

schlock.co.uk



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

Issue 1, Volume 23

17 September 2011

Schlock! is an exciting new 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 schlock fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk.

We will also review published and self-published novels, in both print and digital editions. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

The stories, articles and illustrations contained on this website are copyright © to the respective authors and illustrators, unless in the public domain.

This Edition

Featured in this edition is a collection of stories, new and old.

This week's cover illustration is *Run - zombies are on their way by Frederic Dupont*

**State of Emergency - Part Five by David Christopher – *Direct action...*
SCIENCE FICTION**

Live by the Sword by Peter Law- *"I am a killer and I want to tell someone about it."*... HORROR

Virtual Black by Todd Nelsen – *Anders waited for his next client to arrive ...* HORROR

**Super Duper – Part Eighteen by James Rhodes – *The vigil for Smith...*
SCIENCE FICTION**

Babbage Must Die - Part Seventeen by Gavin Chappell – *The Privateers...* SCIENCE FICTION

**The Dark Place: Part Fourteen by James Talbot – *The Last Installment...*
DARK FANTASY**

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Twenty-Two ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest. *Before Twilight... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney...* GOTHIC HORROR

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 17) by Ray Cummings - *...Landing on the asteroid....* SPACE OPERA

My Mystical Child Part Two by Gavin Chappell – War of extermination... Ninth in the Going Underground series. URBAN FANTASY

Schlock! Classic Serial: Carmilla - Part Fifteen by J. Sheridan LeFanu - Conclusion... GOTHIC HORROR

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Six: Direct Action

‘Alright, something’s got to be done,’ Will said. ‘But why do you keep expecting me to do it?’

Daisy looked at him disappointedly. Rex leaned forward.

‘You’ve got the skills we need,’ he said. ‘You can assassinate Verlaine. That’ll show them that they can’t take us for granted.’

Will spread his hands. ‘I don’t even have a gun,’ he said. ‘Okay, I can shoot – only because my father took me shooting since I was small. He was always anxious to get in with the country set, and it must have looked good, I suppose. I hated it.’

Daisy leaned forward to join Rex. ‘But you are good at it,’ she said. She indicated the now silent TV. ‘You know what’s happening out there. They killed the Professor and covered it up. Now people who protest are being killed as well. We’ve got to hit back before something worse happens.’

Will swallowed. Cold sweat ran down his back at the thought of what was going on. It was terrible, horrible, unbelievable. People needed to calm down. Both sides were rubbing up against each other, and neither seemed willing to accept the others’ point of view. A recipe for disaster. What would assassination achieve?

‘Verlaine is at the back of all this,’ Rex said coldly. ‘She wants an excuse to bring in her National Security Bill with full powers. This is her feeding the flames! She has to be stopped.’

Daisy nodded. ‘And you’re the one to do it,’ she said, putting a cool, soft hand on Will’s wrist, looking intently into his eyes. He swallowed again. Now he was sweating freely.

‘I’ll need a gun,’ he objected.

‘That can be arranged,’ Rex said. ‘The organisation’s made contacts in London since Quigley was murdered.’

Will looked bitterly at him. ‘Why can’t *they* carry out the assassination?’

‘We need your skills,’ Daisy told him. He turned his bitter gaze on her. He felt horribly like he was being set up.

‘Give me time to think it over,’ he insisted.

‘You’ve got twenty four hours,’ said Rex. He swept from the room. Shortly after, Will heard the front door slam. He turned to see Daisy was looking at him. The atmosphere seemed to have cleared a little.

‘This is difficult for me,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t expecting to have this off loaded on me. Look, I’m not a hitman! I don’t even like shooting grouse. Why me?’

‘I can’t do it,’ Daisy said with a shrug. ‘And Rex wouldn’t know one end of a gun from another. He’s full of ideas, and passion. But he’s not practical.’

‘Damn right he’s not practical,’ Will replied angrily. ‘This is a crazy scheme. What if it goes wrong?’

Daisy smiled. ‘I trust you,’ she said, and Will groaned. ‘I know you won’t let me down.’

Will thought of Caroline, how she had tried to control his life in the end, what he wore, what he ate, before abruptly tiring of him. Was he destined to spend his entire life with women manipulating him?

He considered getting up and walking straight out. But what would he do then? Could he just go back to his job in the off-licence, with no Caroline and no Daisy? With the world in the state it was, could he turn his back on everything? It would just come knocking sooner or later. It seemed whichever way he turned, disaster lay.

Daisy turned on the TV again, and flicked through the channels until she came to the news again. More footage of riots and burning buildings, tanks patrolling city streets. What the hell was going on? It could be only miles away. He could hear nothing. The picture changed to footage of protestors running away from blank-helmeted security men. He found it hard to breathe for anger.

‘Alright, so how are we going to do it, then?’ he asked suddenly. ‘Not that I’ve agreed, mind you.’

Daisy rose and paced up and down. ‘I don’t know,’ she admitted. ‘Rex has talked about it. I think he’s thinking of something like the Kennedy assassination, you know, up on top of a building, shooting the home secretary when she passes in a car.’

‘I hate heights,’ Will complained. ‘Anyway, how can we know when she’s going to be driving past?’

‘Rex knows people in the Home Office,’ Daisy said airily.

‘Oh, his famous contacts,’ Will sneered. ‘And they’re going to tell him what he wants to know? Sounds like a security breach to me.’

Daisy shrugged. ‘Rex has a lot of contacts. The whole organisation is very small. At least, I only know a few other people involved. There are other people, but I never get to meet them. But there are people we have influence over.’

Will looked suspiciously at her. The more he heard, the more he wondered if Tarrant had been right, that all these civil libertarians were fronting for terrorists. Other people who Daisy had never met? It sounded like this might just be a small cell in a larger group. But who was running it? What interests did they represent? And why had they picked on Will to carry out the shooting?

Or was he just getting paranoid? Was it just a group of inept students with big ideas? Was he being played for a fool by bigger fools? He looked at the TV again. Something had to be done. And he didn’t think he’d get far by writing to his MP.

‘So what brought you into all this?’ he asked Daisy. ‘What’s a nice girl like you...?’

A smile brightened her intense features. She laughed, and looked self-conscious. Then she went to the kitchenette and put the kettle on. He followed.

‘I was never that interested in politics as a teenager,’ she said, dropping a couple of teabags into two cracked, chipped mugs. ‘I was a pretty typical kid, only interested in parties, boys, all that. When I was doing my A-levels at college, I ended up studying Politics because my boyfriend was doing it. We split up after half a year, and I was stuck studying Politics. But I worked hard at it, and when it came to uni, I picked Politics as my degree subject. I got more into it, and I got into old bands like the Clash, the Manic Street Preachers, Rage Against The Machine...’

‘Were you a punk?’ Will asked teasingly. He couldn’t see this demure girl sporting a Mohican, but...

Daisy looked embarrassed again. She spooned sugar into one of the two mugs. ‘I was a goth for a bit,’ she said. ‘Then I met Rex at a gig. He wasn’t interested in the music, just the message. It all went on from there.’

Will nodded glumly. Rex loomed large in all Daisy’s conversations.

‘Do you really believe this is the solution?’ he asked. ‘I mean, whether it’s me or someone else who pulls the trigger...’

The kettle came to a boil. Calmly, Daisy poured the hot water into the two mugs. She took one and handed it to Will. ‘Sugar?’ she asked. He shook his head and took the mug. She sipped her own tea, leaning back against a kitchen unit. Will studied her in silence.

‘I think this is the solution,’ she said. ‘Activism gets nowhere. It’s just a media circus. It’s the same with strikes. The system came to accept it, accommodate it. It doesn’t work. What Rex is planning will send a message; the people can take action. That’s one reason why it has to be someone like you, Will. If we *were* a political organisation, a pressure group or a party, we’d be *them*. But we’re not. We’re ordinary people. And it’s time for ordinary people to stand up to them...’

Will heard the front door open and a noise of traffic from outside followed by the babble of excited voices. Daisy went into the main room, and Will followed slowly, clutching his mug.

Rex had returned, and he had two companions, a lank haired youth with an aggressive air and another lad the same age with a genuine Mohican. Both looked utterly filthy, exhausted and afraid but exhilarated. They looked distrustfully at Will. Rex gave his usual booming laugh, hugged Daisy until she squealed, then introduced Will.

‘This is Wiggy,’ he said, indicating the youth with the lank hair, ‘and this is Higgy.’ The guy with the Mohican shook Will’s hand with a crushing grasp, while his friend glared about him suspiciously. ‘They’ve been out there, on the front line, manning the barricades...’

‘Fuckin’ pigs,’ Higgy growled. ‘Who’s this fucker?’

‘This is the guy who’s going to strike a blow for freedom,’ Rex said grandly.

‘This your gunman?’ Wiggy said, looking aloofly at Will. Will frowned at Rex, who continued breezily.

‘He’s the man we need. He’s got the skills. We have the knowledge. All we need is to bring them together and we’ll show the powers-that-be what the people really want.’

Will shook his head. He didn’t think this was what Professor Quigley had been thinking about at all. He suddenly remembered Quigley’s Manifesto, still hidden in his hotel room. He was supposed to take it to the Professor’s publishers in Oxford by the autumn. That was what mattered, not all this crazy student anarchist shit. Then again, how was he going to get it from the hotel? He’d be arrested. That wouldn’t help. He looked despairingly at Rex’s two associates. He was going to get nowhere like this.

He turned to Rex. ‘Look, I haven’t agreed to anything,’ he said. ‘You said I had twenty four hours to think about it. You’ve given me no time. But I have thought about it, and I know what needs to be done. It doesn’t need assassination. What we need to do is get Professor Quigley’s manifesto to his publishers.’

Rex looked suddenly intent. ‘What do you know about Quigley’s manifesto?’

‘He asked me to make sure it was published,’ Will said, ‘if anything happened to him. Tarrant threatened him. He was afraid. It didn’t stop him going on the demo. But now he’s dead, I have to get the manifesto to his publishers. He died! I’ve got to do this for him.’

Suddenly, Higgy seized him by his collar, lifting him off his feet. Will gagged at the guy’s smell. He clearly didn’t rate personal hygiene highly.

‘Look, mate,’ Higgy snarled. ‘It’s not just your precious professor who’s died. I saw people gunned down today. Unarmed protestors, shot by the security forces! Quigley died when he went on the march; he wanted to be a martyr. But it’s time we got revenge.’

Will struggled free. He glimpsed Daisy looking on in horror while Rex held her back. He glared back at Higgy.

‘And give the other side a martyr? Is that it? There’s got to be a better way. I’m going to get the manifesto to the publishers. When it’s available to everyone, then we’ll see. It’ll be the revolution this country needs – a bloodless one.’

Rex stepped forward. ‘The police confiscated Quigley’s hard drive. All copies of the manifesto have been deleted, or else they’re in the hands of the police.’ He looked closely at Will. ‘Unless you know of another copy.’

Will opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. Rex was a little too eager. Why did he want to know? He’d had nothing but scorn for Quigley and his ideas. All he cared about was his own crazy scheme. He realised how little he knew about Rex, how little even Daisy knew about him. Why this hatred for Verlaine? Why this insistence that assassination was the solution? He looked at Daisy, then at Higgy, and then Wiggy. What did he know about any of them? Who was behind them?

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘I don’t.’

Rex relaxed. ‘Then we’ve got no alternative, have we?’ he said. ‘Time we got this planned.’

Two days later, Will was shivering in the early morning breeze as he crouched atop a building in Central London, gazing in disbelief at the gun in his hands.

It was a 7.62 x 51mm Polish Army bolt-action sniper rifle, provided by one of Rex’s associates. Another associate had provided information on the home secretary’s route to a meeting at Thames House to discuss the recent riots.

London was quiet now, and much of the damage had been repaired. Many arrests had been made, and reports varied wildly as to the number of fatalities incurred. It was widely stated in the press that the protestors had brought everything upon themselves.

Will shivered. The sun had risen only moments before, and its light filtered through clouds onto a dismal, bleak urban cityscape. The street below was almost empty at this time of the morning. Soon the home secretary’s car would drive up from the west and come into range. Verlaine would be sitting in the back seat. If all went to plan, Will would be able to shoot her as soon as she came into view. He squinted down the telescopic sights, and took a deep breath. He could feel his pulse hammering in his temples.

Rex and Daisy were waiting for him in a car at the bottom of the building, a large insurance place whose caretaker was friendly with the organisation. All it took was one well-aimed shot, a sprint across the rooftop, a helter-skelter descent down a

fire escape, and then he'd be in the car and out of there. What happened next was another matter.

He thought briefly of Professor Quigley, dragged into the police van and taken away to a terrible, lonely death. At Verlaine's orders? Was she responsible? Was this right, revenge, an eye for an eye? Why did it fall upon his shoulders...? He tensed suddenly.

A car was heading down the roadway. Motorcycles escorted it down the empty early morning street. Will knew that this was it, the car that was taking Verlaine to the emergency meeting. She would be sitting on the right hand side, by the window, if Rex's informants were right. Will took a look through the sight again.

There she was. Her distinctive features and short-cropped black hair shot into focus. He followed with his gun. It felt cold and dead in his hands. His breathing became deeper. He felt calm. Now the gun was like a living thing, bursting with energy, ready to kick and buck in his hands. The car drew closer.

He took a deep breath. He felt like he was about to leap off a precipice. The car drew closer. He felt almost as if he could reach out and touch the home secretary. This was wrong, he knew in a moment of awful clarity. It could lead to nothing but chaos.

The wind moaned mournfully. He squeezed the trigger.

LIVE BY THE SWORD... By Peter Law

A man and a woman sit in comfortable leather upholstered armchairs, opposite one another in an austere but expensively furnished room.

"So, why are you here?" asks the woman, glancing at the clock. It is ten minutes past four in the afternoon and this is her last appointment for the day.

The man takes a deliberately long sip of his coffee and then sets the cup down on the low table between them. He sits back in his chair and lifts his eyes to meet those of the woman.

"I am a killer and I want to tell someone about it."

He sees the woman's smile suddenly slip, a smile probably cultivated through rigorous practice over many years and one, he is sure, she now wears quite automatically. Just for a moment, though. She is, of course, a seasoned professional and he is certain that there isn't much she hasn't heard before.

The smile returns now but she is silent.

"Are you okay?" he asks in a quiet voice.

"Yes. You just surprised me, that's all. But I believe that was your intention wasn't it?"

His turn to smile now. "Yes. Yes it was."

"Okay. You got me." She says this lightly but there is a slight tremor to her voice. He likes this. It's what he expects.

"So," she continues, more confident now, "you're a killer?"

"Yes."

She pauses for a moment; then, "What do you kill?"

"People. Women, to be exact." He holds her eye as he says this.

She takes an almost imperceptible breath. Seconds pass and then the breath comes back out, though this time it is certainly perceptible. "Why are you telling me this?"

“Because I want to tell someone.” He hesitates and looks away with a frown. “I want to tell my... *story* but I don’t want to be caught and I see this as a doctor/patient relationship and as such, our conversation will remain just between you and me.” He looks back at her again. “That is the case, isn’t it, Doc? This won’t ever leave this room, will it?”

She is held in his stare but her eyes grow distant. He doesn’t like this. He likes the frightened look better. He wants *that* look to return. The moment is brief though and quickly she comes back to him.

“Yes. You are right. This is a private and confidential conversation. It will never leave this room. You have my professional word on that.”

“Thanks Doc.” The man smiles, and waits. The woman looks more relaxed now. Probably doesn’t believe him. Probably will give him the standard sixty minutes of “*let’s talk about your childhood*” bullshit and then push him out the door and call the cops. No matter; he doesn’t really expect anything else at this stage, and he has taken the necessary precautions to make sure his real identity is well hidden.

“Shall we begin then?” she asks.

“Yes, I believe we will.”

“So, when did you last kill...someone?”

“A *woman*.” He corrects her.

“Okay. So when did you last kill *a woman*?”

He sees that behind the facade she is still uncomfortable and he is pleased.

“Ten days ago. In my apartment.”

Again a pause. A slight swallow. He watches her throat as she speaks. “Why did you kill her?”

“Because I wanted to.”

“Why did you want to?”

“I don’t know. I just did.”

A trace of anger briefly contorts her features. “Are you going to be like this all the way through the session?”

“Like what?”

“Obtuse. Tight-lipped. *Smug*. If you came here to tell your story then tell it, but don’t waste my time by doing it one answer at a time.”

The man is simultaneously annoyed and impressed by her bravado. He smiles and then sighs. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Believe you about which part? Her words are a curt. He now perceives that she is actually frightened. He has had much time to study the female *condition*, as he calls it, and his experience tells him that he is starting to get what he came here for.

“You don’t believe I’m a killer.”

“I believe *you* believe you are a killer.”

“Cut the psycho-babble crap, Doc. I have killed eight women in the last three months and I will tell you all the detail in its multi-coloured fucking glory if that’s what you want.”

He watches her carefully for a reaction. He knows she believes him but he needs to see it in her eyes.

Again, her eyes grow distant.

Again he is annoyed but also a little confused. What is wrong with her?

“Are you listening to me?” His voice is raised now.

She blinks and looks directly at him.

“Yes. Of course I’m listening to you. I was just thinking.” She pauses. “You said eight women in three months?”

“Yes, eight, narcissistic, controlling, disrespectful bitches.” He says this with without a trace of malice.

“Not men?” she asks.

“What?”

“Not men? Are you sure you haven’t killed eight *men* in the last three months?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Over the last few months, eight men have been killed upstate. It’s been all over the news. You must have seen it. The time-scale and the numbers match your story, that’s all.”

He is suddenly angry. No, furious. Has he has got it wrong? Can it be that she actually *doesn’t* believe him? That she thinks he is making this up? That he is somehow identifying with these other, other...murders.

Don’t lose control. He tells himself. *This is not how it was supposed to be.* He has to be in control, not *her*. She has to be scared. He has to convince her that he’s the real deal. His eyes flick to the black bag at his feet. He knows what’s in there. He said he wouldn’t do that, though. Not here, not now. Not this time. This was just about talking, nothing else. It has to work this time. *Then why did you bring the bag? Just for back up of course. Just in case. Well, isn’t this just such a case? She doesn’t believe you. She needs to be shown, like the others... No. No! Get control. You need to try talking first. Get control.*

There is a long silence. He is looking at the floor; mumbling. She is looking at him. It is getting dark outside.

At length he finally looks up and speaks in a low and menacing voice. “I *have* heard the news, yes. I *am* aware that some men have been killed; the nearest, I believe, some one hundred and fifty plus miles from here. I can also see how this coincidence might lead to you to your conclusion but these...“Black Widow” murders, if indeed that’s what they are, are just that, a *coincidence*.

“*Black Widow?*”

“Yes, Black Widow. A woman who kills men.” He is impatient now.

“You believe a woman killed these men and not a man?”

“It’s usually the case, isn’t Doc?”

“Well no, actually. Most serial killings are perpetrated by men, regardless of victim gender.”

He starts to speak but then stops. He is still angry.

They sit in silence.

After a while she smiles at him. “I apologise if I offended you.”

When he doesn’t respond to, she asks if he would you like a refill.

He looks up, confused. “A refill?”

“Yes, more coffee?” She gestures to the kettle and the tray of cups in the corner of the room.

He is surprised by her sudden light-heartedness. Again, he is caught off-guard. He supposes that this is part of her training. Get through to his emotions; then disarm him with a change of subject. He calms down. He understands now. She has revealed a tactic. She wanted him to get angry. He will not let her do that again to him. *He* is in control. *Him*, not her.

“Yes.” He smiles, feeling better now. “More coffee. That would be nice.”

She gets up to make the coffee. Her back to him. Brave.

He watches her. She is shapely but not perfect. Her hips, though in proportion, are too wide. The tapered skirt and high heels, a contrived combination designed to

accentuate her legs, doesn't quite disguise her too-thick ankles. He thinks her tan is natural but not her blonde hair. Many would find her attractive but not he.

She soon returns and hands him the cup. He takes a sip. The combination of the hot liquid and the rich aroma is instantly gratifying. He is happy now.

He glances again at the black bag and smiles to himself. He won't be needing it now. He is in control, ready to talk again. Ready, finally, to tell his story.

"So, where do you want me to start, Doc? My last or my first?"

She looks at him, tilting her head to the side as if considering the question. It strikes him as a very feminine gesture.

Moments pass. He takes another sip of coffee and then leans forward. "Well?"

"You know, I'm really not sure I want to get into this just now," she answers. "It's getting late."

He glares at her. His smile disappears. "You're serious?"

"Yes, why?"

"You're fucking unbelievable, you know that?"

"What's wrong? It's almost five. We can start again another time."

"I don't want to start another time," he suddenly shouts. "I want to do this now and I *will* do this now and you will sit there and fucking listen!"

She suddenly looks shaken by his outburst. Her confidence cracked. He smells fear. *Good. It's okay, don't lose it again. It's okay. Calm down. You've got her now. This bitch will do just as she is told and if she doesn't...if she continues to push me, then I will open the bag and I will show her and she will fucking believe!*

The woman however surprises him by standing up.

She grins at him. "I'm sorry, but we really *have* run out of time."

He is incredulous. Dumbfounded.

He growls at her, running the fingers of both hands through his oily hair. "You know, Doc, I've tried to be nice. I've tried to do this your way. I've tried to make this just a conversation and nothing more and believe me this could be something so much more and still might," - he unconsciously glances at his bag before continuing - "but you are just wasting my time with stupid and insulting questions. Don't you understand what this is? Don't you know what you have here? You are fucking privileged to have me here!"

The woman stands silently smiling her infuriating fake smile throughout this and then she speaks.

"I take it you're done now?"

He doesn't answer but continues to glare at her.

"Good. You know what? I've dealt with plenty of men like you. They may not all have claimed to have killed eight women but they were all *you* just the same. You think you're something special, coming in here off the street to tell me your little horror story? Am I supposed to be impressed or *scared*? Fear and oppression is your trade and the fix you get from plying it is nothing new to me. Why is it anyway that you all think we should be frightened of you? That you have a God-given right to be on top? You need to get over yourself. You are all nothing; just little children scratching around in the dirt trying to get one over on each other. You are beneath me!"

She stops suddenly. The only now sound is the clock ticking in the background. Then the man falls back in his chair and starts to laugh. It grows into a hearty belly laugh that sounds wholly incongruent given their surroundings and the context of their conversation. It is a short while before he can speak.

“Wow. You’re just as much a hot-head as me, Doc. Had some tough relationships have you? Been dumped a few times? So what’s fucking new? You make out that I’m a stereotypical egotistical alpha male, grandstanding and showing off to the little lady, when all the while you’re just your common or garden variety man-hating woman. Nice, Doc, real nice. Professional too, don’t you think, losing your cool like that?” He starts to stand but feels a touch dizzy, so he settles back down into the chair.

The woman comes a little closer. She gently pushes his bag out of reach with her foot.

“Man-hating yes,” she hisses, “but there is something very different about me. This dog has a bite as well as a bark.” Her tone suddenly changes now; she friendly, fawning almost; all enmity gone. She moves to stand beside him. “How are you feeling by the way?”

Standing over him, she looks enormous. Inexplicably, he starts to feel scared.

“How am I feeling?” His throat is suddenly dry.

“Yes. How are you feeling? I mean, how’s your stomach for example? Perhaps you are feeling light-headed? Maybe your arms and legs feel heavy?”

The man looks up her smiling face. His head does indeed feel light. *Shit*. He tries to stand again and finds he can’t.

The woman continues. “You see, as you might have already guessed, there was a bit more than coffee in your cup. I slipped a little something in there to help you relax.” She laughs. “In fact, that’s a tad disingenuous; it will do quite a bit more than just relax you. Soon you won’t really be able to move at all. It’s okay though,” she says with mock concern, “you’ll still be able to breathe and see *and* most importantly, *feel*, at least for a while.

The man reaches out for her but he can barely lift his arm. He tries to speak but his tongue has swollen and his jaw is starting to numb.

“*Waa haf oo dun to ma?*”

She ignores his question and looks out at the darkening sky.

“You know, it’s really quite staggering that you came to me. What are the odds? Of all the people you could have chosen to share your pathetic little *story* with; you chose me. Almost enough to make you take up religion, isn’t it. Almost... You know I’ve rid the world of some truly evil pricks in my time but if you’ve really done the things you say you have, then you are a prize among prizes.”

The man is overcome with panic now. Inside he is screaming.

His last words squeeze out from between two slowly stiffening lips, “*Hu aah oo?*”

She turns back to him. “Who am I?” she repeats, looking into his eyes and smiling benevolently.

“Well honey, you can just call me ‘The Black Widow’.”

VIRTUAL BLACK by Todd Nelsen

Anders waited for his next client to arrive. It was a patient kind of wait. The kind a man has when he puts the final touches to a house of playing cards. He lifted the cuff of his shirt and glanced down to his wristwatch, checking the minutes. It was mid afternoon, 3:34 to be exact. He had arrived precisely 34 minutes before, one hour ahead of schedule. The park remained more or less empty. This was peculiar,

considering the mildness of the day; the weather was an even burst of bright sunshine, not a single drop of rain. It was Saturday. So, where were all the people? he thought. Where were the laughing children? The dog walks? The young lovers on their afternoon strolls? His time here had not been completely without incident, at least. 13 ½ minutes before, on the dot, a lone jogger had darted passed. Anders knew this to be true because he had clocked it. Before that, seconds after he came to the park bench, he spotted a flock of birds, geese, flying directly overhead. He clocked them, too, and mentally stored the information. He'd ceased, many years before, jotting the events to paper. Not only was this helpful in avoiding unwanted attention, but it was useful in storage and encoding.

"A direct line *is* a direct line," his predecessor had said, matter-of-factly. "Record the important events, Anders... the events that matter. Ignore the rest. You're being redundant."

Anders disagreed, at first, stating that memory is too fragile, that what is stored in the long term is more reliant on what we *choose* to remember, as opposed to what others might consider important (who were we to judge what people found entertaining?). Later, he learned, of course, that they had chosen him for this work for this very reason.

Anders attention to detail was uncanny; he noticed all of it.

The paint of the park bench was starting to crack, for example. The jogger wore white shoes. The geese flew in a V shaped formation (they looked like a squadron of honking WWII fighters, when he thought about it). But there was more to what he saw, too. The paint was indeed cracked, but the cracks weren't uniform. They were unevenly spaced, peeling less toward the foot and the middle of the bench than at the top and the edges. The jogger's shoes had been white, true, but not only white. The left shoe was scuffed, blackened near the toe. The shoelace had been loose. The geese, eleven of them in all, were 3 ½ trees distant from the ground... one was falling behind the rest, caught in the full force of the gale, high above him.

What amazed Anders most was how the input he received would later unfold. Upon upload, the input processed backwards, like a master tape on rewind. He would not remember any of this, he knew, only his training and the foreknowledge that there was more to come.

He glanced to his wristwatch, again. It was a minute past 4. His client was officially late, he thought. He bent down, picked up the duffle bag at his feet, and placed it upon his lap. Unzipping it, he produced a folded sheet of white paper. The typed print read as follows:

Name: Jonathon O'Reilly
Age: 36
Height & Build: Moderate & Slim
Eye & Hair: Brown
Residence: City of New Denver
Occupation: Banker
Time & Place: 4 PM, River Front Park
Method for Storage: Gunshot or Strangulation

Other than a picture (the man appeared much older than any 36 he remembered), no further information was provided. Anders found it surprising he had brought the dossier along to begin with. With a single glance, 3 hours previous, he was able to recall every detail, from the dimple in his client's chin to the awkward

bend of his client's nose.

"You the gentleman I'm suppose to meet?"

Anders placed the dossier back in the duffle bag, zipping it shut. The voice hadn't startled him. He'd clocked the footsteps 6 seconds ago.

"You're late," Anders said. "Follow me."

"You sure you can make this look legit? I have a family to consider..."

Anders paused. "I can make it look like anything you want, Mr. O'Reilly," then added, "as long as it remains within the perimeters of the agreement."

"Sorry, I'm a little nervous."

"Follow me," Anders repeated.

Clients had various reasons for contacting the V.I.D. Some were terminally ill or mentally unstable. Others, as appeared to be the case with Jonathon O'Reilly, contacted it for monetary gain. An unfortunate few were brought in... selected... by local law enforcement or interested parties. All clients shared one characteristic in common, however.

Once they made the acquaintance of Anders Nicoli Castellanos, there was no chance for negation... they were storage.

2

"Good work, Anders. Systematic and clean, as always. Any problems?"

"None." Anders removed the straps from his ankles and stood to his feet, rubbing the temples behind his eyes. "How long was my upload?"

"Nearly two hours. Your memory of the events should be gone within the hour," the retrieval tech said. "I suggest at least three to four hours of sleep. Plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol for the next few days. You know the routine."

"Will do." Anders replied. "By the way..." Anders pointed to the monitor.

"Him?" the tech asked, inquisitively. Anders nodded but didn't look.

"Gambling debt. I hear he owed the Consortium a tidy sum of money. Guess he figured he could take the easy way out, huh?" The tech chuckled.

Anders proceeded to button his shirt. The Consortium was one thing (they were downright dirty, in fact), but in his line of work, it *never* went down easy.

3

The V.I.D... an acronym for Virtual Information Display. The V.I.D... a conglomerate of interested parties who elected to remain unnamed. The V.I.D... the ultimate form of entertainment.

The V.I.D. existed in essence but not in actual fact. The vital elements were there: sight, taste, hearing, smell, touch... acceleration, balance, relative position, pain, temperature. And these could be adjusted to various frequencies with editing. A user could replay the V.I.D. at half speed, if he so desired, to relish a moment. The V.I.D. could be paused or fast-forwarded to a specific event for expediency. But, in the end, the V.I.D. required no active involvement from the user. The end result depended largely on the storage tech. The storage tech was the focal point, the catalyst, for the overall experience. If Anders experienced excitement or anger, the user would, too. If Anders stopped for an arti-burger and fries or an afternoon shit along the way, they'd be sure to experience it. It mattered little that the user didn't have the freedom of choice once connected. That was never the point. It wasn't a computer simulation or a video game. The V.I.D. was marketed as an authentic experience, beyond the

artificial, and this is what Anders was paid to deliver. Anders was one of the few operators qualified for this sort of work. According to last count, there were only 3,500 storage techs worldwide.

“Gotta fiver, fella?”

Anders reached into his pocket and produced two, shiny coins. A “fiver,” as the man called it, wasn’t worth much these days, and two quarters (regardless of how shiny) were worth even less. It was like handing a hungry elephant a peanut.

“Will this do?” Anders smiled.

The wino hesitated, took a “why don’t ya piss on me some more?” look at the quarters, and wheeled on.

Anders continued walking.

In the beginning, clients were selected. At this time, kill storage, as it was commonly called, was illegal, though most considered it highly profitable and worth the risk. Such underground classics as “Homeless Gutted with Knife” and “Cheating Housewife Strangled with Cord” came from this earlier period. It was realized early on, however--and after the involvement of various, law enforcement agencies--that more humane standards of conduct were necessary. Clients would have to be *willing* clients to participate--free denizens in what was quickly becoming a new world order. Nonetheless, in the years that followed, there remained legitimate grounds for V.I.D. selection. Such undesirables as being a cutthroat, a thief, a pedophile, a rapist, were reason enough for most. All that was required was proof that there were minimal chances for rehabilitation. A variance of 1.5% was considered standard in most cases. Selectees comprised the most violent of cases; hence, they were often the most sought after in the kill markets. They had no say in when, where, or how storage would occur. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet when it came to the storage of a selectee, and everybody wanted in.

Anders had stored a fair amount of these.

For others, the process was less obtrusive. Sites for storage were arranged and agreed on. Most chose three or four. Clients never knew which site a storage tech would choose, of course, but they had some idea (O’Reilly had probably been stalking the park for days). There was a twofold reason for this change. First, it left little room for error. If a client arrived on site, and on schedule, the deal was sealed. Second, it was noticed that clients were more manageable and agreeable with planning. Some even arranged living wakes with family and friends beforehand. It became its own religion, in a way. If you were sick of living, sick of debt, wanting to get your family ahead, contact the V.I.D... and carry out your affairs accordingly. The V.I.D. would take care of the rest.

Satisfaction guar-an-teeed.

There was a healthy amount of celebrity that went along with becoming a client. This offered added incentive. Sponsors. Interviews. The occasional book deal (people still read, though its popularity was declining). Anders didn’t particularly like this aspect of the job--it made it more difficult on his end--but he tolerated it. Once the V.I.D. went global, and became a product of commerce and trade, slogans such as... JUST DO IT!... or... IS IT IN YOU?... became commonplace in most homes. Though all denied any direct involvement, many corporations actively supported the V.I.D. and integrated it into their own marketing strategies.

As for the method of storage, it was non-negotiable. The V.I.D. offered a wide array of choices to the client, but the final decision was left to the discretion of the storage tech at hand. In the case of Jonathon O’Reilly... age 36, moderate height and slim build, brown hair, brown eyes... Anders selected strangulation.

To put it bluntly, he lured O'Reilly to the wooded area of the park... and urged him to run.

4

It takes 3 minutes for death to occur via strangulation... shorter if a ligature is used.

Anders opted for both.

5

As Anders casually strolled passed 8th and Sims, he was already starting to forget the events of the last 8 hours. Impressions were all he had now; even these would be gone soon. The sensation of a chase... acceleration. Hands on soft tissue... touch. An intake of breath... sound. The coolness of shade... temperature. There were emotional responses as well, but they were often the first to go. He couldn't recall these now; too much time had elapsed. He had been trained to emote responses on his own. He was able to induce sexual excitement and arousal; it didn't matter if the client was male or female (Anders, himself, didn't claim to be gay *or* straight and expressed little interest in sex). He could bring himself to extreme anger, jealousy, even sympathy, at the drop of a hat. On occasion, the dossier would dictate *what* Anders should feel--how to color the storage, so to speak. Other times, it was left to his own discretion. Anders was an actor in many ways, but more than that. He not only gave a performance. He lived it.

Anders Castellanos was also... trained to kill.

He walked a few more blocks, turned west, and entered the largest building of the Upper End, the most expensive of the districts. It was now 9:21. The custodian of the property gave him a nod. Anders nodded back. Then he stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the seventh floor.

By the time he reached it...

A sealed envelope. Inside, a white sheet of paper. On it, words... but they were hazy--smearred ink on the foreground. In the following days, the balance in his account would rise considerably. It would remain the only evidence of what had transpired. The V.I.D. safeguarded its storage techs with complete anonymity. If any suspicions aroused, Anders was instructed to inform others that he was a wealthy bachelor, the sole beneficiary of a sizable inheritance. In reality, Anders had no family; he had no ties. And he preferred to keep it this way.

"Lights."

His apartment was well furnished, plush, with all the extravagances of modern living. It had been this way for nearly a year now. A visiting V.I.D. rep politely hinted to Anders, one morning, that he should at least *try* to make some effort to keep up the appearance of living a well-to-do life ("You have the money, buddy... so why not spend it?"). If Anders had any say in the matter, he would have been perfectly content with his bed, a chair, and a small table. Still, in the interest of anonymity (and the V.I.D., of course), he consented. He did have a fascination for one thing tangible, however; one might consider it an obsession.

Clocks, of varying shapes, colors, and sizes adorned the apartment walls. In the living room alone there were twelve (an appropriate number, he thought). In his bedroom, nine. He kept his most valuable pieces in a mechanized strongbox, safe behind the picture above his bed.

Anders had once read:

The measurement of time, dating all the way back to the sundial, is man's greatest and oldest achievement. With it, we record the passing of centuries, millennia. Yet time's measurement is not immutable; it need not go on forever. It exists... because we, its creators, exist.

Anders found the thought comforting. For him, time was the one sure thing he had. It was his slam-dunk into the ass end of the universe. The movement of sun and moon. The progress of the outer galaxies. The beating of a heart. In attoseconds, man had learned to offer sense to the senseless and to provide place where place didn't belong. If the clocks ever stopped their ticking... well, that would be it, wouldn't it?

Record the important events, Anders... the events that matter.

Anders removed his coat, ate a light meal, and went to bed.

6

At 3:07 AM, Anders awoke to the buzzing sound of his door. He stood to his feet, reached for a robe, and crossed the living room. He had been asleep for 4 hours. Without bothering to check the caller (only a fool with a death wish would fuck with a storage tech), he buzzed the doors, unbolted the lock, and opened them. Within moments, before him stood a man he didn't recognize.

Considering the hour, and the fact nobody ever visited...

"Anders, we have a problem."

7

"Rogue?"

"Well, it's an outdated expression, but I do think that about sums it up. Cora has gone rogue." His visitor (who he knew now to be a Mr. Heywood) ran a solitary finger across the edge of his glass, in thought, then turned it up to his mouth and downed what remained of its contents.

"This is good, Anders. What is it?"

Anders reached for the glass and poured him another. "Macallan."

Heywood laughed. "You're kidding, right? Isn't that about 25 Gs a bottle?"

Anders shrugged. Honestly, he could care less how much it cost. He didn't drink the shit. He kept it around, like most everything else in the apartment, to keep up appearances for the V.I.D.

"Remind me to visit more often," Heywood said, taking the glass.

After having known him for little more than 10 minutes, Anders had already decided he didn't like Heywood. There was nothing necessarily wrong with the V.I.D. rep. He was just too easy, too casual, for his taste, Anders thought. Like most in his position, Heywood probably used his easiness to hide his own incompetence. In Ander's line of work, that could get a tech hurt... or even killed.

"Tell me more about Cora."

The V.I.D. rep placed the glass on the table and reached into his breast pocket, producing an envelope. Anders knew it well. It was the same type of envelope used for assignment. The off-white of the paper was unmistakable. Heywood rummaged through its contents and handed Anders a photograph.

"May I?" Heywood asked, reaching for a cigarette.

Anders nodded and took the photo.

She was attractive, as far as the female form went. This wasn't surprising,

considering the advances and popularity of cosmetic alteration these days. Dark hair. Slim build. Young--in her early twenties. She looked like a girl fresh out of high school, somebody's daughter, and hardly had the look of a hardened tech. As the old adage went, however, appearances could be deceiving.

"What's her present location?" he asked, digesting the input.

"Unknown," Heywood said. "Cora was last seen on site with client..." he reached into the envelope and produced a sheet of paper, "... 146. On Franklin and 4th, the lower East End. It says there is an old theater there. Do you know it?"

"Yes," Anders replied. He knew it well. "It's called the Marquis." It was one of the few venues that continued to entertain audiences with the films of the previous decades, had been doing so for the last 50 years. There were very few of them left these days, though a small number of artists and history-types frequented the theaters well enough to keep the reels turning.

"What about the storage?"

"146 was discovered the next morning. He'd received severe trauma to the neck, chest, and head. It's doubtful a bludgeoning instrument was used" (which meant she used her hands, Anders thought). "A protein vendor found 146 in a back alley, eighteen blocks from kill site."

"Cold?" Anders already knew the answer.

"Cold," Heywood repeated. "It appears our young Cora lured 146 from site and disposed of him in that alley. Judging by the number of injuries, and the trauma involved, it must have taken her some time. It was good work, Anders," Heywood said, with no small amount of admiration. "I would like to have seen it."

Anders placed the photo on the table, ignoring the man's enthusiasm. He now had a face to go with the name, and a name to go with the face, and no longer required it.

"Perhaps Cora ran into difficulty," he said. "She may not have had a choice."

"Doubtful," Heywood said. "She never made it to retrieval. She never dialed in for clean up. And considering the violence" (Anders had the distinct impression he was simply rehashing the logic of the men who sent him here) "... I see no other way to call it." He placed the envelope on the table, alongside the photo, and returned to his glass. "Know what the *punch* line is?"

Heywood eased himself forward on the couch and smiled. It was an offhand attempt at humor, Anders thought, and he decided he wouldn't be offering the V.I.D. rep another glass of Macallan. He didn't mind the nature of the joke (146 had been pummeled to death... get it?); he just didn't find it funny.

"Enlighten me," Anders replied.

"If Cora never made it to retrieval..." Heywood said, "that means Cora now has the storage." He raised a finger and tapped his head to illustrate. "And if Cora has the storage..."

"She remembers the kill," Anders finished.

"Exactly."

Cora Black gave the knob of the steel door a turn. She was dressed in brown synthetic leather... from neck to toe. At a mere 5'5", she didn't present the image of a hardened killer. As Anders had suggested, however, appearances could be deceiving; Cora had learned to use the illusion of her diminutive size to her full advantage.

With the turn of the knob, the door opened.

Hallelujah, Cora thought. She hadn't the faintest notion what it meant; it just came to her, as most things did. The word could have implied taking a flying leap into a vat of strong acid for all she knew.

Still, considering the day she was having...

Hal-le-lu-jah.

She took a furtive glance back into the alley--it was empty; she hadn't been followed--and entered the building.

The sight that greeted her was the usual assortment of smut and filth; it appeared to be getting worse the further south she drifted. Cora was in the lower East End now, sixteen miles from kill site. She didn't like being this close--she felt exposed--but she didn't have much of a choice. Despite her protests, her contact had been unrelenting in this regard. Judging by what lie beyond the door, she'd finally arrived at the very heart of the slums, it seemed; trash and debris littered the floor; the mattress of an old box spring lay in the far corner (it looked liked the last occupant had used it for a toilet); she could detect the faint smell of... was that vomit?

Fucking dregs, she thought.

She shouted out once. Twice.

Other than the muffled echo of her own voice, the room was empty. She removed the leather straps of the bag from her shoulders (it contained a change of clothes, a viber phone, and the latter half of a protein solid) and walked to the furthest corner of the room.

Home, sweet, home...

If it had been yesterday... or the day before... she would have barricaded the door. The thought of some guttersnipe making a grab for her as she slept infuriated her. God help them if they tried. She'd break a bone or two, if it came down to it. She was certain the authorities hadn't been contacted, at least. She sensed her former employers had exhibited restraint, and besides, it wouldn't have done them a bit of good if they had. Cora had covered her tracks. If there was going to be pursuit, it would come from the V.I.D. itself, and she was confident she could handle it. Barkley had trained her, after all, and Barkley was the best in the business. Unless (she experienced something akin to fear)...

What if they sent Barkley?

Cora quickly buried the thought, took the viber phone from her bag (untraceable, by all accounts, the vendor had said), and made the call.

9

"I won't kill for you."

You are not expected to.

"I won't solicit my body, either. I'm not a prostitute."

Not a requirement.

"So... what is it you want from me?"

Information.

"I'll be protected?"

Protection is what we offer, Cora.

"Where? When?"

Remain where you are. We will come to you. 3 PM.

(click)

The Consortium had been more elusive than the V.I.D., it seemed. All the same, a little secrecy and confidentiality could go a long way.

It'd got her this far, hadn't it?
She took a look about the room and snorted.
Suck it up, Cora, she said to herself. You'll have contact within the hour.

10

The Consortium's roots ran deep, though she wasn't sure how deep. In the beginning, it had been a loose net of clans, organized beneath a thin veil of Sicilian "moral" conduct. Somewhere along the line, however, things began to change. Where before, mob bosses had been the dividing line, caretakers took their place. These, caretakers in turn formed alliances. Once the Japanese Ninkyō Dantai and Russian Bratvas got wind of what was happening...

That had been many years ago.

Many believed the tripartite system was a reaction to the changing climate of the early 21st century. Laws had grown too stringent, punishment too severe. Survival for the criminal underground the world over meant strength in numbers and numbers meant immunity.

The rules of the Consortium were simple. Such cursory items as "don't screw your neighbor's wife" and "respect your appointments" were at the top of that list. Cora had little problem with these and felt she could abide by them. No sweat. She didn't intend on coveting much of anything in the near future beyond her own freedom, and keeping appointments was common courtesy. And then, of course, there was *regola numero uno*, rule number one, and why she had contacted the Consortium to begin with...

"The Consortium had absolutely NO dealings with the V.I.D."

11

At precisely 3 PM, the door opened.

12

Cora stood to her feet, dusting herself off. "You certainly didn't take your time getting here, consort. If I had known you were coming *this* soon, I would have tidied the place up a little..."

The man before her removed his suit jacket and neatly folded it over.

"So..." she clapped her hands together, eyeing the jacket he had now placed at the foot of the door, "where to?"

"I have a few questions for you first, Cora, if you don't mind."

"Do I have a choice?"

"I'm afraid not," the consort smiled. If it was meant to put her at ease, it didn't. It didn't help matters that he now stood directly between herself and her only means of exit, either. There was but one window in the room, and it, too, was behind him. "May I?"

"Is that your first question? Do you need permission?"

He ignored her. "Tell me about your last client, Cora," he said, "... client 146."

"That's none of your damn business," Cora replied, taken back. "That life is behind me now. I wouldn't have made the contact if it were otherwise." Her voice turned even, static. "I'm off the grid. I want to make that clear."

The consort nodded, to acknowledge he understood--or heard her, at least--and

continued. “What led you to us, Cora?”

“Well, let’s see.... I’ve spent the last two years of my life working for corporate thugs and with blank spots eating at my brain,” Cora said. “Is that reason enough?”

“Could be reason enough,” the consort said.

“I’ll say! Do you know what that’s like?”

“I have some idea.”

“I’m not sure you do. How could you?”

“My own responses are irrelevant, Cora. I’m not the one being questioned.”

Cora sighed. From one despotic shit hole into another, she thought. “Shouldn’t you be writing this down... recording it in some way?”

Again, he ignored her. “Blank spots... tell me more about these.”

“A blank spot... a life erased. I don’t know what else to call it. Retrieval calls it storage. You may call it something else. I call it a blank spot.”

“Your clients... they came to you willingly, did they not?”

“Some did... not all.” Cora wasn’t certain of this, however. Her former employers had kindly relieved her of that information. “Wait, I thought you guys didn’t agree with the V.I.D.,” she said suspiciously.

“It is not an issue of agreement, Cora. I’m not here to pass judgment.” For some reason, Cora doubted this. “Let’s talk a little more about your time as a storage tech. Are you saying you developed a conscience when it came to your work?”

She stared back at him, blankly. She noticed the consort’s eyes were the color of her own, a deep and vibrant green. “146... I did it to remember,” she said, flatly, looking away.

“To remember the kill, you mean.”

Cora nodded.

“And remembrance is somehow crucial to your... understanding?”

Cora paused, thinking. “You could say that.” Yeah, that sounded about right.

“And the pain and suffering you inflicted on 146?” The question felt less like a question and more like an accusation.

Cora was already tired of this.

“What about it?” she replied. “With 146’s death on my hands... the memory of the kill safeguards against any future infringement on my part. It means I won’t kill again. It’s one of the primary reasons the V.I.D. eradicates the memory to begin with, I think. My response was rational. I don’t expect you to understand it.”

“Impressive. Sounds utilitarian...”

“Call it whatever you want,” she said. “I did what was *necessary*.”

13

“Tell me about your childhood.”

Cora sighed. His last questions had involved her sex life and dietary habits. “Why the fuck do you need to know about that?” she laughed.

“It’s only a question, Cora. We were all young once, were we not?” He continued to smile. Something about that smile didn’t jive with Cora. In the dim light of the room, it reminded her of the jack-o’-lanterns children carved to chase away ghosts or evil spirits. His responses had been too calculated, too finely molded, like circuitry. Again, she felt that dim sense of... it wasn’t fear... what was it?

“I... I... remember little,” she said. “I was raised in New Denver. My mother was a seamstress” (a strange occupation, Cora knew, but that’s what she was). “I

don't remember my father. I never met him.”

“Are your memories of your mother... vague?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you explain this?”

“I don't. I suppose the V.I.D. erased them, too,” Cora said.

“This makes little sense, Cora. Notwithstanding the time and effort involved in tracing the input... what would the V.I.D. have to gain by it?”

“You tell me,” Cora said. “You seem to have all the answers. You asked, I answered. Next question...”

14

“I'm going to repeat a series of words to you, Cora. Respond in any fashion you find appropriate. This will conclude your... *interview*.”

Cora nodded, noting the emphasis he placed on the word. To her, it felt less like a cross-examination into the Consortium and more like an interrogation. At least it would be over soon, she thought. If the situation had been different, though, days before... she would have broken the consort's quizzical neck by now.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” she said.

The consort eyed her, inquisitively, then said, “... *me-chan-ic... or-gan-ic...*”

Cora gazed back at him, puzzled.

“... *sim-u-la-cra... au-tom-a-ta...*”

Cora shrugged. She had heard the words before, and there was an obvious connection there, but it meant nothing to her.

“... *an-droid... gy-noid...*” he continued, slowly.

“I don't understand the point of this. You need to be more specif--”

“... *hal-le-lu-jah...*”

15

Cora lunged toward him, her arms outstretched; what little space they had between them was closed in milliseconds.

Anders stepped forward to greet her... like clockwork.

16

Anders removed the straps from his ankles and stood to his feet, rubbing the temples behind his eyes. “How long was my upload?” he asked. It had seemed longer than usual.

“Sixteen hours. Your memory of the events should be gone within the hour,” the retrieval tech said. “I suggest at least three to four hours of sleep. Plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol for the next few days. You know the routine.”

“Will do,” Anders replied, never understanding why retrieval bothered with all this. Alcohol had no effect on him. His fluids were more akin to electric grease and oil. He ate but out of curiosity, not out of necessity. His sleep was dreamless and only down time. “By the way...” Anders pointed to the monitor.

It was blank.

SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

Chapter 18

The vigil for Smith was not going well. Smith's involvement in the event was somewhat minimalist for a start; he just seemed to lie there looking pallid and ill. Ellie had made him a cup of tea and he hadn't touched a single drop.

After trying to trickle water down Smith's throat for some time, Corrine had had to rethink the idea and she had ransacked the police for anything that might be helpful. She got lucky and found a stash of syringes that were in still in their medically sealed containers. She was going to very gradually inject Smith with water, to act as a kind of manual drip. However, she found some Lucozade and she added a bit of it to the water. In the space of two hours she managed to get about twelve fluid ounces of the solution in to his blood stream.

Much to Corrine's relief Ellie was being very well behaved, Corrine hadn't spent much time around children and she was expecting her to be more easily bored than she was. However, Ellie was quite content to sit at the window with a pair of binoculars looking out for the police.

Smith did not stir, but he didn't die either.

"What I want to know," said Jon, "Is exactly what you're expecting to find in this place?"

"People or food. Maybe some paracetamol."

The two of them walked through the double doors of the service station, into a large empty hallway.

"Look," said Jon. "The arcade still works."

Biggy glanced into the Little Chef. It was all clean. Then he walked into the WH Smiths. It had been picked almost bare.

"There's got to be someone here."

"Well, if there is, they're doing a good job of hiding."

"Mmm," said Biggy.

There was a sound, vague and indistinct. It sounded like, "Whohllou."

"Kids are playing," he told Jon.

"That could have been anything"

"I'm a dad. I know what it sounds like when kids play."

"When was the last time you saw your kid?"

Biggy didn't answer him. He walked straight out of the double doors and cocked his head like a spaniel. Jon reached his side and Biggy picked up his pace and wandered around the side of the building.

Out in the car park, the children were playing a game that seemed to involve picking up money off the floor and jumping over each other a lot. Crouched behind one of the cars, Biggy tried unsuccessfully to figure out the rules. Jon nudged him with his shoulder.

"What's that copper doing there?" he asked.

The policeman had his arms tied behind his back. They had been firmly secured to a lamppost. In addition to that, he had been securely gagged. Someone, Biggy guessed it was a child, had put up a colourful sign next to him that read, "Stay away from Mr Badman."

"Buggered if I know, Jon. Let's ask."

As Biggy stood up all of the kids instantly spotted his gigantic frame.

“A giant,” shouted one of the girls.

They ran to one side to hide behind a stern looking young woman. Biggy held up his hands.

“It's fine, we don't mean any harm. We were just looking for a little girl.”

“None of these girls are up for grabs, I'm afraid.”

The voice came from behind them. Biggy watched Jon spin around and throw out a kick at the man who appeared at their rear flank.

The Don was expecting the kick. He gripped Jon's ankle calmly and took a step backwards. With the movement, Jon's back leg buckled and he crashed arsewards to the floor.

“We're not here to fight, are we Jon?”

Jon shook his head in earnest.

“I'm looking for my daughter Elaine, and a few bites to eat. That's all.”

“There's no Elaine here. We had an Ellie but that kind officer of the law handcuffed her and she's been missing ever since.”

“Did she have brown hair?” asked Biggy.

The Don nodded.

“She wouldn't have been with a pasty looking guy who had a t-shirt wrapped around his head, would she?”

“She's definitely with a pale chap, yes.”

“Who is he?”

“He's my best friend,” said The Don. “Where she is, I don't know.”

“Why did the copper handcuff her?”

“Apparently he accused her of looting. He's not all there, I'm afraid.”

“OK,” said Biggy very calmly, “I don't suppose you could get all these children out of the line of sight, could you? I'd like to have a word with him.”

Smith was having the most peculiar dream that somebody was injecting him with Lucozade. He hated Lucozade almost as much as he hated having injections. He wanted to itch his arm but it was too far away. He had rather a nice view of himself. He was pleased to see that the nice little girl had made him a cup of tea but he suspected it was just a dream because Corrine was there too. It did seem real though, she was holding his arm. She appeared to be crying. Apart from the cup of tea, it was all a bit depressing. Smith noticed that Corrine was on her knees and that her bottom was pushed high up into the air. It disturbed him a little that the sight didn't arouse him.

“It doesn't really make sense,” he said to himself, “that I'm not at all horny.”

“Also,” he added, “I shouldn't really be able to see myself either. I'm either dead or astral projecting.”

Smith looked around for a bright light to head towards but there was none. Well, there was a reasonably bright light but it was coming from a battery-powered lamp that Corrine had found so he figured it was probably best to let that idea go.

“Even if I am dead,” he thought, “I'm not a fucking moth.”

Also, it was quite far away.

“At least the power plant hasn't exploded yet,” thought Smith.

With that thought, he found himself outside of the Sellafield nuclear processing plant. It was empty of life. The ground was littered with the corpses of uniformed men and women, military, fire service and NHS. The corpses looked quite old, they were not flesh coloured any more. The whole place felt sick. Despite the horror of the place, Smith took a great deal of satisfaction in stepping through the wire

fence and on to the site. He could hear a loud humming sound, infuriatingly loud. The air around him was wavy and soft focus as though there had been a gas leak. Smith sniffed the air but he had no lungs to breathe it with. In a panic at the loss of one of his senses, Smith put his hands on his chest to feel if it were still expanding and contracting. His hands could feel nothing either.

“Oh shit, I am dead,” he said.

There was a bright light as one of the reactors on the site went into catastrophic meltdown and as it became brighter Smith's eyes darkened to a total black.

“Should we really be leaving him with those two? We don't even know them.” Nicola had her concerned face on, the one that made The Don shit his pants in fear.

“It's OK; I'm going back out to check he doesn't kill him or let him go.”

“Or torture him?”

“Or torture him.”

Nicola sent the children into the Little Chef to draw pictures.

“Well go on then,” she told The Don, “We could be dead by now.”

BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

Chapter Seventeen

‘Belay that, Boone,’ Piper ordered. ‘Belay that!’

‘Why are Americans attacking a British ship?’ Brian demanded.

‘A very good question, sailor,’ said Captain Martin, coming up the companionway from behind them.

Another volley boomed out from the ship, fire flashing amid the thick black smoke. The shot crashed down on the deck, blowing away men and rigging with equanimity.

‘Man the guns!’ Martin bellowed, his eyes ablaze as he glared at the American ship. ‘We’ll bring this privateer to the rightabouts!’

‘What’s a privateer?’ Brian asked Boone as they hurried for the gun deck.

‘You don’t know what a privateer is?’ Boone asked, as another volley of shot whistled over the upper deck. ‘You know what a pirate is, don’t you? Well, a privateer’s like that, but they’re employed by a nation to raid ships of other countries in time of war.’

‘Surely America’s not at war with England,’ Brian began.

‘Captain Martin!’ Lieutenant Piper shouted. ‘Surely we should treat with these attackers, see why they’re attacking. This must be a mistake!’

Another deafening roar and a volley of shot blew away more of the ship’s rigging, taking with it several sailors. Brian, Boone, and the others crouched down by the entrance to the companionway and peered out.

Piper confronted Martin in the middeck. After a moment, Martin grudgingly gave the order to run up the flag of truce. Moments later, the white flag was fluttering above the battered frigate, although Brian could hear sounds of sailors loading the cannon on the gun deck below. Piper stepped to the rail the moment the American bombardment eased off.

‘Ahoy, the ship!’ he called out.

‘Ahoy there!’ answered the American ship. ‘Do you wish to negotiate terms of surrender?’

‘Not in the slightest, sir!’ Piper replied primly. ‘Merely to ask what confounded lunacy has possessed you to attack a vessel from a country with which you are not at war!’

‘The United States has declared war on England. Any English vessel we encounter is prize. Surrender, or we will resume hostilities.’

Brian and Boone exchanged glances.

Impatient, Captain Martin blustered forward. ‘Very well, resume your hostilities!’ he bellowed. Turning away, he shouted, ‘Fire the bow-chasers! Turn hard-a-port and fire a broadside! Why are you men skulking there!’ He had seen Brian and his companions. ‘Get below and man the guns!’

They hurried down to the gun deck just in time for the first broadside from the guns on the port side. Brian was deafened by the boom in the enclosed space, and choked by the sulphurous clouds of black smoke as the cannons leapt back in their carriages. Men rushed forward, reloaded, and hauled the cannons back into place.

McGee rushed up to them. ‘Where’ve ye been?’ he demanded. ‘Get on dat gun down dere!’

Unenthusiastically, Brian and the Americans made their way down to a cannon that remained unmanned halfway down the gun deck. As they reached it, the bombard from the privateer hit the ship and sent them slamming into the bulkhead.

‘I don’t want to fire on my own countrymen,’ Boone said angrily, and the others agreed.

‘We’d be turncoats if we did,’ one sailor agreed.

The rest of the cannons were loaded and primed. McGee shouted at them to hurry up. Brian looked out of the gun port to see the American privateer seemingly almost close enough for him to reach out and touch it.

‘I don’t think we’re going to have much choice,’ he said. ‘They’re firing on us!’ Both ships fired simultaneously, and the narrowing gap between them filled with black smoke and flashes of fire. Then the privateer smashed straight into the side of the *Mars* and there was no longer any room for cannon fire.

‘Up on deck!’ someone was shouting. ‘Prepare to repel boarders!’

The gun crews leapt up and rushed for the companionway where they were given muskets and cutlasses. As Brian turned to join them, the deck lurched to one side.

‘I think we’ve been holed,’ Boone whispered.

‘Holed?’ Brian demanded.

‘One of those shots got us below the waterline,’ Boone said. ‘Unless something’s done quick, this ship’s sunk.’

‘Then let’s get up on deck!’ Brian said. ‘If we can get onboard the privateer, we might just stand a chance...’

‘Maybe we can surrender to them,’ said one of the Americans. ‘If they know we’re fellow countrymen...’

Ignoring him, Brian led them at a run across the gun deck.

Taking the cutlass and two flintlocks that were thrust at him by a sailor, Brian hurried up the companionway, followed by Boone and the others, similarly accoutred. As they rushed out onto the open deck, the roar of gunfire and the shouts of embattled men hit them as if they had run into a wall of noise. Smoke billowed in the air, the deck pitched beneath their feet. American privateers, clad in a ragged assortment of clothes, were swinging over the rail from their own ship; apparently a second wave come to reinforce the Americans already fighting the English sailors. Brian ducked as a musket ball went whizzing past him.

This was crazy, he thought to himself. He was deliberately running into a warzone.

The deck shifted beneath him, and he remembered what Boone had said about the *Mars* being holed. ‘Come on!’ he shouted, brandishing his cutlass and charging at the advancing Americans.

He saw Captain Martin himself up ahead, fencing with calm efficiency with a wild-eyed American with a huge red beard. In the midst of battle, Martin was placid, languid, the reverse of his usual irate self.

He cut down Redbeard and strode across the deck, shouting to Piper:

‘This ship’s been holed, or I’m a Dutchman. Get the paychest from the hold and we’ll commandeer this American vessel.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ Piper shouted from the quarterdeck, where he was directing the resistance against the attack. He shouted to two men to join him and he hurried below.

‘Hurry, you laggards!’ Martin shouted at Brian and his friends. ‘Get over that rail!’ In demonstration, the captain leapt up onto the rail, holding a rope.

Just as he was about to swing across onto the privateer’s deck, a stray shot blew off his jaw. He turned slowly on his heel, his astounded eyes glaring above the red ruin of his face, fixed his gaze accusingly on Brian, and fell into the sea.

Brian felt his stomach spasm, and he began to retch uncontrollably, dry heaves that brought up nothing. Boone grabbed his arm.

‘Snap out of it, man!’ the American bellowed. ‘Now’s the time to get across. The captain’s dead, the crew will have to surrender. Now we can get away!’

Brian did his best to control himself. ‘Get away?’ he said thickly, as shot roared through the air above them. ‘I want to get back to England, not America!’

‘Get over that rail!’ Boone shouted. ‘This ship is sinking, the captain’s dead. Our only hope is the privateer.’

The Stars and Stripes fluttered in the smoke-thick air as Brian followed his friends over the rail. They swung across the narrow gap on thick ropes and landed on the creaking deck of the enemy vessel.

Or were the Americans enemies? Brian felt no loyalty towards his own crazy country. Should he consider the Americans as his friends? The ragged sailors who set upon them with cutlasses the moment they touched the deck didn’t seem to think so.

He swung his heavy blade back and forth, inexpertly parrying the mashing blows of a little man who swung his sword as if it was a butcher’s cleaver. Fearful for his life, Brian seized the opportunity to grab the man by his coat and drag him forward, tripping him with an out-stuck leg. The little man hit his head on the deck and sprawled still.

Another man came at Brian, pointing a loaded pistol at him. Brian flung himself to one side as the pistol went off, then sprang up, hacking at the man with his cutlass. To Brian’s mingled wonder and horror, the heavy blade slashed the man right across his stomach and he fell back, clinging at the purple worms of guts that slopped out of the cut.

Brian had gone so far across the deck he was surrounded by Americans. He turned to see where Boone and the rest had got to, and saw them kneeling on the deck by the rail, hands on their heads. They’d surrendered! The bastards! Brian gaped around him, seeing fat dark blobs of blood dripping from his blade, and wondered what his chances of surrender would be.

Brian heard a laugh from behind. He turned to see a big man dressed in a long black cloak and a tricorn hat with long rat-tails of hair peeping out. The man had a cutlass in one hand, and somehow Brian knew that this was the privateer captain.

‘So, you’re the swab who’s singlehandedly cut his way through two of my men!’ the privateer captain bellowed.

Brian gestured helplessly towards Boone and the others. ‘Look, I can explain,’ he began. ‘I didn’t think I was on my own. I thought...’

Then the deck was swarming with English sailors again. Brian saw Piper at their head. Two men behind him were carrying a large, familiar looking chest. As the English sailors forced themselves aboard, the *Mars* itself began to sink beneath the water.

‘Have at ye!’ the privateer captain shouted, hacking at Brian with his cutlass, as the English and American sailors rushed together to fight in the middle of the deck. The battle broiled on either side and Brian automatically swung up his cutlass to block the captain’s attack.

‘Where did you learn to fight, Englishman?’ the captain boomed. ‘Don’t they teach fencing in the Royal Navy?’

‘Look, I only signed on as a waister!’ Brian expostulated, angrily bashing his blade down. He knocked the captain’s cutlass down and then brought the hilt of the cutlass up in a punch, using it as a knuckleduster. He caught the captain’s chin a heavy blow and the man went staggering back into two sailors. They helped their captain to his feet and he thrust them away angrily, peering in Brian’s direction.

‘I’ll get yer for that, Englishman!’ he roared, and rushed forward.

Instinctively, Brian dodged to one side, and the captain’s rush brought him straight past towards the rail. His broad back presented an inviting target. Brian quelled an urge to kick the man overboard and seized him by the neck.

As the captain struggled in his grasp, Brian turned to see that the deck was littered with bodies and swarming with struggling men. Neither side seemed to be getting the upper hand. On the far side, he could see Piper rallying his followers. Boone was shouting something at one of the privateers and gesticulating towards the English attackers. Brian dragged the captain up onto the quarterdeck of the American ship, holding a pistol to his head.

He gave a piercing whistle that carried across the tempestuous floating battlefield. One by one, heads turned, and those belonging to the Americans halted and stared in dismay. Piper also saw Brian and what he was doing.

‘Wells!’ he said. ‘Good man.’ He turned to the Americans. ‘Surrender yourselves and your ship to us. We have important cargo that we are taking to Spain. If you do as you are told, you won’t suffer.’

The American captain shifted in Brian's grip. 'My men are too few now to crew this ship,' he said, 'wherever you want us to take you.'

Piper looked around at his own men, frozen in mid-struggle with the Americans. 'But together, we have sufficient seamen to crew this vessel,' he said. 'McGee! Swim back to the wreck of the *Mars* and take down the colours before she sinks. The American flag will no long fly from this ship. We'll replace it with the Union Jack.'

Brian thought it was time to intervene. He levelled his pistol at Piper.

'That's enough!' he cried out as McGee went to the rail. 'This ship's crew is half American, half British. The captain is American, isn't that right?'

'Aye,' said his prisoner stolidly.

'You're not a captain, Piper...' Brian went on.

Piper drew himself up proudly. 'Captain Martin has fallen in the fight,' he said. 'That makes me acting captain.'

'Says who?' Brian demanded, keeping his pistol trained on the lieutenant. 'Boone!' he added, and the American sailor looked at him from below. 'Disarm the lieutenant.'

Boone went over to Piper's side and removed a cutlass and a pistol. He bound the lieutenant's hands behind his back.

'Now set the captain free,' he told Brian. 'You've decided to join the cause of liberty? Join the US?'

Brian shook his head, and pointed his gun at the American captain again. 'Take down that flag,' he said, and Boone frowned. 'McGee!' Brian shouted. The Irishman looked up. 'Take down the American flag.'

McGee complied, bewildered by the turn of events. Soon the Stars and Stripes was running down the flagpole. McGee bundled up the flag and called over:

'What do Oi run up now? Do yer want me to swim back to da *Mars* like the lootenant said?'

Brian shook his head. He tore the black cloak from the American captain's shoulders and flung it to McGee.

'Run this up the flagpole,' he said.

As McGee did so, Brian turned to the crew. 'We've no need to sail under either country's colours. We're stuck out here, in the middle of the ocean, and we need each other to survive. We can forget about wars, we can forget about loyalty to country; instead we can think about loyalty to each other! We'll bow to no man, king or president or emperor. We'll cruise against ships of every nation. We're free!

‘We’re pirates!’

As His Majesty’s Frigate *Mars* sank beneath the Atlantic waters, the black flag fluttered bravely above the corpse-littered deck of the privateer.

The Dark Place by James Talbot

Chapter 14

‘Is she dead?’ said a voice close to Martin. He lifted his head and the young girl in the pink coat was standing next to him.

‘Yes, she’s dead,’ he replied. ‘She told me she only wanted Isobel and that once Isobel was dead she would be able to rest.’

‘Well, she was right wasn’t she?’ said Martin angrily.

‘Maybe I can go home now as well?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Martin. ‘Perhaps you can.’

‘I’d like to see my Mum again’ the girl whispered.

‘Don’t you understand you’re dead?’ Martin shouted at the girl. The girl’s grey eyes seemed to look straight at Martin as she replied.

‘I know I’m dead. Vasilisa told me when she brought me here.’

‘Why did she bring you to this place?’ said Martin. ‘What were you brought here for?’

‘I’m supposed to give you a message,’ replied the girl. ‘She told me to tell you that she had spared you. Isobel was the last Stefanovich left alive and only you now know the full story of what happened to Vasilisa and why she has had such vengeance on Isobel and her family. Your burden is to live with this knowledge and to have lost the woman you love.’

‘Am I just supposed to accept that?’ asked Martin his voice breaking as fresh tears streamed down his face.

‘There is nothing else you can do. You’ll be leaving here soon.’ Martin looked at the young girl. Her completely grey eyes were unsettling but Martin forced himself to look straight at them.

‘What will happen to you?’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ replied the girl. ‘She never told me what would happen to me. Will you tell my Mum you saw me?’ she suddenly asked. As Martin looked at the girl he

realised she was starting to fade. He could see the ground behind her as he looked through her. The next moment she was gone and Martin thought he heard an echo of her voice in his mind as she vanished from his view. 'Please?'

Michael Carey, Karen and Tom were all sitting in the kitchen at Isobel's house when Tom heard a noise from upstairs. They had searched the house from top to bottom in an effort to find Martin but there wasn't a trace of him or Isobel to be found.

'What was that?' said Tom lifting his hand in a gesture to the others to stop speaking.

'What was what,' said Karen looking surprised.

'I'm sure I heard something upstairs,' Tom replied.

Michael Carey pushed back his chair and with Tom and Karen, following made his way into the hallway and began to climb the stairs. As they reached the top, they saw Martin emerge from one of the bedrooms. He looked drawn and he was filthy. His shirt was torn and bloody and fresh blood from his cruelly torn shoulders was beginning to soak into it. His clothes gave off an impossible stench of rotteness and decay and it was all they could do to avoid retching as he approached them. Karen had her hand over her mouth to try to avoid the disgusting odour that seemed to surround Martin while Tom had placed a handkerchief over his lower face. Doing his best to breathe through his mouth and avoid using his nose Michael Carey moved towards Martin.

'What happened, Martin? Where's Isobel?'

'She's dead,' Martin replied. 'She's in the bedroom.'

With a strangled sob, Karen pushed past Martin and Michael Carey and ran towards the bedroom. She found Isobel lying on the bed. Her clothes exuded the same filthy odour as Martin and she was covered in the same black slime Karen had seen on Martin's hands and arms.

Martin had followed Michael Carey and Tom into the bedroom after Karen and he had seen the horror on Karen's face as she looked at the body of her friend.

'There was nothing I could do,' he said quietly from the doorway.

'Tell us what happened, Martin,' said Michael Carey.

Slowly Martin told them what had happened. They had gasped in shock at the sight of the wounds on his shoulders and upper back.

'We need to call the police, Martin,' Michael Carey said as he helped Martin along the landing and down the stairs.

Karen and Tom followed them from the bedroom but were still on the landing above them and Martin could hear Karen sobbing. She had her arms around Tom and her head rested against his shoulder as he did his best to comfort her.

‘Oh my God, Tom. What are we going to do,’ she sobbed.

‘Don’t worry,’ he answered. ‘I’m sure we can get this sorted out somehow.’

Inside Tom was in turmoil. ‘How the hell are we going to explain this?’ he thought. ‘Isobel’s dead we’re in the house when she dies and there’s no way the police are going to believe Martin’s story of her dying in some place in his dreams.’

‘The police are on their way,’ said Michael Carey as he hung up the telephone.

Martin looked at them all. ‘I know what you must be thinking but I did everything I could to try and save Isobel. There was nothing I could do to get her down from that tree. I have no idea how long she was tied up there for but it must have been long enough for the pressure on her diaphragm and her lungs to suffocate her. She was alive when I first climbed up to her but she was in and out of consciousness.’

Martin hung his head and his shoulders shook as he sobbed.

‘You’ll have to get those wounds on your shoulders looked at, Martin,’ observed Michael Carey. Fresh blood welled from the deep incisions and began to soak into what remained of the back of Martin’s shirt. Karen was looking miserable and Tom looked nervous.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Martin raising his head and looking at the two of them. ‘If the police are going to arrest anyone, it’s going to be me.’

Ten minutes later the police arrived at Isobel’s house. Two uniformed officers were listening to Martin’s story with a look of disbelief on their faces. One of them had quickly gone upstairs and checked Isobel’s body and then called for the paramedics and the medical examiner.

As Martin was talking, there was a loud knock on the front door. Michael Carey stood up and moved to answer the door but one of the officers politely asked him to sit down and he would see who was at the door. A couple of minutes later a plain-clothes officer came into the room.

‘Good evening,’ he said. ‘My name is Detective Constable Mike Jones. So who can tell me what happened here?’

Martin raised his hand. ‘I can tell you what happened but it’s not easy to understand and you probably won’t believe me.’

‘Well, why don’t you try me?’ answered the police officer.

‘Hello, Detective Jones,’ said Karen.

‘Hello Mrs Small,’ said the detective recognising Karen.

‘How do you two know each other?’ asked Tom looking at Karen.

‘Detective Jones came to the shop after that terrible accident with Anne and Tony McGuire,’ she replied.

Mike Jones made copious notes as he listened to Martin’s story. He took a quick look at Martin’s back and grimaced when he saw the deep wounds.

‘You’ll need to go to the hospital to get them looked at,’ he said.

‘So I’ve been told,’ Martin replied. The police took statements from all of them and then escorted Martin to the hospital to have his injuries attended to. Michael Carey, Karen and Tom were allowed to return to their homes but Detective Constable Jones asked them all to attend the main police station at St Anne’s street the next day.

At the hospital, Martin was in A&E waiting to have his wounds dressed. The Speciality Registrar was talking to Detective Constable Jones in a private office further down the corridor.

‘The wounds in his back and shoulders were caused by something extremely powerful and with razor sharp claws. The spacing of the wounds roughly corresponds with the shape of a human hand but I’ve never seen anything like that since I started medicine.’

‘How long would that be?’ said Detective Jones drily, thinking the young man in front of him barely looked old enough to be at university never mind be a doctor.

‘I’ve been here at the hospital for three years, since I finished medical school, so believe me I know what I’m talking about,’ retorted the registrar.

‘Sorry, it’s been a long day,’ the detective offered by way of an apology.

‘As I was saying,’ continued the registrar. ‘Whatever caused those wounds was hugely powerful and the claws or whatever they were that inflicted the wounds are like nothing I’ve seen before. It’s almost as though the wounds were caused by sharp human nails but such damage would be impossible for a human being to do. The power required to cut that deep and bruise the tissue so much is beyond the capability of all but the strongest human being, if it’s possible at all.’

‘I see,’ said Detective Jones, thinking perhaps Martin’s story may have a grain of truth to it.

At the rectory, Michael Carey was sitting in his study. He very rarely drank but he had a large glass of brandy in his left hand while his other held an open bible. His head was filled with images of the wounds on Martin’s back interspersed with visions of Isobel lying on the bed and memories of the stench that emanated from her clothes.

He sipped the brandy and the dark brown liquid warmed the back of his throat as he swallowed. He could find no reference to what he believed had happened to Martin and Isobel. The Bible had references to possession and demons but there was nothing

in the bible or his other books about a motivating force that would enable a curse to be fulfilled by someone who had been murdered.

‘It all sounds impossible,’ he thought.

Tom and Karen were discussing the night’s events.

‘Do you think we’ll be charged with anything?’ Karen said.

‘Honestly, I don’t know’ answered Tom. ‘I don’t see how we could be charged with anything. We were there but as far as we know nothing actually happened in the house did it? The three of us were together most of the time weren’t we so we’re not going to give conflicting statements or anything like that.’

‘I feel so sad about poor Isobel,’ said Karen, her eyes filling with tears and her breath catching in her throat as she stifled a sob.

Tom put his arms around her. ‘There’s nothing we can do now is there? We tried our best to be there and help her but in the end there was nothing we could have done to stop what happened.’

‘I know,’ Karen replied. ‘But knowing that doesn’t make things any easier does it? Isobel is dead, poor Martin is hurt and we don’t know what’s going to happen to him.’

Tom made them both a coffee to which he added a shot of whisky. They were both exhausted, the warm gas fire in the lounge and the coffee and alcohol made them drowsy, and they fell asleep on the settee.

‘Let’s go over this again shall we Martin?’ Detective Mike Jones looked at Martin from across the table in the small police interview room. Martin hadn’t been charged with anything yet and he was still officially “helping with enquiries.”

‘You say that you and Miss Stevens have been haunted, or perhaps menaced would be better word, by some kind of malevolent spirit that is in fact the ghost of a young girl murdered in Estonia over a hundred years ago?’

‘I know it sounds impossible to believe,’ said Martin, ‘but it’s true.’

‘I’ve heard some strange stories while I’ve been on the force, Martin, but yours does take some believing. You do have some things in your favour that suggest you’re telling the truth though and it’s that incongruence that’s keeping you out of the cells at the moment.’

Martin went over the whole story again from meeting Isobel to the final time he saw her alive in the dark monochrome world.

‘What did you say this girl’s name was?’ asked the detective.

‘She said her name was Vasilisa but I don’t know if that was her real name or not. I know I saw a horrible vision of her death though.’

Detective Jones looked at his notes and then Martin. 'We're going to let you go home now, Martin, but I'd like you back here later this morning at 11.30 to answer some more questions. You can of course bring a solicitor if you want but that's up to you. We'll be speaking to the other people who were with you tonight and we're going to contact your friends Steve and Jess as well.'

'They'll tell you exactly the same things I have,' said Martin.

'Yes, well we'll see won't we?' said the police officer.

Steve and Jess were in the kitchen when the telephone rang. It was only 7.30 and they both looked at each other with worried expressions. Steve picked up the phone.

'Hello.'

'Is that Mr Jones?' said a voice he didn't recognise.

'Yes, this is Mr Jones,' answered Steve. 'Who is this?'

'Sorry to bother you so early,' said the voice. 'My name is Detective Constable Mike Jones and I'm calling in relation to an incident that occurred last night involving a friend of yours, Martin Davies.'

'What happened?' said Steve his voice full of concern. 'Is Martin all right?'

'He's fine,' said the police officer. 'Would it be possible for me to see you and your wife this morning?'

'I suppose so,' said Steve. 'What time do you want to see us?'

'I could come over right away,' the officer replied.

'OK, how long will it take? We'll each have to ring the office and let them know we're running late.'

'It shouldn't take longer than about fifteen minutes and I'll be there within the next half an hour.'

Steve replaced the receiver and turned towards Jess. 'That was the police; they're coming over to see us about something that happened to Martin last night.'

'Is Martin OK?' asked Jess.

'He said yes but I suppose we'll find out more when he gets here. I'm just going to telephone the office and let them know I'll be a bit late.'

'I'd better do the same,' said Jess.

Michael Carey woke up still sitting in the chair in the study. His neck ached atrociously and he had a splitting headache.

‘I suppose I deserve that after two glasses of brandy and a night in the chair,’ he thought as he tried to relieve the pain by massaging the back of his neck. He checked his watch, it was just after 7.30.

‘I’d better go and have a shower and a shave so I have time for some breakfast before I go to the police station,’ he thought absently as he made his way upstairs.

He was still exhausted from last night and wished he’d gone to bed instead of sitting in the study and reading. He looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror and didn’t especially like what he saw. His eyes were red rimmed and the lower part of his face was covered in grey stubble. He barely recognised the lined face and the grey hair.

‘When did I get so old?’ he thought as he rubbed his hand across the stubble.

At 8.30, Michael Carey felt a little better. He had showered, shaved, and changed into a grey suit. He had put on a clean Rabat and new white collar. He checked his reflection in the mirror again and thought he looked a lot better.

‘More like a man of the cloth should look,’ he thought, ‘and not some poor homeless person who doesn’t have the good fortune to be able to wash when they want to.’ He went downstairs and filled the kettle with water before switching it on to boil.

‘So you say you arrived at Isobel’s house at around nine-fifteen and left about an hour later?’ said Detective Jones as he made notes in his black notebook.

‘That’s right,’ said Steve. Jess nodded in agreement.

‘The man you met there his name was Aleksander?’

‘Vukovic,’ replied Jess.

‘Did you say he had arrived by car?’ asked the detective.

‘There was a black Porsche parked in the driveway in front of Martin’s car so we supposed that was his,’ answered Steve.

Detective Constable Mike Jones was thinking about the black Porsche that had been involved in the fatal car accident last night. The driver had been a foreign national but how he had crashed his car in such a devastating way, even allowing for what was left of the snow, was a mystery.

‘Well, I think that’s enough information for now, so I’ll let you people get on your way to work,’ he said as he folded his notebook and put it into his jacket pocket.

‘Is Martin in some kind of trouble?’ asked Steve.

‘His girlfriend Isobel Stevens died last night and Mr Davies is helping us with our enquiries,’ replied Detective Jones.

‘Oh no,’ said Jess putting a hand across her mouth. ‘Why didn’t you tell us that before? What happened to her?’

‘Sorry Mrs Jones but I had to ask you some routine questions first,’ replied the detective.

‘Where’s Martin now?’ demanded Steve.

‘He’s at home but he’s coming back to the station to answer some more questions at around 11.30.’

‘Will you be charging him with anything?’ asked Jess a look of horror on her face.

‘At the moment I can’t say’ answered the detective. ‘There are a few more lines of enquiry we have to pursue before we can make any decisions.’

Martin had been sitting in the lounge of his house since he got back home in the early hours. He had exhausted his tears and now he just felt numb. The local anaesthetic and the painkillers given to him at the hospital were starting to wear off and now his shoulders and his back were starting to feel like they were on fire. Spook had wandered in from the kitchen and curled up in front of the fire when Martin had arrived home but now he was awake, and rubbing himself round Martin’s ankles.

Martin reached down and absently started to stroke Spook who responded by purring loudly and licking Martin’s hand. In spite of his utter despair at losing Isobel and the physical pain, he was feeling Martin couldn’t help but smile as he looked down at the cat.

‘You’ve got no idea what’s been happening have you?’ Spook just meowed and rubbed his head harder against Martin’s ankles. ‘OK, come on,’ said Martin standing up and walking towards the kitchen.

Spook ran in front of him and by the time Martin had walked into the kitchen the cat was pacing backwards and forwards in front of the cupboard where the cat food was stored. Martin fed Spook then walked tiredly upstairs to his bedroom. He switched on the light as he walked into the en suite bathroom and then stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and red rimmed from crying and being so tired. He needed a shave and his clothes were filthy.

‘Not looking so good are you?’ Martin said to himself as he pulled off the remains of his shirt and filled the basin with hot water.

When she woke up that morning, Karen had been unsure what to do. Should she open the shop as usual or not bother? She telephoned Jane Delaney and broke the news to her about Isobel. Jane had been horrified and equally unsure about opening the shop in Chester as Karen was about the shop in Liverpool. Eventually they had decided

between them that until a proper decision was made they should keep the shops open as usual.

Tom said that he needed to go to work and explain why he needed some time off that morning to attend the police station while Karen planned to open the shop and then close it later that morning. Tom had dropped Karen off at the shop on his way to the office.

‘Do you want me to pick you up or meet you at the police station?’ he had asked as he stopped the car outside the shop.

Karen thought for a moment. ‘It will mean you coming out of town and going back won’t it so I’ll get a taxi and meet you there.’

‘OK,’ Tom replied then leant across the car and kissed her. ‘Don’t worry it will work out OK.’

‘I hope so,’ said Karen as she got out of the car. She waved to Tom as he drove off and then crossed the pavement to the front of the shop. As she slid, the shutter up on the door Karen couldn’t help herself and she felt her eyes fill with tears. She quickly opened the front door and went inside so she could compose herself.

Martin eased a clean white shirt over the dressings on his injured back. He had been unable to shower but a wash and a shave had made him feel slightly better. He was on his way downstairs to have some breakfast when the telephone started ringing.

‘Hello,’ he said as he picked up the handset.

‘Martin, it’s Steve! Are you all right? We’ve just had a visit from a police officer called Mike Jones who told us that something happened to Isobel after we’d seen you last night. Are you in trouble, Martin?’

‘I don’t know, to be honest Steve.’ As quickly, as he could Martin told Steve what had happened last night. There was silence on the phone.

‘That’s a pretty fantastic story,’ said Steve finally.

‘It’s the truth,’ said Martin quietly.

‘Have you got a solicitor, Martin?’

‘I didn’t kill her, Steve,’ said Martin. ‘It happened exactly as I told you it did.’

‘It’s not that I don’t believe you, Martin, but how are you going to get the police to believe you? They deal in facts and evidence and you can’t prove what happened can you?’ said Steve.

‘No,’ replied Martin, ‘but the police officer who spoke to you said there were some things in my favour and that there were some inconsistencies that suggested I was

telling the truth. Apparently that's the only thing that's keeping me out of jail at the moment.'

'I'm coming over there and I'll come with you to the police station,' said Steve. Martin did his best to dissuade Steve but it was useless.

It took nearly a month for the police to decide that Isobel had been killed a person or persons unknown. The police couldn't completely unravel the events of that night. The death of Aleksander Vukovic after crashing his car and the injuries Martin had suffered all pointed towards something other than just a simple case of murder. The forensic team couldn't isolate what the black oily substance that covered Isobel and Martin's clothes was nor could they decide where it had come from.

The head of the forensic team was baffled, the substance was plant based but it belonged to a species that had never been seen or catalogued before. They had worked out the mechanics of how Isobel had died but without any trace on her body or evidence to suggest how she had been suspended by her arms, they could not say how it had been accomplished. Privately, Detective Jones had told Martin they would like to believe him but the whole story was just too fantastic and they would be the laughing stock of the whole force if they admitted that.

During the time it took to reach a decision, Martin was pursued endlessly by the press trying to photograph him and interview him. He couldn't talk about what happened because of the ongoing investigation, so the papers fabricated stories and printed them anyway. Tom and Karen suffered for a couple of days as did Jess and Steve. It was Michael Carey who bore the brunt of the press speculation. As soon as it became known that a member of the Anglican Church had been involved, the papers were full of speculation about black masses and exorcisms gone wrong.

Isobel had no living relatives, so Martin had arranged her funeral. The service was conducted at St Mary's by Michael Carey. As Martin sat in the nearly empty church, he thought back to when he had promised himself he would come and see Michael Carey deliver a sermon.

'I never thought it would be like this though,' Martin thought as the tears ran unchecked down his cheeks.

When it was over the coffin was taken to the crematorium for the final goodbyes. Martin walked out into the weak sunshine and felt as though his life was over. He thanked Steve and Jess, Paul Mason and his wife, Tom and Karen and Jane Delaney for coming then shook hands with Michael Carey.

'I'd like to thank you for everything you've done,' said Martin.

Michael Carey looked at Martin thoughtfully before replying. 'I believe what happened was real, Martin. I just wish I could have done more to help you and Isobel. Will we see each other again after today? I'd really like the chance to discuss stigmata and auto-suggestion with you.'

'I'd like that too,' said Martin 'I'll call you in a few days and we can arrange something.' The few photographers that had turned up were disappointed as the only photographs they could take were of a few people mourning the passing of a loved one, and they soon left.

'So what will you do now?' Steve asked Martin as they stood next to their cars.

'I'm going to go home and have a quiet think and maybe a glass of whisky, and just think about Isobel for a little while,' answered Martin, his eyes filling with tears again.

Steve and Jess hugged Martin and he was glad of their friendship. Jess wiped the tears from her face.

'If you need anything or just want to talk later you can come over to our house Martin.'

'I know, Jess. Thanks. I just want to spend some time on my own for a little while and think about things.'

Martin shook hands with Steve and hugged Jess again, then they got in their cars and left.

'Do you think he'll be all right?' Jess asked Steve as they drove away. He'll be fine,' said Steve.

Epilogue

Martin gave the cat basket and an envelope to the taxi driver along with instructions to deliver both to Steve and to Jess. He gave the taxi driver twenty pounds and told him to keep the change. Spook meowed as the taxi driver took the basket. Martin saw Spook's amber eyes looking at him through the wicker weave of the basket as the taxi driver turned to leave. He watched the driver load the basket on the rear seat of the taxi then drive away.

Martin had written to Steve and Jess apologising for what he was going to do and asking them to take care of Spook for him. As he closed the door, Martin hoped Steve and Jess would look after Spook and that he would settle down in his new home. Walking back into the lounge Martin went over his plans once more in his mind and decided that this was what he wanted.

Martin made himself comfortable on the settee and switched on the CD player. As the music started, he took the tourniquet and wound it round his upper left arm. Once the veins in his forearm had bulged, Martin took the hypodermic and inserted it into the vein. He withdrew the needle slightly allowing some blood to flow back into the syringe before removing the tourniquet.

Taking a last look around the lounge Martin depressed the syringe and injected the lethal dose of 10mg of sodium thiopental into the vein. As his eyes closed and he

slumped, forward Martin could see Isobel walking towards him smiling and carrying a large bunch of white lilies in her arms.

The CD player continued to play in the background. The final words of the song, 'It's never over
Yesterday's just a memory,' faded away and the room was silent.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLV.

THE OPEN GRAVES.—THE DEAD BODIES.—A SCENE OF TERROR.

We have said Waggles spoilt everything, and so he did, for before Mr. Leigh could utter a word more, or advance two steps towards the rioters, Waggles charged them staff in hand, and there soon ensued a riot of a most formidable description.

A kind of desperation seemed to have seized the beadle, and certainly, by his sudden and unexpected attack, he achieved wonders. When, however, a dozen hands got hold of the staff, and it was wrenched from him, and he was knocked down, and half-a-dozen people rolled over him, Waggles was not near the man he had been, and he would have been very well content to have lain quiet where he was; this, however, he was not permitted to do, for two or three, who had felt what a weighty instrument of warfare the parochial staff was, lifted him bodily from the ground, and canted him over the wall, without much regard to whether he fell on a hard or a soft place on the other side.

This feat accomplished, no further attention was paid to Mr. Leigh, who, finding that his exhortations were quite unheeded, retired into the church with an appearance of deep affliction about him, and locked himself in the vestry.

The crowd now had entire possession—without even the sort of control that an exhortation assumed over them—of the burying-ground, and soon in a dense mass were these desperate and excited people collected round the well-known spot where lay the mortal remains of Miles, the butcher.

"Silence!" cried a loud voice, and every one obeyed the mandate, looking towards the speaker, who was a tall, gaunt-looking man, attired in a suit of faded black, and who now pressed forward to the front of the throng.

"Oh!" cried one, "it's Fletcher, the ranter. What does he do here?"

"Hear him! hear him!" cried others; "he won't stop us."

"Yes, hear him," cried the tall man, waving his arms about like the sails of a windmill. "Yes, hear him. Sons of darkness, you're all vampyres, and are continually sucking the life-blood from each other. No wonder that the evil one has power over you all. You're as men who walk in the darkness when the sunlight invites you, and you listen

to the words of humanity when those of a diviner origin are offered to your acceptance. But there shall be miracles in the land, and even in this place, set apart with a pretended piety that is in itself most damnable, you shall find an evidence of the true light; and the proof that those who will follow me the true path to glory shall be found here within this grave. Dig up Miles, the butcher!"

"Hear, hear, hear, hurra!" said every body. "Mr. Fletcher's not such a fool, after all. He means well."

"Yes, you sinners," said the ranter, "and if you find Miles, the butcher, decaying—even as men are expected to decay whose mortal tabernacles are placed within the bowels of the earth—you shall gather from that a great omen, and a sign that if you follow me you seek the Lord; but if you find him looking fresh and healthy, as if the warm blood was still within his veins, you shall take that likewise as a signification that what I say to you shall be as the Gospel, and that by coming to the chapel of the Little Boozlehum, ye shall achieve a great salvation."

"Very good," said a brawny fellow, advancing with a spade in his hand; "you get out of the way, and I'll soon have him up. Here goes, like blue blazes!"

The first shovelful of earth he took up, he cast over his head into the air, so that it fell in a shower among the mob, which of course raised a shout of indignation; and, as he continued so to dispose of the superfluous earth, a general row seemed likely to ensue. Mr. Fletcher opened his mouth to make a remark, and, as that feature of his face was rather a capacious one, a descending lump of mould, of a clayey consistency, fell into it, and got so wedged among his teeth, that in the process of extracting it he nearly brought some of those essential portions of his anatomy with it.

This was a state of things that could not last long, and he who had been so liberal with his spadeful of mould was speedily disarmed, and yet he was a popular favourite, and had done the thing so good-humouredly, that nobody touched him. Six or eight others, who had brought spades and pickaxes, now pushed forward to the work, and in an incredibly short space of time the grave of Miles, the butcher, seemed to be very nearly excavated.

Work of any kind or nature whatever, is speedily executed when done with a wish to get through it; and never, perhaps, within the memory of man, was a grave opened in that churchyard with such a wonderful celerity. The excitement of the crowd grew intense—every available spot from which a view of the grave could be got, was occupied; for the last few minutes scarcely a remark had been uttered, and when, at last, the spade of one of those who were digging struck upon something that sounded like wood, you might have heard a pin drop, and each one there present drew his breath more shortly than before.

"There he is," said the man, whose spade struck upon the coffin.

Those few words broke the spell, and there was a general murmur, while every individual present seemed to shift his position in his anxiety to obtain a better view of what was about to ensue.

The coffin now having been once found, there seemed to be an increased impetus given to the work; the earth was thrown out with a rapidity that seemed almost the quick result of the working of some machine; and those closest to the grave's brink crouched down, and, intent as they were upon the progress of events, heeded not the damp earth that fell upon them, nor the frail brittle and humid remains of humanity that occasionally rolled to their feet.

It was, indeed, a scene of intense excitement—a scene which only wanted a few prominent features in its foreground of a more intellectual and higher cast than composed the mob, to make it a fit theme for a painter of the highest talent.

And now the last few shovelfuls of earth that hid the top of the coffin were cast from the grave, and that narrow house which contained the mortal remains of him who was so well known, while in life, to almost every one then present, was brought to the gaze of eyes which never had seemed likely to have looked upon him again.

The cry was now for ropes, with which to raise the cumbrous mass; but these were not to be had, no one thought of providing himself with such appliances, so that by main strength, only, could the coffin be raised to the brink.

The difficulty of doing this was immense, for there was nothing tangible to stand upon; and even when the mould from the sides was sufficiently cleared away, that the handles of the coffin could be laid hold of, they came away immediately in the grasp of those who did so.

But the more trouble that presented itself to the accomplishment of the designs of the mob, the more intent that body seemed upon carrying out to the full extent their original designs.

Finding it quite impossible by bodily strength to raise the coffin of the butcher from the position in which it had got imbedded by excessive rains, a boy was hastily despatched to the village for ropes, and never did boy run with such speed before, for all his own curiosity was excited in the issue of an adventure, that to his young imagination was appallingly interesting.

As impatient as mobs usually are, they had not time, in this case, for the exercise of that quality of mind before the boy came back with the necessary means of exerting quite a different species of power against the butcher's coffin.

Strong ropes were slid under the inert mass, and twenty hands at once plied the task of raising that receptacle of the dead from what had been presumed to be its last resting-place. The ropes strained and creaked, and many thought that they would burst asunder sooner than raise the heavy coffin of the defunct butcher.

It is singular what reasons people find for backing their opinion.

"You may depend he's a vampyre," said one, "or it wouldn't be so difficult to get him out of the grave."

"Oh, there can be no mistake about that," said one; "when did a natural Christian's coffin stick in the mud in that way?"

"Ah, to be sure," said another; "I knew no good would come of his goings on; he never was a decent sort of man like his neighbours, and many queer things have been said of him that I have no doubt are true enough, if we did but know the rights of them."

"Ah, but," said a young lad, thrusting his head between the two who were talking, "if he is a vampyre, how does he get out of his coffin of a night with all that weight of mould a top of him?"

One of the men considered for a moment, and then finding no rational answer occur to him, he gave the boy a box on the ear, saying,—

"I should like to know what business that is of yours? Boys, now-a-days, ain't like the boys in my time; they think nothing now of putting their spokes in grown-up people's wheels, just as if their opinions were of any consequence."

Now, by a vigorous effort, those who were tugging at the ropes succeeded in moving the coffin a little, and that first step was all the difficulty, for it was loosened from the adhesive soil in which it lay, and now came up with considerable facility.

There was a half shout of satisfaction at this result, while some of the congregation turned pale, and trembled at the prospect of the sight which was about to present itself; the coffin was dragged from the grave's brink fairly among the long rank grass that flourished in the churchyard, and then they all looked at it for a time, and the men who had been most earnest in raising it wiped the perspiration from their brows, and seemed to shrink from the task of opening that receptacle of the dead now that it was fairly in their power so to do.

Each man looked anxiously in his neighbour's face, and several audibly wondered why somebody else didn't open the coffin.

"There's no harm in it," said one; "if he's a vampyre, we ought to know it; and, if he ain't, we can't do any hurt to a dead man."

"Oughtn't we to have the service for the dead?" said one.

"Yes," said the impertinent boy who had before received the knock on the head, "I think we ought to have that read backwards."

This ingenious idea was recompensed by a great many kicks and cuffs, which ought to have been sufficient to have warned him of the great danger of being a little before his age in wit.

"Where's the use of shirking the job?" cried he who had been so active in shoveling the mud upon the multitude; "why, you cowardly sneaking set of humbugs, you're half afraid, now."

"Afraid—afraid!" cried everybody: "who's afraid."

"Ah, who's afraid?" said a little man, advancing, and assuming an heroic attitude; "I always notice, if anybody's afraid, it's some big fellow, with more bones than brains."

At this moment, the man to whom this reproach was more particularly levelled, raised a horrible shout of terror, and cried out, in frantic accents,—

"He's a-coming—he's a-coming!"

The little man fell at once into the grave, while the mob, with one accord, turned tail, and fled in all directions, leaving him alone with the coffin. Such a fighting, and kicking, and scrambling ensued to get over the wall of the grave-yard, that this great fellow, who had caused all the mischief, burst into such peals of laughter that the majority of the people became aware that it was a joke, and came creeping back, looking as sheepish as possible.

Some got up very faint sorts of laugh, and said "very good," and swore they saw what big Dick meant from the first, and only ran to make the others run.

"Very good," said Dick, "I'm glad you enjoyed it, that's all. My eye, what a scampering there was among you. Where's my little friend, who was so infernally cunning about bones and brains?"

With some difficulty the little man was extricated from the grave, and then, oh, for the consistency of a mob! they all laughed at him; those very people who, heedless of all the amenities of existence, had been trampling upon each other, and roaring with terror, actually had the impudence to laugh at him, and call him a cowardly little rascal, and say it served him right.

But such is popularity!

"Well, if nobody won't open the coffin," said big Dick, "I will, so here goes. I knowed the old fellow when he was alive, and many a time he's d——d me and I've d——d him, so I ain't a-going to be afraid of him now he's dead. We was very intimate, you see, 'cos we was the two heaviest men in the parish; there's a reason for everything."

"Ah, Dick's the fellow to do it," cried a number of persons; "there's nobody like Dick for opening a coffin; he's the man as don't care for nothing."

"Ah, you snivelling curs," said Dick, "I hate you. If it warn't for my own satisfaction, and all for to prove that my old friend, the butcher, as weighed seventeen stone, and stood six feet two and-a-half on his own sole, I'd see you all jolly well—"

"D——d first," said the boy; "open the lid, Dick, let's have a look."

"Ah, you're a rum un," said Dick, "arter my own heart. I sometimes thinks as you must be a nevy, or some sort of relation of mine. Howsomdever, here goes. Who'd a thought that I should ever had a look at old fat and thunder again?—that's what I used

to call him; and then he used to request me to go down below, where I needn't turn round to light my blessed pipe."

"Hell—we know," said the boy; "why don't you open the lid, Dick?"

"I'm a going," said Dick; "kim up."

He introduced the corner of a shovel between the lid and the coffin, and giving it a sudden wrench, he loosened it all down one side.

A shudder pervaded the multitude, and, popularly speaking, you might have heard a pin drop in that crowded churchyard at that eventful moment.

Dick then proceeded to the other side, and executed the same manoeuvre.

"Now for it," he said; "we shall see him in a moment, and we'll think we seed him still."

"What a lark!" said the boy.

"You hold yer jaw, will yer? Who axed you for a remark, blow yer? What do you mean by squatting down there, like a cock-sparrow, with a pain in his tail, hanging yer head, too, right over the coffin? Did you never hear of what they call a fluvifium coming from the dead, yer ignorant beast, as is enough to send nobody to blazes in a minute? Get out of the way of the cold meat, will yer?"

"A what, do you say, Dick?"

"Request information from the extreme point of my elbow."

Dick threw down the spade, and laying hold of the coffin-lid with both hands, he lifted it off, and flung it on one side.

There was a visible movement and an exclamation among the multitude. Some were pushed down, in the eager desire of those behind to obtain a sight of the ghastly remains of the butcher; those at a distance were frantic, and the excitement was momentarily increasing.

They might all have spared themselves the trouble, for the coffin was empty—here was no dead butcher, nor any evidence of one ever having been there, not even the grave-clothes; the only thing at all in the receptacle of the dead was a brick.

Dick's astonishment was so intense that his eyes and mouth kept opening together to such an extent, that it seemed doubtful when they would reach their extreme point of elongation. He then took up the brick and looked at it curiously, and turned it over and over, examined the ends and the sides with a critical eye, and at length he said,—

"Well, I'm blowed, here's a transmogrification; he's consolidated himself into a blessed brick—my eye, here's a curiosity."

"But you don't mean to say that's the butcher, Dick?" said the boy.

Dick reached over, and gave him a tap on the head with the brick.

"There!" he said, "that's what I call ocular demonstration. Do you believe it now, you blessed infidel? What's more natural? He was an out-and-out brick while he was alive; and he's turned to a brick now he's dead."

"Give it to me, Dick," said the boy; "I should like to have that brick, just for the fun of the thing."

"I'll see you turned into a pantile first. I sha'n't part with this here, it looks so blessed sensible; it's gaining on me every minute as a most remarkable likeness, d——d if it ain't."

By this time the bewilderment of the mob had subsided; now that there was no dead butcher to look upon, they fancied themselves most grievously injured; and, somehow or other, Dick, notwithstanding all his exertions in their service, was looked upon in the light of a showman, who had promised some startling exhibition and then had disappointed his auditors.

The first intimation he had of popular vengeance was a stone thrown at him, but Dick's eye happened to be upon the fellow who threw it, and collaring him in a moment, he dealt him a cuff on the side of the head, which confused his faculties for a week.

"Hark ye," he then cried, with a loud voice, "don't interfere with me; you know it won't go down. There's something wrong here; and, as one of yourselves, I'm as much interested in finding out what it is as any of you can possibly be. There seems to be some truth in this vampyre business; our old friend, the butcher, you see, is not in his grave; where is he then?"

The mob looked at each other, and none attempted to answer the question.

"Why, of course, he's a vampyre," said Dick, "and you may all of you expect to see him, in turn, come into your bed-room windows with a burst, and lay hold of you like a million and a half of leeches rolled into one."

There was a general expression of horror, and then Dick continued,—

"You'd better all of you go home; I shall have no hand in pulling up any more of the coffins—this is a dose for me. Of course you can do what you like."

"Pull them all up!" cried a voice; "pull them all up! Let's see how many vampyres there are in the churchyard."

"Well, it's no business of mine," said Dick; "but I wouldn't, if I was you."

"You may depend," said one, "that Dick knows something about it, or he wouldn't take it so easy."

"Ah! down with him," said the man who had received the box on the ears; "he's perhaps a vampyre himself."

The mob made a demonstration towards him, but Dick stood his ground, and they paused again.

"Now, you're a cowardly set," he said; "cause you're disappointed, you want to come upon me. Now, I'll just show what a little thing will frighten you all again, and I warn beforehand it will, so you sha'n't say you didn't know it, and were taken by surprise."

The mob looked at him, wondering what he was going to do.

"Once! twice! thrice!" he said, and then he flung the brick up into the air an immense height, and shouted "heads," in a loud tone.

A general dispersion of the crowd ensued, and the brick fell in the centre of a very large circle indeed.

"There you are again," said Dick; "why, what a nice act you are!"

"What fun!" said the boy. "It's a famous coffin, this, Dick," and he laid himself down in the butcher's last resting-place. "I never was in a coffin before—it's snug enough."

"Ah, you're a rum 'un," said Dick; "you're such a inquiring genius, you is; you'll get your head into some hole one day, and not be able to get it out again, and then I shall see you a kicking. Hush! lay still—don't say anything."

"Good again," said the boy; "what shall I do?"

"Give a sort of a howl and a squeak, when they've all come back again."

"Won't I!" said the boy; "pop on the lid."

"There you are," said Dick; "d——d if I don't adopt you, and bring you up to the science of nothing."

"Now, listen to me, good people all," added Dick; "I have really got something to say to you."

At this intimation the people slowly gathered again round the grave.

"Listen," said Dick, solemnly; "it strikes me there's some tremendous do going on."

"Yes, there is," said several who were foremost.

"It won't be long before you'll all of you be most d—nably astonished; but let me beg of all you not to accuse me of having anything to do with it, provided I tell you all I know."

"No, Dick; we won't—we won't—we won't."

"Good; then, listen. I don't know anything, but I'll tell you what I think, and that's as good; I don't think that this brick is the butcher; but I think, that when you least expect it—hush! come a little closer."

"Yes, yes; we are closer."

"Well, then, I say, when you all least expect it, and when you ain't dreaming of such a thing, you'll hear something of my fat friend as is dead and gone, that will astonish you all."

Dick paused, and he gave the coffin a slight kick, as intimation to the boy that he might as well be doing his part in the drama, upon which that ingenious young gentleman set up such a howl, that even Dick jumped, so unearthly did it sound within the confines of that receptacle of the dead.

But if the effect upon him was great, what must it have been upon those whom it took completely unawares? For a moment or two they seemed completely paralysed, and then they frightened the boy, for the shout of terror that rose from so many throats at once was positively alarming.

This jest of Dick's was final, for, before three minutes had elapsed, the churchyard was clear of all human occupants save himself and the boy, who had played his part so well in the coffin.

"Get out," said Dick, "it's all right—we've done 'em at last; and now you may depend upon it they won't be in a hurry to come here again. You keep your own counsel, or else somebody will serve you out for this. I don't think you're altogether averse to a bit of fun, and if you keep yourself quiet, you'll have the satisfaction of hearing what's said about this affair in every pot-house in the village, and no mistake."

Brigands of the Moon by Ray Cummings

XVIII

A fair little world. I had thought so before; and I thought so now as I gazed at the asteroid hanging so close before our bow. A huge, thin crescent, with the Sun off to one side behind it. A silver crescent, tinged with red. From this near vantage point, all of the little globe's disc was visible. The seas lay in gray patches. The convexity of the

disc was sharply defined. So small a world! Fair and beautiful, shrouded with clouded areas.

"Where is Miko?"

"In the lounge, Gregg?"

"Can we stop there?"

Moa turned into the lounge archway. Strange, tense scene. I saw Anita at once. Her robed figure lurked in an inconspicuous corner; her eyes were upon me as Moa and I entered, but she did not move. The thirty-odd passengers were huddled in a group. Solemn, white-faced men; frightened women. Some of them were sobbing. One Earth woman—a young widow—sat holding her little girl, and wailing with uncontrolled hysteria. The child knew me. As I appeared now, with my gold laced white coat over my shoulders, the little girl seemed to see in my uniform a mark of authority. She left her mother and ran to me.

"You—please, will you help us? My Moms is crying."

I sent her gently back. But there came upon me then a compassion for these innocent passengers, fated to have embarked on this ill-fated voyage. Herded here in this cabin, with brigands like pirates of old, guarding them. Waiting now to be marooned on an uninhabited asteroid roaming in space. A sense of responsibility swept me. I swung upon Miko. He stood with a nonchalant grace, lounging against the wall with a cylinder dangling in his hand. He anticipated me, and was the first to speak.

"So, Haljan, she put some sense into your head? No more trouble? Then get into the turret. Moa, stay there with him. Send Hahn here. Where is that ass, Coniston? We will be in the atmosphere shortly."

I said, "No more trouble from me, Miko. But these passengers—what preparation are you making for them on the asteroid?"

He stared in surprise. Then he laughed. "I am no murderer. The crew is preparing food, all we can spare. And tools. They can build themselves shelter—they will be picked up in a few weeks."

Dr. Frank was here. I caught his gaze but he did not speak. On the lounge couches there still lay the five bodies. Rankin, who had been killed by Blackstone in the fight; a man passenger killed; a woman and a man wounded, as well.

Miko added, "Dr. Frank will take his medical supplies and will care for the wounded. There are other bodies among the crew." His gesture was deprecating. "I have not buried them. We will put them ashore; easier that way."

The passengers were all eying me. I said:

"You have nothing to fear. I will guarantee you the best equipment we can spare." I turned to Miko. "You will give them apparatus with which to signal?"

"Yes. Get to the turret."

I turned away, with Moa after me. Again the little girl ran forward.

"Come ... speak to my Moms; she is crying."

It was across the cabin from Miko. Coniston had appeared from the deck; it created a slight diversion. He joined Miko.

"Wait," I said to Moa. "She is afraid of you. This is humanity."

I pushed Moa back. I followed the child. I had seen that Venza was sitting with the child's weeping mother. This was a ruse to get a word with me.

I stood before the terrified woman while the child clung to my legs.

I said gently, "Don't be so frightened. Dr. Frank will take care of you. There is no danger; you will be safer on the asteroid than here on the ship." I leaned down and touched her shoulder. "There is no danger."

I was between Venza and the open cabin. Venza whispered swiftly, "When we are landing, Gregg, I want you to make a commotion—anything—just as the women go ashore."

"Why? Of course you will have food, Mrs. Francis."

"Never mind details! An instant—just confusion. Go, Gregg—don't speak now!"

I raised the child. "You take care of Mother." I kissed her.

From across the cabin, Miko's sardonic voice made me turn. "Touching sentimentality, Haljan! Get to your post in the turret!"

His rasping note of annoyance brooked no delay. I set the child down. I said, "I will land us in an hour. Depend on it."

Hahn was at the controls when Moa and I reached the turret.

"You will land us safely, Haljan?" he demanded anxiously.

I pushed him away. "Miko wants you in the lounge."

"You take command here?"

"Yes. I am no more anxious for a crash than you are, Hahn."

He sighed with relief. "That is true, of course. I am no expert at atmospheric entry."

"Have no fear. Sit down, Moa."

I waved to the lookout in the forward watch tower, and got his routine gesture. I rang the corridor bells, and the normal signals came promptly back.

I turned to Hahn. "Get along, won't you? Tell Miko that things are all right here."

Hahn's small dark figure, lithe as a leopard in his tight fitting trousers and jacket with his robe now discarded, went swiftly down the spider incline and across the deck.

"Moa, where is Snap? By the infernal—if he has been injured—"

Up on the radio room bridge, the brigand guard still sat. Then I saw that Snap was out there sitting with him. I waved from the turret window, and Snap's cheery gesture answered me. His voice carried down through the silver moonlight: "Land us safely, Gregg. These weird amateur navigators!"

Within the hour I had us dropping into the asteroid's atmosphere. The ship heated steadily. The pressure went up. It kept me busy with the instruments and the calculations. But my signals were always promptly answered from below. The brigand crew did its part efficiently.

At a hundred and fifty thousand feet I shifted the gravity plates to the landing combinations, and started the electronic engines.

"All safe, Gregg?" Moa sat at my elbow; her eyes, with what seem a glow of admiration in them, followed my busy routine activities.

"Yes. The crew works well."

The electronic streams flowed out like a rocket tail behind us. The Planetara caught their impetus. In the rarefied air, our bow lifted slightly, like a ship riding a gentle ground swell. At a hundred thousand feet we sailed gently forward, hull down to the asteroid's surface, cruising to seek a landing space.

A little sea was now beneath us. A shadowed sea, deep purple in the night down there. Occasional verdurous islands showed, with the lines of white surf marking them. Beyond the sea, a curving coastline was visible. Rocky headlines, behind which mountain foothills rose in serrated, verdurous ranks. The sunlight edged the distant mountains; and presently this rapidly turning little world brought the sunlight forward.

It was day beneath us. We slid gently downward. Thirty thousand feet now, above a sparkling blue ocean. The coastline was just ahead; green with a lush, tropical vegetation. Giant trees, huge-leaved. Long, dangling vines; air plants, with giant pods and vivid orchidlike blossoms.

I sat at the turret window, staring through my glasses. A fair, little world, yet obviously uninhabited. I could fancy that all this was newly sprung vegetation. This asteroid had whirled in from the cold of the interplanetary space, far outside our solar system. A few years ago—as time might be measured astronomically, it was no more than yesterday—this fair landscape was congealed white and bleak with a sweep of glacial ice. But the seeds of life miraculously were here. The miracle of life! Under the warming, germinating sunlight, the verdure had sprung.

"Can you find landing space, Gregg?" Moa's question brought back my wandering fancies. I saw an upland glade, a level spread of ferns with the forest banked around it. A cliff height nearby, frowning down at the sea.

"Yes. I can land us there." I showed her through the glasses. I rang the sirens, and we spiraled, descending further. The mountain tops were now close beneath us. Clouds were overhead, white masses with blue sky behind them. A day of brilliant sunlight. But soon, with our forward cruising, it was night. The sunlight dropped beneath the sharply convex horizon; the sea and the land went purple.

A night of brilliant stars; the Earth was a blazing blue-red point of light. The heavens visibly were revolving; in an hour or so it would be daylight again.

On the forward deck now Coniston had appeared, commanding half a dozen of the crew. They were carrying up caskets of food and the equipment which was to be given the marooned passengers. And making ready the disembarking incline, loosening the seals of the side dome windows.

Sternward on the deck, by the lounge oval, I could see Miko standing. And occasionally the roar of his voice at the passengers, sounded.

My vagrant thoughts flung back into Earth's history. Like this, ancient travelers of the surface of the sea were herded by pirates to walk the plank, or be put ashore, marooned upon some fair desert island of the tropic Spanish main.

Hahn came mounting our turret incline. "All is well, Gregg Haljan?"

"Get to your work," Moa told him sharply.

He retreated, joining the bustle and confusion which now was beginning on the deck. It struck me—could I turn that confusion to account? Would it be possible, now at the last moment, to attack these brigands? Snap still sat outside the radio room doorway. But his guard was alert with upraised projector. And that guard, I saw, in his position, commanded all the deck.

And I saw too, as the passengers now were herded in a line from the lounge oval, that Miko had roped and bound all of the men, a clanking chain connected them. They came like a line of convicts, marching forward, and stopped on the open deck near the base of the turret. Dr. Frank's grim face gazed up at me.

Miko ordered the women and children in a group beside the chained men. His words to them reached me: "You are in no danger. When we land, be careful. You will find gravity very different—this is a very small world."

I flung on the landing lights; the deck glowed with the blue radiance; the searchbeams shot down beside our hull. We hung now a thousand feet above the forest glade. I cut off the electronic streams. We poised, with the gravity plates set at normal, and only a

gentle night breeze to give us a slight side drift. This I could control with the lateral propeller rudders.

For all my busy landing routine, my mind was on other things. Venza's swift words back there in the lounge. I was to create a commotion while the passengers were landing. Why? Had she and Dr. Frank some last minute desperate purposes?

I determined I would do what she said. Shout, or mis-order the lights. That would be easy.

I was glad it was night. I had, indeed, calculated our descent so that the landing would be in darkness. But to what purpose? These brigands were very alert. There was nothing I could think of to do which would avail us anything more than a probable swift death under Miko's anger.

"Well done, Gregg!" said Moa.

I cut off the last of the propellers. With scarcely a perceptible jar, the Planetara grounded, rose like a feather, and settled to rest in the glade. The deep purple night with stars overhead was around us. I hissed out our interior air through the dome and hull ports, and admitted the night air of the asteroid. My calculations—of necessity mere mathematical approximations—proved fairly accurate. In temperature and pressure there was no radical change as the dome windows slid back.

We had landed. Whatever Venza's purpose, her moment was at hand. I was tense. But I was aware also, that beside me Moa was very alert. I had thought her unarmed. She was not. She sat back from me; in her hand was a long thin knife blade.

She murmured tensely, "You have done your part, Gregg. Well and skillfully done. Now we will sit here quietly and watch them land."

Snap's guard was standing, keenly watching. The lookouts in the forward and stern towers were also armed; I could see them both gazing keenly down at the confusion of the blue lit deck.

The incline went over the hull side and touched the ground.

"Enough!" Miko roared. "The men first. Hahn, move the women back! Coniston, pile those caskets to the side. Get out of the way, Prince."

Anita was down there. I saw her at the edge of the group of women. Venza was near her.

Miko shoved her. "Get out of the way, Prince. You can help Coniston. Have the things ready to throw off."

Five of the steward crew were at the head of the incline. Miko shouted up at me:

"Haljan, hold our shipboard gravity normal."

"Yes."

The line of men were first to descend. Dr. Frank led them. He flashed a look of farewell up at me and Snap as he went down the incline with the chained men passengers after him.

Motley procession! Twenty odd, disheveled, half-clothed men of these worlds. The changing, lightening gravity on the incline caught them. Dr. Frank bounded up to the rail under the impetus of his step; caught and held himself. Drew himself back. The line swayed. In the dim, blue lit glare it seemed unreal, crazy. A grotesque dream of men descending a plank.

They reached the forest glade. Stood swaying, afraid at first to move. The purple night crowded them; they stood gazing at this strange world, their new prison.

"Now the women."

Miko was shoving the women to the head of the incline. I could feel Moa's gaze upon me. Her knife gleamed in the turret light.

She murmured again, "In a few moments you can bring us away, Gregg."

I felt like an actor awaiting his cue in the wings of some turgid drama the plot of which he did not know. Venza was near the head of the incline. Some of the women and children were on it. A woman screamed. Her child had slipped from her hand; bounded up over the rail and fallen. Hardly fallen—floated down to the ground, with flailing arms and legs, landing in the dark ferns unharmed. Its terrified wail came up.

There was a confusion on the incline. Venza, still on the deck, seemed to send a look of appeal to the turret. My cue?

I slid my hand to the light switchboard. It was near my knees. I pulled a switch. The blue lit deck beneath the turret went dark.

I recall an instant of horrible, tense silence, and in the gloom beside me I was aware of Moa moving. I felt a thrill of instinctive fear—would she plunge that knife into me?

The silence of the darkened deck was broken with a confusion of sounds. A babble of voices; a woman passenger's scream; shuffling feet; and above it all, Miko's roar:

"Stand quiet! Everyone! No movement!"

On the descending incline there was chaos. The disembarking women were clinging to the gang rail; some of them had evidently surged forward and fallen. Down on the ground in the purple-shadowed starlight, I could vaguely see the chained line of men. They too, were in confusion, trying to shove themselves toward the fallen women.

Miko roared: "Light those tubes! Gregg Haljan! By the Almighty, Moa, are you up there? What is wrong? The light tubes—"

Dark drama of unknown plot! I wondered if I should try and leave the turret. Where was Anita? She had been down there on the deck when I flung out the lights.

I think twenty seconds would have covered it all. I had not moved. I thought, "Is Snap concerned with this?"

Moa's knife could have stabbed me. I felt her lunge against me. And suddenly I was gripping her, twisting her wrist. But she flung the knife away. Her strength was almost the equal of my own. Her hand went for my throat, and with the other hand she was fumbling.

The deck abruptly sprang into light again. Moa had found the switch and threw it back.

She fought me as I tried to reach the switch. I saw down on the deck. Miko was gazing up at us. Moa panted, "Gregg—stop! If he sees you doing this, he'll kill you."

The scene down there was almost unchanged. I had answered my cue. To what purpose? I saw Anita near Miko. The last of the women were on the plank.

I had stopped struggling with Moa. She sat back, panting. And then she called:

"Sorry, Miko. It will not happen again."

Miko was in a towering rage. But he was too busy to bother with me; his anger swung on those nearest him. He shoved the last of the women violently at the incline. She bounded over. Her body, with the gravity pull of only a few Earth pounds, sailed in an arc and dropped near the swaying line of men.

Miko swung back. "Get out of my way!" A sweep of his huge arm knocked Anita sidewise. "Prince, damn you, help me with those boxes!"

The frightened stewards were lifting the boxes, square metal storage chests each as long as a man, packed with food, tools, and equipment.

"Here, get out of my way! All of you!"

My breath came again; Anita nimbly retreated before Miko's angry rush. He dashed at the stewards. Three of them held a box. He took it from them; raised it at the top of the incline, poised it over his head an instant, with his massive arms like gray pillars beneath it; and flung it. The box catapulted, dropped; and then passing the Planetara's gravity area, it sailed in a long flat arc over the forest glade and crashed into the purple underbrush.

"Give me another!"

The stewards pushed another at him. Like an angry Titan, he flung it. And another. One by one the chests sailed out and crashed.

"There is your food. Go pick it up! Haljan, make ready to ring us away!"

On the deck lay the dead body of Rance Rankin, which the stewards had carried out. Miko seized it: flung it.

"There! Go to your last resting place!"

And the other bodies, Balch, Blackstone, Captain Carter, Johnson—Miko flung them all. And the course masters and those of our crew who had been killed.

The passengers were all on the ground now. It was dim down there. I tried to distinguish Venza, but could not. I could see Dr. Frank's figure at the end of the chained line of men. The passengers were gazing in horror at the bodies hurtling over them.

"Ready, Haljan?"

Moa prompted me. "Tell him yes!"

I called, "Yes!" Had Venza failed in her unknown purpose? It seemed so. On the radio room bridge Snap and his guard stood like silent statues in the blue lit gloom.

The disembarkation was over.

"Close the ports!" Miko commanded.

The incline came folding up with a clatter. The port and dome windows slid closed. Moa hissed against my ear:

"If you want life, Gregg Haljan, you will start your duties!"

Venza had failed. Whatever it was, it had come to nothing. Down in the purple forest, disconnected now from the ship, the last of our friends stood marooned. I could distinguish them through the blur of the closed dome—only a swaying, huddled group was visible. But my fancy pictured this last sight of them, Dr. Frank, Venza, Shac and Dud Ardley.

They were gone. There were left only Snap, Anita and myself.

I was mechanically ringing us away. I heard my sirens sounding down below, with the answering clangs here in the turret. The Planetara's respiratory controls started; the pressure equalizers began operating; and the gravity plates began shifting into lifting combinations.

The ship was hissing and quivering with it, combined with the grating of the last of the dome ports. And Miko's command:

"Lift, Haljan!"

Hahn had been mingling with the confusion of the deck though I had hardly noticed him. Coniston had remained below with the crew answering my signals. Hahn stood now with Miko, gazing down through a deck window. Anita was alone at another.

"Lift, Haljan!"

I lifted up gently, bow first, with a repulsion of the bow plates. And started the central electronic engine. Its thrust from the stern moved us diagonally over the purple forest trees.

The glade slid downward and away. I caught a last vague glimpse of the huddled group of marooned passengers, staring up at us. Left to their fate, alone on this deserted world.

With the three engines going, we slid smoothly upward. The forest dropped, a purple spread of treetops edged with starlight and Earthlight. The sharply curving horizon seemed to follow us upward. I swung on all the power. We mounted at a forty degree angle, slowly circling, with a bank of clouds over us to the side and the shining little sea beneath.

"Very good, Gregg." In the turret light Moa's eyes blazed at me. "I do not know what you meant by darkening the deck lights." Her fingers dug at my shoulders. "I will tell my brother it was an error."

I said, "An error—yes."

"I didn't know what it was. But you have me to deal with now. You understand? I will tell my brother so. You said, 'On Earth a man may kill the thing he loves.' A woman of Mars may do that! Beware of me, Gregg Haljan."

Her passion-filled eyes bored into me. Love? Hate? The venom of a woman scorned—a mingling of turgid emotions....

I twisted back from her grip and ignored her. She sat back, silently watching my busy activities: the calculations of the shifting conditions of gravity, pressures, temperatures; a checking of the instruments on the board before me.

Mechanical routine. My mind went to Venza, back there on the asteroid. The wandering little world was already shrinking to a convex surface beneath us. Venza, with her last unknown play, gone to failure. Had I missed my cue? Whatever my part, it seemed now that I must have horribly misacted it.

The crescent Earth was presently swinging over our bow. We rocketed out of the asteroid's shadow. The glowing, flaming Sun appeared, making a crescent of the Earth. With the glass I could see our tiny Moon, visually seeming to hug the limb of its parent Earth.

We were on our course to the Moon. My mind flung ahead. Grantline with his treasure, unsuspecting this brigand ship. And suddenly, beyond all thought of Grantline, there came to me a fear for Anita. In God's truth I had been, so far, a very stumbling, inept champion, doomed to failure with everything I tried. Why had I not contrived to have Anita desert at the asteroid? Would it not have been far better for her there, taking her chance for rescue with Dr. Frank, Venza and the others?

But no! I had, like a fool, never thought of that! Had let her remain here on board at the mercy of these outlaws.

And I swore now, that beyond everything, I would protect her.

Futile oath! If I could have seen ahead a few hours! But I sensed the catastrophe. There was a shudder within me as I sat in that turret, docilely guiding us out through the asteroid's atmosphere, heading us upon our course for the Moon.

MY MYSTICKAL CHILDE by Gavin Chappell

3

Siân glowered at Eloise. The first time she had set eyes on the Goth chick, Siân had worked her out. She was one of those crypto-Christian bleeding heart types, wasn't it? The sort who talked all the time about tolerating other people's cultures, but as soon as they found themselves faced with female circumcision or cannibalism or

headhunting, or anything that differed in the slightest from mainstream western beliefs, forgot all that nauseating “noble savage” drivel they dribbled and were the first to shout ‘Exterminate all the brutes.’

Racist, that, wasn’t it? She’d seen it in the English tourists every summer, whenever they ventured out of their tourist traps and saw the real Wales. She’d seen it in the inbred shitheads on the estate, back in Caer Pedryfan, them who’d supported Plaid or even Meibion Glyndwr, but had thrown stones at her because she looked a bit different. Well now, she was back with her dad and her real people. And if they had different notions on the ethics of reproduction from Little Miss Perfect there, she didn’t care. She was home.

‘What’s your problem, Eloise?’ she demanded. ‘Do you want to find the Cauldron or not? We’re on this quest for your sake, aren’t we? For your sister! It’s about time you came to terms with the real world. The only way we’ll be able to beat Kohl to the Cauldron is with my father’s help. Take it or leave it.’

Eloise looked stubborn.

‘There they are,’ Hamish hissed, peering over the ledge. ‘The beach is about twenty feet below us. But the place is swarming with those little keeches we met in the mines, Osborne.’

‘Aye,’ Osborne replied. ‘It will be. What do we do now, Menyw?’

‘Me?’ asked Menyw. ‘Why ask me? You’re the mighty warriors.’

‘What are they doing with that mauchit big ball thing?’ asked Hamish.

‘I believe it is some form of submersible,’ said Anghelides, moving up behind them. ‘Kohl plans to pass over the falls and through the maelstrom that leads to the interior of the planet.’

‘Is that a practical way of getting there?’ asked Osborne, with a barely repressed shudder.

‘It’s as practical as any,’ Menyw murmured.

‘Och, they seem almost ready,’ said Hamish suddenly. ‘But something’s holding them up.’

He moved closer. Osborne hissed; ‘Watch out!’ But it was too late. Hamish’s movement had dislodged a pebble beside him. He glanced down to see it go skittering over the ledge.

Kohl leant on the Spear of Lugus and looked on with satisfaction as the goblins prepared the submersible for his journey to the centre of the earth. The brass and gilt globe in itself, about thirty feet across, looked like something from the wildest opium dreams of Jules Verne.

‘You say this is the only way I will get to Agartha?’ he asked of the small figure who stood beside him, a hooded cloak hiding his face.

‘Yes,’ the Pwcca hissed. ‘Unless you wish to swim! Now, when will we receive these Sten guns of which you speak?’

‘I will my agent contact on my return from the Hollow Earth,’ said Kohl. He turned away, but the Pwcca reached out a clawed hand and restrained him.

‘No, my friend,’ he croaked. ‘You will contact him now! Few return from the world within - and we need those weapons to end our eternal war with the elves.’

Kohl sighed and took out his mobile phone. ‘I don’t expect I’ll get a signal,’ he muttered. He rang a number and stood in silence with the phone to his ear. At last, he

spoke. 'Ring me!' he snapped. 'ASAP. Kohl.' He switched off the phone and turned to the Pwcca, whose eyes glittered balefully beneath the folds of his hood. 'What more can I do, Pwcca?' he replied. 'A message I've left him.'

'My followers will not allow you aboard the submersible until we have confirmation,' the Pwcca replied.

'Come now,' Kohl replied. 'Those degenerate hippies are on my trail, Anghelides may still be following... And the elves are restless, by your own admission...'

'If the elves rise up, then you will fight them at my shoulder, friend,' said the Pwcca grimly. Kohl looked away in disgust. There was a clatter from the rocks behind them. The Pwcca turned round. 'What was that?' he hissed.

Kohl looked indifferent.

'Does it matter?' he began. The Pwcca struck him.

'Look!' he hissed, pointing a clawed hand upwards.

Kohl strained his eyes in the gloom to see three or four figures clinging to a ledge some way up the cavern wall. 'Who are they?' he asked.

The Pwcca ignored him and shouted orders at his warriors. The goblins ceased their tasks and produced bows.

'Down!' shouted Menyw as flint-tipped arrows hummed around them. One buried itself in Anghelides' chest and he staggered back against the wall. Hamish, Osborne and Menyw crouched down behind the lip of the ledge.

'Cowards!' Anghelides spat, struggling back to the edge. 'Attack them!'

'What are you talking about?' Osborne asked. 'Get down!'

Three arrows hit the undead occultist and he stumbled, but did not fall.

'After me!' he croaked, seemingly unhurt by the arrows protruding from his body. He leapt over the ledge.

Kohl was trying to follow the goblin's arrows when he saw something pitch over the ledge. They'd hit someone! The falling body plummeted closer, arms and legs flailing wildly. It was Anghelides! Kohl sneered triumphantly as the body hit the beach a few feet away - but his face fell when the occultist rose and turned to face him.

'So!' Anghelides hissed. 'This is how you intend to reach Agartha, is it? But you reckon without the *Ordo Templi Typhonis*!'

'The first thing I will do once my armies have seized control of Europe,' Kohl replied, 'is bring an end to that infamous order!'

'What are the fuck are they doing?' barked Hamish. Beneath them, they could see Anghelides bearing down on Kohl. The goblins around them seemed uncertain how to react to this foe in their midst and it was up to Kohl to defend himself.

'That's ma spear!' Hamish shouted, seeing Kohl lift the weapon up to menace Anghelides. 'Ya scunner!' he yelled and he leapt over the edge.

'Idiot!' shouted Osborne, grabbing for him. He caught Hamish by the hood of his coat, but the lad's momentum pulled him over. The pair of them toppled into the darkness.

'Oh dear me,' said Menyw worriedly. Things weren't turning out as planned.

Osborne and Hamish landed on the grey sand with a thump that knocked the breath out of them. Groaning, Osborne tried to rise, to find three flint-tipped spears at his throat. He looked about him. They were surrounded by goblins.

‘Shit...’ said Hamish painfully.

‘Hamish, you idiot,’ gasped Osborne.

Kohl thrust again with the Spear.

‘You think you’re immortal, don’t you?’ he laughed wildly, as Anghelides dodged. ‘But are you immune to a divine artefact such as this? I don’t think so.’

‘Shall we kill him?’ demanded the Pwcca suddenly. ‘This is your rival, is it not? Who, then, are his minions?’

‘Degenerates!’ said Kohl. ‘This “occult master” associates with such scum because no one else will...’

Anghelides’ hand flashed out. Kohl heaved the Spear back as the occultist tried to wrench it out of his hand and fell back against the wall of the submersible. His grip on the weapon weakened and Anghelides tore it away.

The occultist raised the Spear above his head.

The Pwcca shouted something and the goblins closest to the scene put arrows to their strung bows. Anghelides looked round. About a dozen goblins menaced him. Already, his tattered body was riddled with arrows.

He seized Kohl with his free arm and pulled him against his bony chest as a human shield.

‘Stay back!’ he shouted. ‘Don’t shoot! Do these savages understand a word I say?’ he added in an undertone to the Neo-Nazi.

‘Don’t shoot him!’ Kohl cried out. ‘Don’t shoot me! Or you’ll never get the weapons I promised you!’

The Pwcca raised a hand and his archers relaxed, although they did not lower their bows.

‘You are his foe?’ he asked.

Anghelides looked down at the little man.

‘Correct,’ he replied cautiously. ‘What of it?’

The Pwcca tilted his head thoughtfully.

‘Kohl wishes to enter the underworld through the maelstrom. He says that you do too. He offers us superior weapons with which to defeat our age-old enemies the ellyllon. And yet we have still to see these weapons he offers. We have no reason to trust him. But what about you? If you can improve on his offer, we may allow you and your degenerate minions to use the submersible...’

‘What are they talking about?’ said Hamish.

‘I think Anghelides is trying to get the goblins on our side,’ replied Osborne, squinting at the scene.

‘On his side, you mean,’ said Hamish. ‘He’ll forget about us as soon as we’re no longer useful.’ He winced and turned his head towards Osborne. ‘What’s happened to Menyw?’

Kohl cursed his treacherous associates.

‘Are you such a fool you think this walking corpse is willing to do a deal with you?’ he gasped. The Pwcca returned his gaze imperturbably.

‘I’m not such a fool as to take your word,’ he replied.

‘Tracherous *untermensch!*’ snarled Kohl. With an abrupt movement, he slipped out of Anghelides’ grasp and sent the occultist tumbling to the ground. He seized the Spear, then turned and swung himself up the side of the submersible, towards the hatch at the top.

The Pwcca yelled something to his goblins and the air around Kohl hummed with stone-headed arrows as the goblin archers loosed.

‘And kill the others!’ he cried. ‘We cannot trust any of the overworlders!’

Anghelides was struggling to his feet when the goblins turned on him. He sank back onto the cold sand, his grisly body pin-cushioned with arrows.

‘No!’ shouted Hamish as the goblins raised stone axes to despatch him. He flung one aside and tried to run, but more leapt on him. Osborne feebly tried to rise, but was knocked back by a blow from a stone axe.

It was just at that moment that Menyw floated down into the melee.

‘Stop this, Pwcca!’ cried the old druid.

The Pwcca raised a hand and his goblins paused. The goblin king strode forward.

‘Who are you who floats down from above?’ the Pwcca demanded. His eyes narrowed to baleful slits and recognition seemed to dawn. ‘No... It can’t be...!’

‘Yes, Pwcca,’ Menyw replied. ‘I am the old enemy of your folk. One hundred generations ago, I and King Pretanos led the Pretani to Albion...’

‘We know you from our legends,’ the Pwcca spat. ‘It was you and your people with your swords of sky-metal who stole our land and forced us to flee into the forests and the mountains. And now you trouble us even here!’

‘It was the will of the gods,’ Menyw replied. ‘We tried to co-exist peacefully with you, but you attacked us again and again.’ He looked weary. ‘The war was long. Even today, it continues underground. But today, it is you who are the aggressors. Let us pass into the centre of the world, or people of his kind’ - he indicated Kohl, still clinging to the top of the submersible - ‘will control the overworld.’

‘Why should we care?’ the Pwcca spat. ‘Whoever rules above would exterminate us all without a thought. Just as we will kill you!’

He raised his hands and the goblins rushed forward. They surrounded the druid, but Menyw turned towards the Pwcca again and laughed.

‘I kept you talking long enough,’ he said. Osborne, watching the confrontation from the ground nearby, was shocked by the expression on the old man’s face; cold, sneering, triumphant. ‘Now face your final defeat!’ the druid added. A commotion from the head of the beach drew everyone’s attention.

Issuing from a cave mouth were the warriors of the ellyllon.

Siân charged across the rocks, at her father’s side. Behind her came Bhukhan, his face resolute; behind him were Nick and Eloise, resigned to fighting on the elven side. ‘My enemy’s enemy...’ Eloise had said finally. The *coblynau* turned to face their assault.

Siân drew the bronze machete her father had given her. The melee began.

‘Siân!’ a voice screamed from the confusion ahead. She lashed out at the goblins swarming towards her and tried to locate the speaker.

Their guards had run off to join the defence and Hamish and Osborne were free to watch the battle as it spread out across the wet subterranean beach. Osborne had just spotted the Welsh girl.

‘Never mind her, there’s Eloise and Nick!’ Hamish shouted. ‘Eloise!’ he cried. ‘Eloise!’

The girl spotted them across the broiling chaos, where goblins and elves fought with hideous savagery. She waved briefly and grabbed Nick by the arm.

‘Never mind them!’ Menyw shouted from nearby. ‘Look!’

The druid was pointing towards the submersible.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ demanded Siân.

Her machete was red with goblin blood and her eyes glinted. The expression on her face was something Eloise had hitherto only seen on the faces of the Little People.

‘We’re going to join our friends,’ said Eloise defiantly. She could see a way through the battle to join them. She had also seen Kohl enter the giant metal globe behind them. What he was doing, she didn’t know, but she was certain that it would not bode well for them.

‘What’s it to you?’ Nick added. Both had joined the elven army in the hopes of finding their friends; both had viewed Siân’s transformation with concern.

Siân glowered at them.

‘You’re not my people,’ she said, as if she was trying to convince herself. ‘Why should I trust you...’

‘Look,’ Eloise said. ‘If you really want to stay with your bloodthirsty Stone Age friends, you do that. But we’ve got a job to do. Kohl is escaping. We’ve got to stop him before he gets to the Cauldron!’

Siân looked at them in an agony of indecision.

A scream of anger and pain rang out through the battlefield. They turned, to see Siân’s father bearing the goblin leader to the ground. He lifted his axe, then brought it slashing down.

They watched in sick horror as Khorakh put his lips to the Pwcca’s gaping neck and drank the spurting blood.

‘Stop him!’ shouted Menyw. The submersible hatch was closing. Kohl had disappeared within a minute ago.

Hamish, Osborne at his heels, grabbed hold of the ladder and scrambled up. He seized the hatch and set his shoulder to it, to stop it closing. Gears ground and shrieked. Osborne joined him and put his own shoulder against the hatch.

The submersible was beginning to sway, as if about to set sail upon the swirling waters of the underground river.

‘Go!’ shouted Bukhan.

Siân turned to her brother.

‘What...’ she said in amazement.

‘This place is not for you,’ Bukhan replied. ‘We may have the same father, but you belong in the overground world. Look!’ He indicated the battlefield, where the victorious elves were slaughtering the defeated goblins and others prepared fires to cook their corpses. ‘These people - my people - you could never understand them! I have problems and I was only overground three years...’

‘Then come with us!’ Eloise said.

Bukhan shook his head. ‘I fit in with my father’s people no more than Siân does with her mother’s,’ he admitted. ‘I belong here, just as she belongs overground - but look!’

He pointed towards the submersible, which was beginning to move towards the waters. Menyw stood beside it, waving desperately at them.

‘Come on!’ said Eloise. She ran towards the druid, Nick following. Siân turned to look at Bukhan.

‘Go!’ he shouted. She hesitated, then turned and followed the humans.

Bukhan followed them with his eyes as they clambered onto the submersible and tried to gain access. Then he went to join the elves as they feasted upon their fallen foes.

The travellers burst into the submersible cabin. Kohl turned to face them.

‘Have you come to join me?’ he sneered, looking from witch to druid, biker to skinhead, then eyeing Nick and Siân with equal scorn. ‘The hatch is shut, despite your attempts. We are now entering the water. The journey to Agartha will be a long one.

‘How will we pass the time?’

The current seized hold of the metal globe and they spun away across the dark, turbulent waters. Slowly, they sank beneath the surface.

The falls seized them and flung them spinning into the abyss.

CARMILLA by J. Sheridan LeFanu

XVI

Conclusion

I write all this you suppose with composure. But far from it; I cannot think of it without agitation. Nothing but your earnest desire so repeatedly expressed, could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for months to come, and reinduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific.

Let me add a word or two about that quaint Baron Vordenburg, to whose curious lore we were indebted for the discovery of the Countess Mircalla's grave.

He had taken up his abode in Gratz, where, living upon a mere pittance, which was all that remained to him of the once princely estates of his family, in Upper Styria, he devoted himself to the minute and laborious investigation of the marvelously authenticated tradition of Vampirism. He had at his fingers' ends all the great and little works upon the subject.

"Magia Posthuma," "Phlegon de Mirabilibus," "Augustinus de cura pro Mortuis," "Philosophicae et Christianae Cogitationes de Vampiris," by John Christofer Herenberg; and a thousand others, among which I remember only a few of those which he lent to my father. He had a voluminous digest of all the judicial cases, from which he had extracted a system of principles that appear to govern--some always, and others occasionally only--the condition of the vampire. I may mention, in passing, that the deadly pallor attributed to that sort of revenants, is a mere melodramatic fiction. They present, in the grave, and when they show themselves in human society, the appearance of healthy life. When disclosed to light in their coffins, they exhibit all the symptoms that are enumerated as those which proved the vampire-life of the long-dead Countess Karnstein.

How they escape from their graves and return to them for certain hours every day, without displacing the clay or leaving any trace of disturbance in the state of the coffin or the cerements, has always been admitted to be utterly inexplicable. The amphibious existence of the vampire is sustained by daily renewed slumber in the grave. Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigor of its waking existence. The

vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast.

The vampire is, apparently, subject, in certain situations, to special conditions. In the particular instance of which I have given you a relation, Mircalla seemed to be limited to a name which, if not her real one, should at least reproduce, without the omission or addition of a single letter, those, as we say, anagrammatically, which compose it.

Carmilla did this; so did Millarca.

My father related to the Baron Vordenburg, who remained with us for two or three weeks after the expulsion of Carmilla, the story about the Moravian nobleman and the vampire at Karnstein churchyard, and then he asked the Baron how he had discovered the exact position of the long-concealed tomb of the Countess Mircalla? The Baron's grotesque features puckered up into a mysterious smile; he looked down, still smiling on his worn spectacle case and fumbled with it. Then looking up, he said:

"I have many journals, and other papers, written by that remarkable man; the most curious among them is one treating of the visit of which you speak, to Karnstein. The tradition, of course, discolors and distorts a little. He might have been termed a Moravian nobleman, for he had changed his abode to that territory, and was, beside, a noble. But he was, in truth, a native of Upper Styria. It is enough to say that in very early youth he had been a passionate and favored lover of the beautiful Mircalla, Countess Karnstein. Her early death plunged him into inconsolable grief. It is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law.

"Assume, at starting, a territory perfectly free from that pest. How does it begin, and how does it multiply itself? I will tell you. A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That specter visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires. This happened in the case of the beautiful Mircalla, who was haunted by one of those demons. My ancestor, Vordenburg, whose title I still bear, soon discovered this, and in the course of the studies to which he devoted himself, learned a great deal more.

"Among other things, he concluded that suspicion of vampirism would probably fall, sooner or later, upon the dead Countess, who in life had been his idol. He conceived a horror, be she what she might, of her remains being profaned by the outrage of a posthumous execution. He has left a curious paper to prove that the vampire, on its expulsion from its amphibious existence, is projected into a far more horrible life; and he resolved to save his once beloved Mircalla from this.

"He adopted the stratagem of a journey here, a pretended removal of her remains, and a real obliteration of her monument. When age had stolen upon him, and from the vale of years, he looked back on the scenes he was leaving, he considered, in a different spirit, what he had done, and a horror took possession of him. He made the tracings and notes which have guided me to the very spot, and drew up a confession of the deception that he had practiced. If he had intended any further action in this matter, death prevented him; and the hand of a remote descendant has, too late for many, directed the pursuit to the lair of the beast."

We talked a little more, and among other things he said was this:

"One sign of the vampire is the power of the hand. The slender hand of Mircalla closed like a vice of steel on the General's wrist when he raised the hatchet to strike. But its power is not confined to its grasp; it leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from."

The following Spring my father took me a tour through Italy. We remained away for more than a year. It was long before the terror of recent events subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations--sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door.