting louder. I can smell the stench of burning wood!*

Lucy awoke. She looked to the sleeping body of David, her partner. She heard his soft gentle snores and felt reassured by them.

*What a horrible nightmare! I can still hear the sound of sirens, how odd.*

She put the thought of the nightmare out of her mind. An hour later David descended down the stairs as she was writing. During David's breakfast, Lucy asked.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“The sound of sirens.”

“No, are you okay?”

“Yes, fine.”

“I don't have time to talk about it now, but we will discuss it when I get back from work.”

Lucy awoke.

*The nightmare! No don't think about it!*



She remembered.

*Oh no! God no!*

She remembered how she had been doing aromatherapy.

*I retired to bed...The candle...Oh God, no!*

She looked around the room by the light of the bedside lamp.

*Sammy! Where's Sammy?*

She heard the sound of waves crashing against rocks.

*The sound of waves is getting fainter and fainter but the sound of sirens is so loud now.*

Then realisation hit her.

*The door! I need to get to the door!*

Lucy jumped out of her bed as fast she could.

*God! My head is spinning.*

She rushed into the room with the pulsating door just to see it go out.

*Downstairs I can hear the sound of shouting.*

She descended down the stairs to the front door. The fire and smoke had no effect on her; she passed through them as if they were not there. Then she saw Sammy. Next to Sammy was a fireman, bent over.

She walked closer to get a better look.

*C.P.R. He's performing C.P.R.*

She walked even closer, as in a black nightmare not wanting to see what she would know she would see.

*My body! He's performing C.P.R on my unconscious body!*

There was a scattering of broken glass around her body.

*Oh God, no! The nightmare...*

Then realisation hit her. It wasn't a nightmare!

*Living with David was the life I could have had!*

THE END

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## DOMESTIKA

Five

Still in the wide open spaces, in this case the hills behind the estate overseeing the coastal village of Saint Bees near Whitehaven, Matt Johnson trudged through sludge in the field as he lost sight of the black cat he swore had been lying dead in Dennis Henderson's garden moments before. He hop-skipped huge knolls and steered out of the way of bogs. Typical landscape for the North of England, since at least in the South—he may have been mistaken—or did the ground seem harder there, less damp and sludgy? Honestly, fucked if he knew but one thing was for sure, which was that it was one big severe ball-ache trying to keep from sinking into one of these multitudes of bogs and being seen for the final time by anybody.

If he'd known the cat's name, he could have called out to it. It was a long shot if the cat heeded a shout as cats, because of course like everyone—especially cat owners—knew, every one of these similar furry critters possessed a peculiar selective hearing and rarely answered any attempt to grab their attention. Dogs had masters but cats had servants, wasn't that the old score?

In Matt's time, having never owned a cat, he went by the rumours. If anything, the reporter preferred dogs—oh, and parrots—but never cats.

They always seemed very sly creatures. His mother told him as a child that cats were bad luck and never to be trusted. In his very early youth, many a time Matt observed his mother chase the wee beasties from the garden, cursing and swearing to high heaven. Didn't dogs hate cats and wish to devour them whole? Most of them had this attitude anyway—from movies to cartoons to real life. However, wasn't it the case the public never witnessed a dog bonding with a domestic cat, unless you followed videos on YouTube which littered our screens with banal imagery of brotherly adoration between domestic animals?

“Fucking bastard...!” Matt yelled as his right foot sank in mud, and he felt his foot go cold when the sludge seeped into his shoe. In a way, it was like an ancient Hammer horror flick...Curse of the Muddy Lagoon...starring Mr Cushing or, even better, Mr Lugosi!

He loved those old films. The fun he had as a young lad staying up late at night with his dad and watching them on TV.

Pausing, Matt surveyed the landscape, looking for any shifting black shape, that darn cat!

The cat that had risen from the dead, somehow...

...the idea still baffled him immensely.

Finally, Matt reached the brow of the hill overlooking the narrow road where the accident occurred, seeing there was nothing there now, except for some strange and wholly deserted space. Although, from here, he could get a bird's eye view overlooking the kennels site organised by Animal Concern, where you'd expect to hear yapping dogs in the distance, yet the entire area was eerily silent and somehow gaudy.

Matt shivered in the cold, and dared to believe the rain was about to start up once more.

The skies had darkened far too early in the morning for Matt's liking and it didn't feel right. The grey clouds high above seemed to shift and formulate to make shapes that looked like dead men's wizened faces.

"Damned stinking rain..." he muttered.

Wildly, he expected to hear the character Alex from the 1973 *Clockwork Orange* movie recite the famous line, "And what is so stinking about it?"...and he chuckled at the thought, wondering where the hell did that come from?

But Cumbria always seemed to get stinking weather despite its landscape being one of the world's greatest and most captivating.

He extracted his mobile phone and dialled a number.

The response came in seconds. It was Peter King at the KLF News office. He said, "Yeah, what can I do for you, Matt?"

"Listen, I'm in Whitehaven where the shit went down last night, presently standing on the hill overlooking the crash site, you know—the truck—carrying the waste? Well, surprisingly, the place is deserted, no truck, nobody...but listen, the house across the street from the incident last night...don't ask me how but I discovered a dead body, and it's gory, Pete, fucking grotesque, mutilated...I want you to ring the police, get them out here. As for that half-arsed conference this afternoon, I'm not attending, I'm knackered and going to bed, I've had enough, I'm fucked, need sleep. Do you want to go for a beer tonight? I'll see you in The Top House around about ten-thirty, okay?"

"Yeah, no bother."

"Okay," Matt said, adding quickly, "Now get some work done, contact the police, there's been a wicked crime committed."

"Should we get the crew there to report?"

"Up to you, but I won't be there...I've seen enough, enough to make me dead in the brain. I always imagined I was scarred for life when I first watched the porno film *Animal Farm* and saw that woman with the pig..."

Peter laughed, "It's on my must-watch list."

"I'm sure you'll love it."

Peter asked, "So, where you going now? I've had folk on the blower asking to speak to the investigative crew from last night. They want you, Matt...what do I tell them?"

"Simple, tell them nothing, zilch, zero, nada...I'll deal with those nosy fuckers in my own sweet time. But for now, Peter, goodbye..." Matt said, and cut Peter King off in mid-flow, adding, "...sorry, mate!"

Matt trudged down the hill. However, something he noticed that was quite shocking stopped him in his tracks, something entirely puzzling. Indeed, it was horrific, if only mildly horrific since it concerned an array of dead carcasses which lay strewn across the hill. From this vantage point, he could already tell they were animals and not human, at least five or six scattered here and there, which looked very much the size of cats and dogs.

He wandered over towards the first and nearest one to him.

If he wasn't mistaken, it looked like a senior German Shepherd which had its lower jaw ripped from its place, all bloodied and hanging off. Already, the maggots had congregated and set to the job of feasting on the grisly mess. There was no way of saying how long it had been dead. Matt was no expert in such cases. It may have been a week or a day or a couple of hours.

He looked around and saw the other deceased animals scattered about, lying there lonely and ignored. Putting two and two together, it seemed obvious they were from the Animal Concern shelter on the Saint Bees road although he wasn't completely certain at this stage. Whatever, so many deceased beasts shocked him.

But then, he spotted an orange thing caught in a gully by the edge of the road and instinctively walked towards it. His worst suspicions were quickly confirmed. The body was that of a human being lying there.

"Shit, what is happening today?" he said, looking down at the dead man. He must have been mid-30s, blond haired, six feet tall—yet, like the dead dog—his lower jaw was missing, exposing a gaping hole where just an upper set of teeth resided. Matt also noticed his left eyeball had been punctured and that yellow-like pus emerged. It sickened him, and not for the first time this morning. So much fucking death it was unbelievable...

At a guess, Matt presumed the man was employed by the kennels since the jacket he wore was high-visibility yellow and silver and had ANIMAL CONCERN CUMBRIA etched on it, a dead giveaway.

What the fuck was going on in Whitehaven?

Suddenly, Matt's stomach tightened and he doubled up like he had in the Henderson house moments before and began to wretch, when he puked streams of bile and vomit. It tasted of cigarettes and the three coffees he had to wake him up earlier before he set off from Workington in the car.

He was a bona fide hack first and foremost, yes, but he didn't want to report on this shit oddly enough. He'd leave this for the big boys working for the nationals. This shit might even have attracted a global audience. After all, it was straight out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*...or fucking *ET* even! Something bizarre and unruly was shaping in these hills and it frightened him right to the core. Right now, all Matt Johnson wanted was to turn around and walk away. Nothing to do with him or KLF News, like he thought, leave this crap to the big boys stationed in their London offices, as for me, I'm off, I'm walking away and keeping away.

He walked across to another one of the dead dogs lying in the high grass on the hill. It was a chocolate coloured Labrador, a beast you wouldn't imagine seeing in a kennels due to its outward beauty and courteous nature. You'd think a dog like this would not have been in there very long before someone fostered it or even fully adopted it as they were lovely animals, great with adults and kids, or so was their reputation. In fact, Matt's neighbour had a black Labrador called Bingo and she was a terrific animal, friendly and vastly intelligent.

The maggots were relishing the chocolate Labrador's eyes and snout, hacking away at the most tender places.

"Bastards..." Matt muttered, as he paused to take another panorama. It was odd as well that for miles he could see no cattle grazing in the fields around Whitehaven or towards the coastal neck of Saint Bees. No sheep or cows, no horses, nothing. The one place he observed was the farmhouse in the distance not far from here and of course Crook's Cemetery by the old Livingstone Chapel, located on the road which led to the beach. Even from this point, there was a clear view of the Irish Sea, given the skies were still very much grey and clouded over.

He turned and headed back up the hill. He guessed he'd after answer questions by the police pertaining to the death of Dennis Henderson, so he might as well just have sat in his car on the street until they arrived along with the various vultures, radio and TV, and a scattering a national newspapers in for a penny, in for a pound. They thrived on shit like this—morbid cunts.

But again, upon getting to the top of the hill, Matt was further shocked at what he was seeing. The Henderson house was on fire, the flames massive, rising up towards the skies amongst thick black plumes of smoke and burning ash.

So much happening in so little time....it was absolutely fucking unbelievable!

He quickly retrieved his mobile phone and dialled. Peter King answered, saying, "I thought you were going to bed, hombre?"

"Listen, Pete, I'm still at the estate. Don't just ring the police, but ring the fire services as well. The shit has really hit the fan."

Before Peter King could respond, Matt had switched off his phone and was already trudging through the muddy field back towards the estate, his eyes fixated on the burning house in his midst.

Suddenly, the rain came down, heavily.

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## PLANETOID 127 by Edgar Wallace

### Chapter I

“CHAP” WEST, who was never an enthusiast for work, laid down the long pole that had brought him from Bisham to the shade of a backwater west of Hurley Lock, and dropped to the cushions at the bottom of the punt, groaning his relief. He was a lank youth, somewhat short-sighted, and the huge horn-rimmed spectacles which decorated his knobbly face lent him an air of scholarship which his school record hardly endorsed.

Elsie West woke from a doze, took one glance at her surroundings and settled herself more comfortably.

“Light the stove and make some tea,” she murmured.

“I’m finished for the day,” grunted her brother. “The hooter sounded ten minutes ago; and cooking was never a hobby of mine.”

“Light the stove and make tea,” she said faintly.

Chap glared down at the dozing figure; then glared past her to where, paddle in hand, Tim Lensman was bringing the punt to the shore.

Tim was the same age as his school friend, though he looked younger. A good-looking young man, he had been head of the house which had the honour of sheltering Chapston West. They had both been school prefects at Mildram and had entered and passed out on the same day.

Tim Lensman was looking disparagingly at the tangle of bush and high grass which fringed the wooded slope.

“Trespassers will be prosecuted,” he read. “That seems almost an invitation—can you see the house, Chap?”

Chap shook his head.

“No; I’ll bet it is the most horrible shanty you can imagine. Old Colson is just naturally a fug. And he’s a science master—one of those Johnnies who ought to know the value of fresh air and ventilation.”

Elsie, roused by the bump of the punt side against the bank, sat up and stared at the unpromising landing-place.

“Why don’t you go farther along?” she asked. “You can’t make tea here without—”

“Woman, have you no thought before food?” demanded her brother sternly. “Don’t you thrill at the thought that you are anchored to the sacred terrain of the learned Professor Colson, doctor of science, bug expert, performer on the isobar and other musical instruments and—”

“Chap, you talk too much—and I should love a cup of tea.”

“We’ll have tea with the professor,” said Chap firmly. “Having cut through the briars to his enchanted palace, we will be served in crystal cups reclining on couches of lapis lazuli.”

She frowned up at the dark and unpromising woods.

“Does he really live here?” she addressed Tim, and he nodded.

“He really lives here,” he said; “at least, I think so; his driving directions were very explicit and I seem to remember that he said we might have some difficulty in finding the house—”

“He said, ‘Keep on climbing until you come to the top,’” interrupted Chap.

“But how does he reach the house?” asked the puzzled girl.

“By aeroplane,” said Chap, as he tied the punt to the thick root of a laurel bush. “Or maybe he comes on his magic carpet. Science masters carry a stock of ‘em. Or perhaps he comes through a front gate from a prosaic road—there must be roads even in Berkshire.”

Tim was laughing quietly. “It is the sort of crib old Colson would choose,” he said. “You ought to meet him, Elsie. He is the queerest old bird. Why he teaches at all I don’t know, because he has tons of money, and he really is something of a magician. I was on the science side at Mildram and it isn’t his amazing gifts as a mathematician that are so astounding. The head told me that Colson is the greatest living astronomer. Of course the stories they tell about his being able to foretell the future—”

“He can, too!”

Chap was lighting the stove, for, in spite of his roseate anticipations, he wished to be on the safe side, and he was in need of refreshment after a strenuous afternoon’s punting.

“He told the school the day the war would end—to the very minute! And he foretold the big explosion in the gas works at Helwick—he was nearly pinched by the police for knowing so much about it. I asked him last year if he knew what was going to win the Grand National and he nearly bit my head off. He’d have told Timothy Titus, because Tim’s his favourite child.”

He helped the girl to land and made a brief survey of the bank. It was a wilderness of a place, and though his eyes roved around seeking a path through the jungle, his search was in vain. An ancient signboard warned all and sundry that the land was private property, but at the spot at which they had brought the punt to land the bank had, at some remote period, been propped up.

“Do you want me to come with you?” asked Elsie, obviously not enamoured with the prospect of the forthcoming call.

“Would you rather stay here?” asked Chap looking up from his stove.

She gave one glance along the gloomy backwater with its weedy bed and the overhanging osiers. A water-rat was swimming across the still water and this spectacle decided her.



“No; I think I will come with you,” she said; and added, “I don’t like rats.”

“That was a vole,” said Tim, shying a stone in the direction of the swimming rodent.

Her pretty face puckered in an expression of distaste.

“It looks horribly like a rat to me,” she said. Chap poured out the tea and the girl was raising it to her lips when her eyes caught sight of the man who was watching them from between the trees, and she had hard work to suppress the scream that rose to her lips.

“What is it?”

Tim had seen her face change and now, following the direction of her eyes, he too saw the stranger.

There was nothing that was in the slightest degree sinister about the stranger; he was indeed the most commonplace figure Tim had ever seen. A short, stout man with a round and reddish face, which was decorated with a heavy ginger moustache; he stood twiddling his watch chain, his small eyes watching the party.

“Hello!” said Tim as he walked toward the stranger. “We have permission to land here.”

He thought the man was some sort of caretaker or bailiff of “Helmwood.”

“Got permission?” he repeated. “Of course you have—which of you is Lensman?”

“That’s my name,” smiled Tim, and the man nodded.

“He is expecting you and West and Miss Elsie West.”

Tim’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. He had certainly promised the professor that he would call one day during vacation, but he had not intended taking Chap nor his sister. It was only by accident he had met his school friend at Bisham that morning, and Chap had decided to come with him.

As though divining his thoughts, the stout man went on: “He knows a lot of things. If he’s not mad he’s crook. Where did he get all his information from? Why, fifteen years ago he hadn’t fifty pounds! This place cost him ten thousand, and the house cost another ten thousand; and he couldn’t have got his instruments and things under another ten thousand!”

Tim had been too much taken aback to interrupt. “Information? I don’t quite understand...?”

“About stocks and things... he’s made a hundred thousand this year out of cotton. How did he know that the boll-weevil was going to play the devil with the South, eh? How did he know? And when I asked him just now to tell me about the corn market for a friend of mine, he talked to me like a dog!”

Chap had been listening open-mouthed. “Are you a friend of Mr. Colson?” he asked.

“His cousin,” was the reply. “Harry Dewes by name. His own aunt’s child—and his only relation.”

Suddenly he made a step towards them and his voice sank to a confidential tone.

“You young gentlemen know all about him—he’s got delusions, hasn’t he? Now, suppose I brought a couple of doctors to see him, maybe they’d like to ask you a few questions about him...”

Tim, the son of a great barrister, and himself studying for the bar, saw the drift of the question and would have understood, even if he had not seen the avaricious gleam in the man’s eyes.

“You’d put him into an asylum and control his estate, eh?” he asked with a cold smile. “I’m afraid that you cannot rely upon us for help.”

The man went red.

“Not that exactly,” he said awkwardly. “And listen, young fellow...” he paused. “When you see Colson, I’d take it as a favour if you didn’t mention the fact that you’ve seen me... I’m going to walk down to the lock... you’ll find your way up between those poplars... so long!”

And turning abruptly he went stumbling through the bushes and was almost at once out of sight.

“What a lad!” said Chap admiringly. “And what a scheme! And to jump it at us straight away almost without an introduction—that fellow will never need a nerve tonic.”

“How did Mr. Colson know I was coming?” asked Elsie in wonder.

Tim was not prepared with an answer. After some difficulty they found the scarcely worn track that led up through the trees, and a quarter of an hour’s stiff climb brought them to the crest and in view of the house.

Tim had expected to find a residence in harmony with the unkempt grounds. But the first view of “Helmwood” made him gasp. A solid and handsome stone house stood behind a broad stretch of shaven lawn. Flower beds bright with the blooms of late summer surrounded the lawn and bordered the walls of the house itself. At the farther end, but attached to the building, was a stone tower, broad and squat, and on the top of this was erected a hollow structure—criss-crossed without any apparent order or method—with a network of wires which glittered in the sunlight.

“A silver wire-box aerial!” said Chap. “That is a new idea, isn’t it? Gosh, Tim! Look at the telescope!”

By the side of the tower was the bell-roof of a big observatory. The roof was closed, so that Chap’s “telescope” was largely imaginary.

“Great Moses!” said Chap awe-stricken. “Why, it’s as big as the Lick!”

Tim was impressed and astounded. He had guessed that the old science master was in comfortable circumstances, and knew that indeed he could afford the luxury of a car, but he had never dreamt that the professor was a man wealthy enough to own a house like this and an observatory which must have cost thousands to equip.

“Look, it’s turning!” whispered Elsie.

The big, square superstructure on the tower was moving slowly, and then Tim saw two projecting cones of some crystalline material, for they glittered dazzlingly in the sunlight.

“That is certainly new,” he said. “It is rather like the gadget they are using for the new beam transmission; or whatever they call it—and yet it isn’t—”

As he stood there, he saw a long trench window open and a bent figure come out on to the lawn. Tim hastened towards the man of science and in a few minutes Chap was introducing his sister.

“I hope you didn’t mind my coming, sir,” said Chap. “Lensman told me he was calling.”

“You did well to come,” said Mr. Colson courteously. “And it is a pleasure to meet your sister.”

Elsie was observing him closely and her first impression was one of pleasant surprise. A thin, clean-shaven old man, with a mass of white hair that fell over his collar and bushy eye-brows, beneath which twinkled eyes of deepest blue. There was a hint of good humour in his delicately-moulded face. Girl-like, she first noted his extraordinary cleanliness. His linen was spotless, his neat black suit showed no speck of dust.

“You probably met a—er—relative of mine,” he said gently. “A crude fellow—a very crude fellow. The uncouth in life jars me terribly. Will you come in, Miss West?”

They passed into a wide hall and down a long, broad corridor which was lighted on one side by narrow windows through which the girl had a glimpse of a neatly flagged courtyard, also surrounded by gay flower-beds.

On the other side of the corridor, doors were set at intervals and it was on the second of these that Tim, in passing, read an inscription. It was tidily painted in small, gold lettering:

PLANETOID 127.

The professor saw the young man’s puzzled glance and smiled. “A little conceit of mine,” he said.

“Is that the number of an asteroid?” asked Tim, a dabbler in astronomy.

“No—you may search the Berlin Year Book in vain for No. 127,” said the professor as he opened the door of a large and airy library and ushered them in. “There must be an asteroid—by which, young lady, is meant one of those tiny planets which abound in the zone between Mars and Jupiter, and of which, Witts D.Q.—now named Eros—is a remarkable example.

My Planetoid was discovered on a certain 12th of July—127. And it was not even an asteroid!”

He chuckled and rubbed his long white hands together.

The library with its walnut bookshelves, its deep chairs and faint fragrance of Russian leather, was a pleasant place, thought Elsie. Huge china bowls laden with roses stood in every possible point where bowls could stand. Through the open windows came a gentle breeze laden with the perfume of flowers.

“Tea will be ready in a minute,” said Mr. Colson. “I ordered it when I saw you. Yes, I am interested in asteroids.”

His eyes went mechanically to the cornice of the room above the stone fire-place and Tim, looking up, saw that there was a square black cavity in the oaken panelling and wondered what was its significance.

“They are more real and tangible to me than the great planetary masses. Jupiter—a vapour mass; Saturn—a molten mass, yielding the secret of its rings to the spectroscope; Vulcan—no planet at all, but a myth and a dream of imaginative and romantic astronomers—there are no intra-mercurial planets, by which I mean” —he seemed to find it necessary to explain to Elsie, for which Chap was grateful—”that between Mercury, which is the nearest planet to the sun and the sun itself, there is no planetary body, though some foolish people think there is and have christened it Vulcan—”

An elderly footman had appeared in the doorway and the professor hurried across to him. There was a brief consultation (Elsie suspected a domestic problem, and was right) and with a word of apology, he went out.

“He’s a rum bird,” began Chap and stopped dead. From the black cavity above the fireplace came a thin whine of sound, and then a deafening splutter like exaggerated and intensified “atmospherics.”

“What is that?” whispered the girl.

Before Tim could answer, the spluttering ceased, and then a soft, sweet voice spoke:

“Lo... Col—son! Ja’ze ga shil? I speak you, Col—son... Planetoid 127... Big fire in my zehba... city... big fire... “

There was a click and the voice ceased abruptly, and at that moment Professor Colson came in.

He saw the amazed group staring at the square hole in the wall, and his lips twitched.

“You heard—? I cut off the connection, though I’m afraid I may not get him again to-night.”

“Who is he, sir?” asked Tim frowning. “Was that a transmission from any great distance?”

The professor did not answer at once. He glanced keenly and suspiciously at the girl, as though it was her intelligence he feared. And then:

“The man who spoke was a man named Colson,” he said deliberately; “and he spoke from a distance of 186 million miles!”

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

18. Storm of the Sacred Mountain

It was Nais herself who sent me to attend to my sterner duties. The din of the attack came to us in the house where I was tending her, and she asked its meaning. As pithily as might be, for she was in no condition for tedious listening, I gave her the history of her nine years' sleep.

The colour flushed more to her face. "My lord is the properest man in all the world to be King," she whispered.

"I refused to touch the trade till they had given me the Queen I desired, safe and alive, here upon the Mountain."

"How we poor women are made the chattels of you men! But, for myself, I seem to like the traffic well enough. You should not have let me stand in the way of Atlantis' good, Deucalion. Still, it is very sweet to know you were weak there for once, and that I was the cause of your weakness. What is that bath over yonder? Ah! I remember; my wits seem none of the clearest just now."

"You have made the beginning. Your strength will return to you by quick degrees. But it will not bear hurrying. You must have a patience."

"Your ear, sir, for one moment, and then I will rest in peace. My poor looks, are they all gone? You seem to have no mirror here. I had visions that I should wake up wrinkled and old."

"You are as you were, dear, that first night I saw you—the most beautiful woman in all the world."

"I am pleased you like me," she said, and took the cup of broth I offered her. "My hair seems to have grown; but it needs combing sadly. I had a fancy, dear, once, that you liked ruddy hair best, and not a plain brown." She closed her eyes then, lying back amongst the cushions where I had placed her, and dropped off into healthy sleep, with the smiles still playing upon her lips. I put the coverlet over her, and kissed her lightly, holding back my beard lest it should sweep her cheek. And then I went out of the chamber.

That beard had grown vastly disagreeable to me these last hours, and then I went into a room in the house, and found instruments, and shaved it down to the bare chin. A change of robe also I found there and took it instead of my squalid rags. If a man is in truth a king, he owes these things to the dignity of his office.

But, if the din of the fighting was any guide, mine was a narrowing kingdom. Every hour it seemed to grow fiercer and more near, and it was clear that some of the gates in the passage up the cleft in the cliff, impregnable though all men had thought them, had yielded to the vehemence of Phorenice's attack. And, indeed, it was scarcely to be marvelled at. With all her genius spurred on to fury by the blow that had been struck at her by wrecking so fair a part of the city, the Empress would be no light adversary even for a strong place to resist, and the Sacred Mountain was no longer strong.

Defences of stone, cunningly planned and mightily built, it still possessed, but these will not fight alone. They need men to line them, and, moreover, abundance of men. For always in a storm of this kind, some desperate fellows will spit at death and get to hand grips, or slingers and archers slip in their shot, or the throwing-fire gets home, or (as here) some new-fangled machine like Phorenice's fire-tubes, make one in a thousand of their wavering darts find the life; and so, though the general attacking loses his hundreds, the defenders also are not without their dead.

The slaughter, as it turned out, had been prodigious. As fast as the stormers came up, the Priests who held the lowest gate remaining to us rained down great rocks upon them till the narrow alley of the stair was paved with their writhing dead. But Phorenice stood on a spur of the rock below them urging on the charges, and with an insane valour company after company marched up to hurl themselves hopelessly against the defences. They had no machines to batter the massive gates, and their attack was as pathetically useless as that of a child who hammers against a wall with an orange; and meanwhile the terrible stones from above mowed them down remorselessly.

Company after company of the troops marched into this terrible death-trap, and not a man of all of them ever came back. Nor was it Phorenice's policy that they should do so. In her lust for this final conquest, she was minded to pour out troops till she had filled up the passes with the slain, so that at last she might march on to a level fight over the bridge of their poor bodies. It was no part of Phorenice's mood ever to count the cost. She set down the object which was to be gained, and it was her policy that the people of Atlantis were there to gain it for her.

Two gates then had she carried in this dreadful fashion, slaughtering those Priests that stood behind, them who had not been already shot down. And here I came down from above to take my share in the fight. There was no trumpet to announce my coming, no herald to proclaim my quality, but the Priests as a sheer custom picked up "Deucalion!" as a battle-cry; and some shouted that, with a King to lead, there would be no further ground lost.

It was clear that the name carried to the other side and bore weight with it. A company of poor, doomed wretches who were hurrying up stopped in their charge. The word "Deucalion!" was bandied round and handed back down the line. I thought with some grim satisfaction, that here was evidence I was not completely forgotten in the land.

There came shouts to them from behind to carry on their advance; but they did not budge; and presently a glittering officer panted up, and commenced to strike right and left amongst them with his sword. From where I stood on the high rampart above the gate, I could see him plainly, and recognised him at once.

"It matters not what they use for their battle-cry," he was shouting. "You have the orders of your divine Empress, and that is enough. You should be proud to die for her wish, you cowards. And if you do not obey, you will die afterwards under the instruments of the tormentors, very painfully. As for Deucalion, he is dead any time these nine years."

"There it seems you lie, my Lord Tatho," I shouted down to him.

He started, and looked up at me.

“So you are there in real truth, then? Well, old comrade, I am sorry. But it is too late to make a composition now. You are on the side of these mangy Priests, and the Empress has made an edict that they are to be rooted out, and I am her most obedient servant.”

“You used to be skilful of fence,” I said, and indeed there was little enough to choose between us. “If it please you to stop this pitiful killing, make yourself the champion of your side, and I will stand for mine, and we will fight out this quarrel in some fair place, and bind our parties to abide by the result.”

“It would be a grand fight between us two, old friend, and it goes hard with me to balk you of it. But I cannot pleasure you. I am general here under Phorenice, and she has given me the strongest orders not to peril myself. And besides, though you are a great man, Deucalion, you are not chief. You are not even one of the Three.”

“I am King.”

Tatho laughed. “Few but yourself would say so, my lord.”

“Few truly, but what there are, they are powerful. I was given the name for the first time yesterday, and as a first blow in the campaign there was some mischief done in the city. I was there myself, and saw how you took it.”

“You were in Atlantis!”

“I went for Nais. She is on the mountain now, and to-morrow will be my Queen. Tatho, as a priest to a priest, let me solemnly bring to your memory the infinite power you bite against on this Sacred Mountain. Your teaching has warned you of the weapons that are stored in the Ark of the Mysteries. If you persist in this attack, at the best you can merely lose; at the worst you can bring about a wreck over which even the High Gods will shudder as They order it.”

“You cannot scare us back now by words,” said Tatho doggedly. “And as for magic, it will be met by magic. Phorenice has found by her own cleverness as many powers as were ever stored up in the Ark of the Mysteries.”

“Yet she looked on helplessly enough last night, when her royal pyramid was trundled into a rubbish heap. Zaemon had prophesied that this should be so, and for a witness, why I myself stood closer to her than we two stand now, and saw her.”

“I will own you took her by surprise somewhat there. I do not understand these matters myself; I was never more than one of the Seven in the old days; and now, quite rightly, Phorenice keeps the knowledge of her magic to herself: but it seems time is needed when one magic is to be met by another.”

“Well,” I said, “I know little about the business either. I leave these matters now to those who are higher above me in the priesthood. Indeed, having a liking for Nais, it seems I am debarred from ever being given understanding about the highest of the higher Mysteries. So I content myself with being a soldier, and when the appointed day comes, I shall fall and kiss my mother the Earth for the last time. You, so I am told, have ambition for longer life.”



He nodded. "Phorenice has found the Great Secret, and I am to be the first that will share it with her. We shall be as Gods upon the earth, seeing that Death will be powerless to touch us. And the twin sons she has borne me, will be made immortal also."

"Phorenice is headstrong. No, my lord, there is no need to shake your head and try to deny it. I have had some acquaintance with her. But the order has been made, and her immortality will be snatched from her very rudely. Now, mark solemnly my words. I, Deucalion, have been appointed King of Atlantis by the High Council of the Priests who are the mouthpiece of the most High Gods, and if I do not have my reign, then there will be no Atlantis left to carry either King or Empress. You know me, Tatho, for a man that never lies."

He nodded.

"Then save yourself before it is too late. You shall have again your vice-royalty in Yucatan."

"But, man, there is no Yucatan. A great horde of little hairy creatures, that were something less than human and something more than beasts, swept down upon our cities and ate them out. Oh, you may sneer if you choose! Others sneered when I came home, till the Empress stopped them. But you know what a train of driver ants is, that you meet with in the forests? You may light fires across their path, and they will march into them in their blind bravery, and put them out with their bodies, and those that are left will march on in an unbroken column, and devour all that stands in their path. I tell you, my lord, those little hairy creatures were like the ants—aye, for numbers, and wooden bravery, as well as for appetite. As a result to-day, there is no Yucatan."

"You shall have Egypt, then."

He burst at me hotly. "I would not take seven Egypts and ten Yucatans. My lord, you think more poorly of me than is kind, when you ask me to become a traitor. In your place would you throw your Nais away, if the doing it would save you from a danger?"

"That is different."

"In no degree. You have a kindness for her. I have all that and more for Phorenice, who is, besides, my wife and the mother of my children. If I have qualms—and I freely confess I know you are desperate men up there, and have dreadful powers at your command—my shiverings are for them and not for myself. But I think, my lord, this parley is leading to nothing, and though these common soldiers here will understand little enough of our talk, they may be picking up a word here and there, and I do not wish them to go on to their death (as you will see them do shortly) and carry evil reports about me to whatever Gods they chance to come before."

He saluted me with his sword and drew back, and once more the missiles began to fly, and the doomed wretches, who had been halting beside the steep rock walls of the pass began once more to press hopelessly forward. They had scaling-ladders certainly, but they had no chance of getting these planted. They could do naught but fill the narrow way with their bodies, and to that end they had been sent, and to that end they humbly died. Our Priests with crow and lever wrenched from their lodging-places the great rocks which had been made ready, and sent them crashing down, so that once more screams filled the pass, and the horrid butchery was renewed.

But ever and again, some arrow or some sling-stone, or some fire-tube's dart would find its way up from below and through the defences, and there we would be with a man the less to carry on the fight. It was well enough for Phorenice to be lavish with her troops; indeed, if she wished for success, there were no two ways for it; and when those she had levied were killed, she could readily press others into the service, seeing that she had the whole broad face of the country under her rule. But with us it was different. A man down on our side was a man whose arm would bitterly be missed, and one which could in no possible way be replaced.

I made calculation of the chances, and saw clearly that, if we continued the fight on the present plan, they would storm the gates one after another as they came to them, and that by the time the uppermost gate was reached, there would be no Priest alive to defend it. And so, not disdaining to fashion myself on Phorenice's newer plan, which held that a general should at times in preference plot coldly from a place of some safety, and not lead the thick of the fighting, I left those who stood to the gate with some rough soldier's words of cheer, and withdrew again up the narrow stair of the pass.

This one approach to the Sacred Mountain was, as I have said before, vastly more difficult and dangerous in the olden days when it stood as a mere bare cleft as the High Gods made it. But a chasm had been bridged here, a shelf cut through the solid rock there, and in many places the roadway was built up on piers from distant crags below so as to make all uniform and easy. It came to my mind now, that if I could destroy this path, we might gain a breathing space for further effort.

The idea seemed good, or at least no other occurred to me which would in any way relieve our desperate situation, and I looked around me for means to put it into execution. Up and down, from the mountain to the plains below, I had traversed that narrow stair of a pass some thousands of times, and so in a manner of speaking knew every stone, and every turn, and every cut of it by heart. But I had never looked upon it with an eye to shaving off all roadway to the Sacred Mountain, and so now, even in this moment of dreadful stress, I had to traverse it no less than three times afresh before I could decide upon the best site for demolition.

But once the point was fixed, there was little delay in getting the scheme in movement. Already I had sent men to the storehouses amongst the Priests' dwellings to fetch me rams, and crows, and acids, and hammers, and such other material as was needed, and these stood handy behind one of the upper gates. I put on every pair of hands that could be spared to the work, no matter what was their age and feebleness; yes, if Nais could have walked so far I would have pressed her for the labour; and presently carved balustrade, and wayside statue, together with the lettered wall-stones and the foot-worn cobbles, roared down into the gulf below, and added their din to the shrieks and yells and crashes of the fighting. Gods! But it was a hateful task, smashing down that splendid handiwork of the men of the past. But it was better that it should crash down to ruin in the abyss below, than that Phorenice should profane it with her impious sandals.

At first I had feared that it would be needful to sacrifice the knot of brave men who were so valiantly defending the gate then being attacked. It is disgusting to be forced into a measure of this kind, but in hard warfare it is often needful to the carrying out of his schemes for a general to leave a part of his troops to fight to a finish, and without hope of rescue, as valiantly as they may; and all he can do for their reward is to recommend them earnestly to

the care of the Gods. But when the work of destroying the pathway was nearly completed, I saw a chance of retrieving them.

We had not been content merely with breaking arches, and throwing down the piers. We had got our rams and levers under the living rock itself on which all the whole fabric stood; and fire stood ready to heat the rams for their work; and when the word was given, the whole could be sent crashing down the face of the cliffs beyond chance of repair.

All was, I say, finally prepared in this fashion, and then I gave the word to hold. A narrow ledge still remained undestroyed, and offered footway, and over this I crossed. The cut we had made was immediately below the uppermost gate of all, and below it there were three more massive gates still unviolated, besides the one then being so vehemently attacked. Already, the garrisons had been retired from these, and I passed through them all in turn, unchallenged and unchecked, and came to that busy rampart where the twelve Priests left alive worked, stripped to the waist, at heaving down the murderous rocks.

For a while I busied myself at their side, stopping an occasional fire-tube dart or arrow on my shield and passing them the tidings. The attack was growing fiercer every minute now. The enemy had packed the pass below well-nigh full of their dead, and our battering stones had less distance to fall and so could do less execution. They pressed forward more eagerly than ever with their scaling ladders, and it was plain that soon they would inevitably put the place to the storm. Even during the short time I was there, their sling-stones and missiles took life from three more of the twelve who stood with me on the defence.

So I gave the word for one more furious avalanche of rock to be pelted down, and whilst the few living were crawling out from those killed by the discharge, and whilst the next band of reinforcements came scrambling up over the bodies, I sent my nine remaining men away at a run up the steep stairway of the path, and then followed them myself. Each of the gates in turn we passed, shutting them after us, and breaking the bars and levers with which they were moved, and not till we were through the last did the roar of shouts from below tell that the besiegers had found the gate they bit against was deserted.

One by one we balanced our way across the narrow ledge which was left where the path had been destroyed, and one poor Priest that carried a wound grew giddy, and lost his balance here, and toppled down to his death in the abyss below before a hand could be stretched out to steady him. And then, when we were all over, heat was put to the rams, and they expanded with their resistless force, and tore the remaining ledges from their hold in the rock. I think a pang went through us all then when we saw for ourselves the last connecting link cut away from between the poor remaining handful of our Sacred Clan on the Mountain, and the rest of our great nation, who had grown so bitterly estranged to us, below.

But here at any rate was a break in the fighting. There were no further preparations we could make for our defence, and high though I knew Phorenice's genius to be, I did not see how she could very well do other than accept the check and retire. So I set a guard on the ramparts of the uppermost gate to watch all possible movements, and gave the word to the others to go and find the rest which so much they needed.

For myself, dutifully I tried to find Zaemon first, going on the errand my proper self, for there was little enough of kingly state observed on the Sacred Mountain, although the name and title had been given me. But Zaemon was not to be come at. He was engaged inside the Ark

of the Mysteries with another of the Three, and being myself only one of the Seven, I had not rank enough in the priesthood to break in upon their workings. And so I was free to turn where my likings would have led me first, and that was to the house which sheltered Nais.

She waked as I came in over the threshold, and her eyes filled with a welcome for me. I went across and knelt where she lay, putting my face on the pillow beside her. She was full of tender talk and sweet endearments. Gods! What an infinity of delight I had missed by not knowing my Nais earlier! But she had a will of her own through it all, and some quaint conceits which made her all the more adorable. She rallied me on the new cleanness of my chin, and on the robe which I had taken as a covering. She professed a pretty awe for my kingship, and vowed that had she known of my coming dignities she would never have dared to discover a love for me. But about my marriage with Phorenice she spoke with less lightness. She put out her thin white hand, and drew my face to her lips.

“It is weak of me to have a jealousy,” she murmured, “knowing how completely my lord is mine alone; but I cannot help it. You have said you were her husband for a while. It gives me a pang to think that I shall not be the first to lie in your arms, Deucalion.”

“Then you may gaily throw your pang away,” I whispered back. “I was husband to Phorenice in mere word for how long I do not precisely know. But in anything beyond, I was never her husband at all. She married me by a form she prescribed herself, ignoring all the old rites and ceremonies, and whether it would hold as legal or not, we need not trouble to inquire. She herself has most nicely and completely annulled that marriage as I have told you. Tatho is her husband now, and father to her children, and he seems to have a fondness for her which does him credit.”

We said other things too in that chamber, those small repetitions of endearments which are so precious to lovers, and so beyond the comprehension of other folk, but they are not to be set down on these sheets. They are a mere private matter which can have no concern to any one beyond our two selves, and more weighty subjects are piling themselves up in deep index for the historian.

Phorenice, it seemed, had more rage against the Priests' Clan on the Mountain and more bright genius to help her to a vengeance than I had credited. Her troops stormed easily the gates we had left to them, and swarmed up till they stood where the pathway was broken down. In the fierceness of their rush, the foremost were thrust over the brink by those pressing up behind, before the advance could be halted, and these went screaming to a horrid death in the great gulf below. But it was no position here that a lavish spending of men could take, and presently all were drawn off, save for some half-score who stood as outpost sentries, and dodged out of arrow-shot behind angles of the rock.

It seems, too, that the Empress herself reconnoitred the place, using due caution and quickness, and so got for herself a full plan of its requirements without being obliged to trust the measuring of another eye. With extraordinary nimbleness she must have planned an engine such as was necessary to suit her purposes, and given orders for its making; for even with the vast force and resources at her disposal, the speed with which it was built was prodigious.

There was very little noise made to tell of what was afoot. All the woodwork and metalwork was cut, and tongued, and forged, and fitted first by skilled craftsmen below, in the plain at

the foot of the cleft; and when each ponderous balk and each crosspiece, and each plank was dragged up the steep pass through the conquered gates, it was ready instantly for fitting into its appointed place in the completed machine.

The cleft was straight where they set about their building, and there was no curve or spur of the cliff to hide their handiwork from those of the Priests who watched from the ramparts above our one remaining gate. But Phorenice had a coyness lest her engine should be seen before it was completed, and so to screen it she had a vast fire built at the uppermost point where the causeway was broken off, and fed diligently with wet sedge and green wood, so that a great smoke poured out, rising like a curtain that shut out all view. And so though the Priests on the rampart above the gate picked off now and again some of those who tended the fire, they could do the besiegers no further injury, and remained up to the last quite in ignorance of their tactics.

The passage up the cleft was in shadow during the night hours, for, though all the crest of the Sacred Mountain was always lit brightly by the eternal fires which made its defence on the farther side, their glow threw no gleam down that flank where the cliff ran sheer to the plains beneath. And so it was under cover of the darkness that Phorenice brought up her engine into position for attack.

Planking had been laid down for its wheels, and the wheels themselves well-greased, and it may be that she hoped to march in upon us whilst all slept. But there was a certain creaking and groaning of timbers, and laboured panting of men, which gave advertisement that something was being attempted, and the alarm was spread quietly in the hope that if a surprise had been planned, the real surprise might be turned the other way.

A messenger came to me running, where I sat in the house at the side of my love, and she, like the soldier's wife she was made to be, kissed me and bade me go quickly and care for my honour, and bring back my wounds for her to mend.

On the rampart above the gate all was silence, save for the faint rustle of armed men, and out of the black darkness ahead, and from the other side of the broken causeway, came the sounds of which the messenger had warned me.

The captain of the gate came to me and whispered: "We have made no light till the King came, not knowing the King's will in the matter. Is it wished I send some of the throwing-fire down yonder, on the chance that it does some harm, and at the same time lights up the place? Or is it willed that we wait for their surprise?"

"Send the fire," I said, "or we may find that Phorenice's brain has been one too many for us."

The captain of the gate took one of the balls in his hand, lit the fuse, and hurled it. The horrid thing burst amongst a mass of men who were labouring with a huge engine, sputtering them with its deadly fire, and lighting their garments. The plan of the engine showed itself plainly. They had built them a vast great tower, resting on wheels at its base, so that it might be pushed forward from behind, and slanting at its foot to allow for the steepness of the path and leave it always upright.

It was storeyed inside, with ladders joining each floor, and through slits in the side which faced us bowmen could cover an attack. From its top a great bridge reared high above it,

being carried vertically till the tower was brought near enough for its use. The bridge was hinged at the third storey of the tower, and fastened with ropes to its extreme top; but, once the ropes were cut, the bridge would fall, and light upon whatever came within its swing, and be held there by the spikes with which it was studded beneath.

I saw, and inwardly felt myself conquered. The cleverness of Phorenice had been too strong for my defence. No war-engine of which we had command could overset the tower. The whole of its massive timbers were hung with the wet new-stripped skins of beasts, so that even the throwing-fire could not destroy it. What puny means we had to impede those who pushed it forward would have little effect. Presently it would come to the place appointed, and the ropes would be cut, and the bridge would thunder down on the rampart above our last gate, and the stormers would pour out to their final success.

Well, life had loomed very pleasant for me these few days with a warm and loving Nais once more in touch of my arms, but the High Gods in Their infinite wisdom knew best always, and I was no rebel to stay stiff-necked against their decision. But it is ever a soldier's privilege, come what may, to warm over a fight, and the most exquisitely fierce joy of all is that final fight of a man who knows that he must die, and who lusts only to make his bed of slain high enough to carry a due memory of his powers with those who afterwards come to gaze upon it. I gripped my axe, and the muscles of my arms stood out in knots at the thought of it. Would Tatho come to give me sport? I feared not. They would send only the common soldiers first to the storm, and I must be content to do my killing on those.

And Nais, what of her? I had a quiet mind there. When any spoilers came to the house where she lay, she would know that Deucalion had been taken up to the Gods, and she would not be long in following him. She had her dagger. No, I had no fears of being parted long from Nais now.

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