

Schlock! webzine

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

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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!

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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.

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The logo for Schlock! Publishing features the text "Schlock! Publishing" in a bold, black, serif font. The text is set against a solid red rectangular background. The exclamation mark in "Schlock!" is notably larger than the other characters.

This Edition

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



This week's cover illustration is *Black Milk* by [Paul Mellino](#).

[Johnny B Good \(Part One\)](#) by [Todd Nelsen](#) - rockabilly horror in Hell!!!

[Super Duper: Part Thirteen](#) by [award-winning](#) author [James Rhodes](#) - What became of Smith...

[Babbage Must Die - Part Ten](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - a life on the ocean wave...

[The Dark Place: Part Seven](#) by [James Talbot](#) - a shadowy indistinct figure with blood red eyes watched from the depths of the mirror...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Varney the Vampire: Part Sixteen](#) ascribed to [Thomas Preskett Prest](#). Before *Twilight*... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney...

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Chapter Nine](#) by Rex Mundy - Lot meets a heathen warlord...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 10\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *They brought out the body. I stood apart, gazing reluctantly at the small bundle, wrapped like a mummy in a dark metallic screen-cloth. A patch of black silk rested over her face. Four cabin stewards carried her; and beside her walked George Prince.*

[The Hollow Hills - Part Two](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Eloise and her friends learn what lurks within the disused Welsh slate mine. *Seventh in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part Eight](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - *she was not in the room, nor in the dressing room, the door of which was still locked on this side. She could not have passed it. I was utterly puzzled. Had Carmilla discovered one of those secret passages which the old housekeeper said were known to exist in the schloss, although the tradition of their exact situation had been lost?*

Johnny B Good

1

"What do you expect to accomplish with this, Johnny?"

"Whatcha think, man? I'm gonna burn me some rubber. Get me a way outta this cotton pickin' place..."

"And then?"

"There ain't no... *and then*, demon! This little here arrangement ya have with me be over! I'll lay a patch down on these roads the likes of which ya ain't ever gonna believe..."

A smirk. "You will fail, Johnny."

"No, that's where ya got it all wrong, fiend. It'll be fat city where I'm headed. You'll see..."

My name is Johnny B. Roberts. The 'B' is for Bran-do, just like outta the movies. I dropped my granddaddy's name one day and gave that one to myself. Figured I deserved it, on 'count that I could piss more vinegar and take more poundin' than any Alabama greaser I ever did see. On October 2, 1959, I stepped out onto Route 157 and had my brains splattered out over the grill of a 281 Peterbilt. The driver, heels on fire and drunk on bourbon whiskey, swore the midnight dust had obscured his vision. He said, he never saw it comin.' It took the local Sherriff, and two of his deputies, three hours to pick up the pieces. It took my girl 3 1/2 weeks, 4 1/2 days, 16 hours, and 36 minutes to forget 'bout me and get the move on. She got her cherry popped playin' back seat bingo with my ol' buddy Charley in her daddy's car. I hear tell Betty Lou was married and pregnant with child two months later. I didn't pay it no mind. We hear 'bout things like that all the time down here. It's *his* way of tryin' to get a razz outta ya. Don't bother me none. Like most things unsavory, a man gets used to it.

Some say, I kilt myself outta spite. Outta sheer meanness. Woulda taken ever'one in the whole, damn town down with me, if given the chance. Others called it an accident. Some of the church folk even believed I was possessed by demons. Unclean spirits. But, by the way I figure it, they got it all wrong, and this is a false way of seein' it. Man, I didn't need me an excuse! Never did. Sure as shit didn't need no demons. I was just tired of livin' and didn't wanna play their games no more. I walked out on that highway and was certain my death would offer my soul the finality it craved, a little abasement to what 'em poets call... the banality of human existence. Little did I know, I'd be greeted with an afterlife and greased up down here instead. Funny how that works out, ain't it? Ya expect one thing and getcha 'nother. It's happened to me my whole, damn life this way.

Anyhow, that's how ol' Johnny B. Roberts found hisself in this here inferno of the damned. Ain't no big thing really. Just not what I was expectin'...

"You might have considered pills or drowning, Johnny. It would have been far less painful."

"Is that right, man? And what's it to ya? Ya writin' a book? If ya cared 'bout pain, Jack, ya'd stop inflictin' it! Now let me outta this thing, ya horny motherfu..."

I was upside down again, my ankles chained, hands strapped behind my back, my head inches from the fire. He was torturin' me again. Tryin' to blow me off. Took a real likin' to hurtin' me when I got belligerent. I'll say this 'bout this ol', Alabama tomcat, though. The more that Devil hurt me, the more belligerent I got.

And the angrier he got, too.

"I do have many names, Johnny, but do not believe that is one of them.

You're beginning to try my patience, mortal. Still, I must confess your resilience is quite remarkable..."

"Ain't that a bite," I replied evenly.

"Are you familiar with Perillos the Greek, Johnny? No, I imagine you wouldn't be. He was well before your time..." The Devil scratched the tuft of hair upon his chin and took a cloven-footed step closer and continued. "Perillos was an Athenian metal worker who lived in the 5th century. I'm sure this means little to you, but do remind me to introduce you to him."

"I've met him, demon," I said. "He's that goof who's been rattlin' the cage of all the other Ivy Leagues ya got stacked in the lower East end. Just 'nother Clyde bent on destruction, if ya ask me..."

The Devil sighed. "As always, your ignorance never fails to precede you, Johnny. In life, Perillos was an extraordinarily ingenious man--an inventor of sorts. He improvised a form of torture in which victims were encased in a hollowed bull of bronze... hence the name, the brazen bull."

"Seems more like *tits* on a bull to me, demon."

"Ah... but these were exciting times," the Devil said. "Spectators would gather from miles to witness the event. It was quite the spectacle. Once the bull was shut tight, children would take turns gathering straw and dry wood. The victim would be forced to wait until the metal was heated to extreme temperatures by a fire stoked from beneath-- not unlike a Dutch oven."

I felt a snicker comin' on right 'bout then.

"Can you even begin to imagine the distress of these men? It is said, his method of torture was considered so ghastly, so inhumane, that Perillos, himself, was tortured by the same means... as repentance for the evil he had wrought upon the world. I can make you very, very uncomfortable, Johnny B. It would be wise not to test me..."

He was eyeballin' me, the way a big wheel eyeballs some, young hubcap at a road race. Eyes black as coal. Hair the color of dark, sugared molasses. Skin red as rhubarb... that is, when it's full and grown and ripe in springtime for the pickin.' Yes, sir, he was just as ya'd imagine it! I could tell he'd be expectin' hisself an answer and would lay into me hard to get it. But, I gave it a moment, just the same, before swallowin' hard and replyin'...

"That's an awfully interestin' story. A real gone bit. I give ya that..."

"And?"

"Well, I tell ya what, demon. I'll give it to ya straight," I cleared my throat, then, real serious like, "... and on the level. See, I dunno much 'bout no brazen bull, but I did have me one of 'em Dutch ovens once."

"You misunderstand me, Johnny," the Devil said. "We're not discussing Dutch ovens. A Dutch oven is a 17th century concoction."

"Can't say I liked it none too much, neither... and this is what I'm tryin' to tell ya, ya idiot!" I replied. "My brother Blue held me under the covers and broke wind over my head, and I couldn't see straight for two, damn weeks! Musta been 'bout four or five? Blue was a nasty son-of-a-bitch, ya see... and he weren't no Athenian. Can't be much worse than that, I reckon."

"Is this a joke, Johnny? Don't you know me yet, mortal?"

"Do... your... worst, demon!" I replied, annunciatin' ever' word. "I've seen me all kinda nasty shit! Ya think ya can razz me with that? Hell, I remember a time... hold on, now... where ya off to? Ya just gonna cut out and leave me hangin' here again, man? Don't get bent and getcha panties in a bunch just 'cause I didn't take a

likin' to your little story..."

And that's how it went.

Just to let ya know, it's no easy thing to have an intelligent conversation when a fella is chained upside down by his ankles. Most times, I felt like a roasted pig on a picket. But I always knew it'd be a cold day in Hell... pardon my pun... before I let up. If ya wanna know the honest truth, I guess the shoe fit well 'nough in places, but in some places, it didn't. See, most folk spend their lives in places they don't wanna be. Thinkin' all along, that's where they belong, and there ain't no changin' it. That kinda thinkin' never made much sense to me, though. Someone puts me in a bind, and I'm sure as Hell or high water gonna get myself outta it. Brazen bull, mancuenda, iron maiden, Chinese jiá gùn, roast me in the fire again, ya son-of-a-bitch... my ass. Take this ol' Devil here, for example. The way I see it, I think he had hisself some real, daddy issues and couldn't help but take it out on the rest of us. Can't blame him much for that, though.

Can't say I liked my daddy all that much, neither.

Anyhow, time is a funny thing when you're in Hell. It has always been this way, I reckon... even in life... but a fella becomes real aware of time down here. After waitin' for new and interestin' ways for the Devil to torment me, I finally decided to strike ol' Johnny B. Roberts a deal. If Heaven and the good Lord wouldn't have me, I'd make for the earthly plane... back topside where the grass is green and a fella can feel the sunshine on his face.

"And if I win this wager of yours?" the Devil asked. "What do you intend to forfeit?"

"Whatcha think, man? My will be yours... for all eternity. That's whatcha wanted all along, ain't it?"

The Devil smiled. "Yes, that is what I have wanted all along, Johnny. You shall have your road race."

2

"Ed"

Parlayin' with the Devil is a peculiar business. The Devil is a liar, a shuckster, and a cheat. He's more slippery than snot on a doorknob or a big city hooker on a Saturday night. Take the way he handled ol' Ed, for example. When Ed arrived, my earthly age woulda been 'bout 56... though I don't look a day over 22.

Ed was a weird son-of-a-bitch.

In life, he had takin' hisself a likin' to pullin' the skins from the women he was killin' in Plainfield, Wisconsin, and wearin' 'em like Halloween masks. I told Ed, I'd smooth talked plenty a baby girl in my time and could think of better ways for a fella to entertain hisself with 'em.

When the heat got wind of what Ed was up to, and roused him up for it, he'd accumulated hisself quite a collection of keepsakes--least, that's what he called 'em.

Keepsakes.

He was makin' hisself soup bowls outta human skulls. He had organs in his icebox. They even found a belt he'd constructed outta human nipples. His favorite was a pair of lips he used as a drawstring for a window shade. He said, he liked the way the light shined in when he pulled it, and the light is what made it so precious.

I suspect I was 'bout the only person he ever told that one to, just so ya know.

Poor Ed found hisself in the worst of predicaments when he went and kilt off

from a bad ticker and respiratory failure in 84. ‘Cause, once on the other side, the first to greet him was his momma. Ed’s momma was one of the most vile, Bible thumpin’ evangelicals I ever did see. There was a reason Augusta was in Hell, but I don’t think she ever did quite figure out where she was or why she was down here with us. She sure layed into Ed, though, and Ed was snowed by it. Upon seein’ Augusta, Ed started hollerin’ ‘bout how apologetic he was for his transgressions... against God, baby Jesus, and, most importantly, against his momma. In his defense, Ed said, he hadn’t kilt hisself that many, and most of the parts he stockpiled in grave robbin’... in the dead of night, beneath the light of the full moon, when nobody was lookin.’

“Was ya humpin’ on ‘em girls, though, Ed?”

Ed, said, no, they smelled too, damn bad.

“But was ya *thinkin’* ‘bout humpin’ on ‘em, Ed?”

Ed said, yes, momma, he had and near ‘bout did and was terribly sorry for it.

Like I said, Ed was a weird son-of-a-bitch.

Anyhow, word from the bird was, the Devil ascertained the situation right quick and promised Ed and Augusta to cure Ed of his dirty ruminations. Both agreed and set hard to prayin’ for Ed’s redemption. Where I say, I saw the Devil, I think they saw an angel of light... a bona fide messenger of salvation. That’s what a liar and deceiver and no ‘count son-of-a-bitch the Devil is. Slicker than bird shit on a July mornin.’ See, it is not a man’s soul that is sick. I figured that out long ago, too. It is his mind. And that’s what the Devil plays on. Most folks buy into the deceit, though, thinkin’ they’re doin’ the right thing...

What most don’t get is the right can be the wrong, too.

But what could this here inferno of the damned be to a greaser like me?

Where did I belong? I mean, sure, I smoked my fair share of due backs. I drank. I whored. I dragged for pink slips and won a few, more than any other greaser I knew. I whooped me some Alabama butt, too. Didn’t lose me many of ‘em there knuckle brawls neither. But I don’t recall, despite my bad reputation, ever hurtin’ nobody. I never caused no true harm, and if there was any harm I ever did do, I brought it on myself or had it done to me. To tell ya the truth, little coulda been done to me that hadn’t been layed on already. My daddy was cruel. My momma was spiteful. The rest of my kin were a put down... some more worse than others. This I’ll admit freely and take no shame in. I expected that my life, from an early age, weren’t gonna be made in the shade and got my move on. Most folk see it differently, though. It doesn’t matter what hurt it is or what form that hurt might take. They take it in like they’re jacketed up and goin’ steady with it. It becomes a part of their regular disposition and won’t leave ‘em alone.

I ain’t sayin’ I ain’t nothin’ but a no ‘count greaser.

That there is what I am.

But I know when it’s time to pop the clutch and let ‘em engines holler. And I also I know when it’s time to put the breaks on before ya run yourself right over the cliff of all a fella’s got left.

The Plainfield Ghoul. That’s what they called him. That’s what they called Ed. Me? My name is just Johnny... Johnny B. Roberts, if ya wanna be precise.

And I weren’t ‘bout to let no no ‘count demon change that...

“Start your engines...”

It was night. The beginnin’ of our contest. A contest that’d liberate my soul from Hell fire or leave it smolderin’ in the coals. The road ahead cut its way across the expanse, like an Arkansas toothpick, fadin’ to an illusory point in the distance. The cloudless sky, riddled with stars and moon, was all ‘round us. The Devil was to my right, revvin’ his engines. He was an awful sight to behold. Threaded in the blackest of leather. The skin beneath, red as blood. A wicked smile playin’ on his lips like an unholy choir.

You don’t have a snowball’s chance in Hell, Johnny...

Ignorin’ him, I spit hard to my left and fired it up as we awaited the go-ahead of the she-demon dancin’ in our headlights. She’d dolled herself up like a pom girl at a high school track meet for the occasion. Ya’d think she was more cranked ‘bout this here road race than we were, the way the demon hussy was shakin’ and struttin’ herself up and down the road.

And then came the count...

3...

2...

1...

... and we both floored it.

The scream of the bent eight was ‘nough to make the king’s jive. It brought to mind ruminations of the ol’ days when my life was straight and reliable. I’d chosen myself a 283 with mechanical, fuel injection. It’d bore the ears off Mighty Mouse, if a fella’d be willin’ to put the pedal to the metal and let ‘em engines holler.

Which I did do... right thoroughly.

But the Devil’s T-Bird was right up with me, from the get go, and I couldn’t shake him. As I said, I knew the Devil was a shuckster and a cheat. In other such circumstances, he’d be eatin’ my dust with ‘em strawberry wheels.

I turned to the right and nudged him a bit, then. Not hard ‘nough to cream him off the road, for fear of goin’ over the edge myself, but to razz him and give my hopped up 59’ some breathin’ room. The Devil, apparently stunned, faltered, and I gained me a few feet that way.

So, feelin’ right satisfied... I hit him again.

This time, harder than before.

BOOM!

And sparks flew from the steel.

“C’mon, snake... let’s rattle!”

The contest was what most cats’d call... negative perspiration. It was a drag, from beginnin’ to finish, down a stretch of five mile. No change ups. No curves. Just a run. Just like I had me in Alabama with ‘em other rodders in the summers of 57’ and 58’ for kicks. It was a race I was ‘customed to, and a road race I knew I could win--that is, if I was offered a fair shake, and nobody was ‘bout to go changin’ no rules.

In my rearview, I could see the Bird was behind me now, by just a few feet. So, I slammed hard on the breaks, tearin’ its bumper into my back end, and punched the accelerator and goosed it. I could hear the screechin’ of steel and the crunch of glass as the maneuver busted out his front peepers.

Still, the demon managed to stay on.

And I did, too.

I cut hard to the right, then, takin’ the Devil’s earlier position, expectin’ him to try to pass me on my left. If he did, I’d lay dead... let him think he was overtakin’

me... then turn hard into his back end and let him have it.

WHAM!

It was a dangerous maneuver, and could spin us both off the road, but I knew I could keep on, even if he didn't. It didn't go down this way, though. He stayed on my tail end, like a Hellcat, and pawed and scratched me from behind.

Once...

Twice...

I pulled hard to the right, buryin' my two, right tires in the dirt, which was exactly what I needed. Dust kicked up behind me, and whatever business the Devil thought he was dealin' my backside, came to an abrupt halt.

"Choke on that, fiend..."

At these speeds, wailin' on the engines the way we were, road races ended right quick. Up yonder, I could already spot the finish. 'Nother she-demon had marked it. I reckon this one had her head buried in her hands by now, though, appearin' all clutched and dismal. She musta known who was 'bout to lose this here road race.

And it weren't gonna be Johnny B.

And that's when I saw it.

A 281 Peterbilt parked on the side of the road, between me and the finish line.

And my 59' came to a screamin' halt, then... victory cut short less than a quarter mile.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Super Duper

Chapter Thirteen

The policeman slipped and dropped the girl; she bounced off the bonnet of an old Ford Capri that had been kept in almost immaculate condition. The authentic fuzzy dice that had been carefully reconstructed shook violently with the impact.

Smith had been breathing hard. Now he could not feel his breath at all, just a gasping vacuum that he felt sure meant that he had died. When he saw the policeman slip, he gathered all of his strength to continue the pursuit. He could see the girl and the policeman with a relative amount of clarity, but the air around them was fuzzy, and filled with green mice and red dinosaurs. Much to his amazement, Smith was gaining on the pair.

The policeman shook off the crimson pterodactyl that was clawing at him as he tried to stand up and grabbed the girl by the leg. She stumbled and he pulled her back over his shoulder; she was still kicking frantically. Smith shook his head hard and strode onwards. The policeman was picking up speed again.

As the policeman reached the bottom of the slip road, Smith was close enough to reach out and grab him on the shoulder. Smith felt the hard baton crack against his forehead.

"Ow, fuck. What did you do that for?"

“Stay back, I’m armed.”

“Just take the handcuffs off the girl and let her go home.”

“The handcuffs can only be removed at the local constabulary,” declared the policeman triumphantly.

“What?” Smith was holding his knees.

“I can only take them off at the station. I don’t have the keys.”

Smith racked his brain for a plan of action. He was dizzy and he was sure he could feel blood trickling over his face. Much like his hero Bilbo Baggins, Smith felt something cold and hard in his pocket. He slipped his hand into his jeans and inside he felt the knuckledusters that The Don had given him. Good, he thought.

Smith took a step forward, pulled out his hand, and threw the best punch he could muster. He landed the shot right across the policeman’s nose. The policeman winced and then became enraged. He charged at Smith, battering at Smith’s arms as Smith held them up; desperately trying to protect his head. The girl stood up and ran behind the policeman; she curled up into a little ball directly behind his legs. She glanced up at Smith.

As the policeman took his next swing, Smith pushed his arms forwards and the policeman stumbled backwards, catching his feet on the curled up child. He fell like a tree, the back of his head connecting with the back corner of a Dodge Ram. Smith watched the man’s eyes glaze over.

Smith frantically tore through the policeman’s clothes hoping to find the keys to emancipate his young friend. He turned apologetically to her.

“No keys,” said Smith.

The girl shrugged.

“You tried,” she said, “and at least you saved me.”

Smith sighed heavily.

“By a staggering co-incidence you have just paraphrased the exact thoughts in my head.” Smith smiled. “But we can’t leave you in those handcuffs.”

“But you’re bleeding.”

Smith held his hand to his forehead; it was soaked in blood.

“Just a scratch,” said Smith. “Now, this might be the blood loss or the oxygen deprivation talking but I think we need to get you out of those cuffs before I fall asleep. OK?”

The girl nodded sincerely.

Smith took off his shirt and tied it around his head as tightly as possible.

“Come on then,” he said, “let’s get walking.”

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Ten

‘Puss? Puss-puss? Puss-puss-puss!’

Crouching down, Brian held out the saucer of cream. Slowly, elegantly, the ship’s cat slunk out of the shadows and sniffed at it. The ship pitched to one side and Brian put it down in front of her before he spilled its contents. He squatted down as she lapped thirstily.

He liked cats, although he’d never expected to encounter one on a frigate in the middle of the sea. Most cats hated water, in his experience. He’d had one that used to fret constantly whenever he had a shower, sitting in the corner of the bathroom and staring at him worriedly. He’d asked Adams what a cat was doing on board a ship, but the American had stared at him incredulously, and said ‘The rats, you dolt,’ looking at Brian as if he came from another planet. Or even another century.

True, the lowest deck (or *orlop*, as Brian had learnt to call it) did contain tons of flour, which would have obvious attractions for rats and mice, so having a cat to keep them in check made sense. The flour was mainly used to make the tough, almost inedible biscuit he and his fellow sailors were expected to eat. Biscuit! It was like eating stale scones. Gave him terrible constipation. And the other thing they had most of the time was salt meat, which reminded him of gone-off corned beef. He hated corned beef at the best of times. If it wasn’t for the rum – he’d somehow developed a real taste for it – and the weak beer that was their only other drink apart from limejuice (*yeuch!*) – Brian would have jumped ship and taken his chances; whether he was caught and hanged for desertion, or eaten by sharks.

He didn’t actually know if there were any sharks in these waters; the convoy they were guarding was making its way south between Wales and Ireland, on its way to Spain. It wasn’t like they were in the Caribbean. Weren’t there basking sharks round here, though? Not Great Whites or anything, but... Anyway, the sea would be icy cold and it would be a long swim to the shore - and what would he do then? Try to find Ada? No. Maybe grog, hard tack, and constipation wasn’t so bad.

The cat finished lapping. He tickled her under her chin and she purred.

‘Time for me to be going, puss,’ he told her. ‘I’ve got the rest of the livestock to feed. You get back to your rattng.’ She put one ear back in mild dismay and washed her paws affrontedly.

He got up, picked up his two buckets of feed, and headed for the fore hatch. As he did so, he heard shouts and banging from the lower deck and wondered what was going on. There always seemed to be some kind of aggro aboard this ship. He kept out of it if he could, and concentrated on his work.

To his surprise, he was quite enjoying it.

Stevens, the boatswain, and McGee, his mate, had soon realised that he was completely useless when it came to anything nautical. Particularly if it involved knots. Brian was beginning to pick up the jargon, but he refused to call the sails 'shrouds' and sometimes still referred to the deck as the floor, and as for splicing any kind of brace he didn't know where to start. Mostly they had him "holystoning" and doing equally menial tasks, but the one thing he'd shown real aptitude for was looking after animals.

Apart from the ship's cat, who got cream whenever they had any (they didn't have any fridges in this godforsaken century, of course, so milk went off quickly), but otherwise subsisted on rats, mice and scraps from the galley (Brian insisted on calling it the kitchen, because it was one), he also had to feed the chickens and the pigs on the upper deck. All this for ten shillings and ninepence per month, (plus four eighths of the prize money from any captured enemy vessel). He was certain that it was well below the minimum wage.

Brian was making his way across the upper deck, enjoying the sea breeze and the spray on his face, if not the constant pitch and sway of the ship, when he heard the call:

'All hands on deck!'

He tutted, put the buckets of feed down by the pigpen in the fo'c'sle, told the grunting pigs he'd be back soon, and hurried to join his fellow mariners on the middeck.

His messmates were lined up near the front, gazing up at the quarterdeck where the officers were standing, flanked by red-coated marines who stood with their muskets at the ready. Funny, you didn't see much of them normally: they kept aloof from common sailors. Brian was puzzled to see no sign of either Adams or Keane. Looking angry and talking animatedly to the first lieutenant, Captain Martin appeared from below. He gripped the rail and glowered down at the assembled sailors.

'Maybe I should remind you of the Articles of War,' he began, 'or at least introduce you to them for our newcomers.' The first lieutenant handed him a ledger and Martin opened it.

'One. All commanders, captains, and officers, in or belonging to any of His Majesty's ships or vessels of war, shall cause the public worship of Almighty God, according to the liturgy of the Church of England established by law, to be solemnly, orderly and reverently performed in their respective ships...'

He went on.

'Two. All flag officers, and all persons in or belonging to His Majesty's ships or vessels of war, being guilty of profane oaths, cursings, execrations, drunkenness, uncleanness, or other scandalous actions, in derogation of God's honour, and corruption of good manners, shall incur such punishment as a court martial shall think fit to impose, and as the nature and degree of their offence shall deserve....'

And on. And on... Brian found his head nodding.

‘Twenty-nine. If any person in the fleet shall commit the unnatural and detestable sin of buggery and sodomy with man or beast, he shall be punished with death by the sentence of a court martial....’

He perked up at that one. It certainly explained things. He’d had plenty of rum but he hadn’t seen so much as a hint of sodomy. Or the lash, for that matter.

Not yet.

The captain went on. And on. And on. He finished with:

‘Thirty-six. All other crimes not capital committed by any person or persons in the fleet, which are not mentioned in this act, or for which no punishment is hereby directed to be inflicted, shall be punished by the laws and customs in such cases used at sea.’

He slammed shut the ledger and gave it back to the first lieutenant.

‘Seems that some of you who were brought aboard by the press-gang ain’t happy on my ship,’ he went on. Brian listened with a strange, edgy feeling of guilt. Was the captain talking about him? ‘Damme, I’m not glad to have to take on scum like you, lily-livered merchant navy tars, cowards who’d run from the Frogs as soon as they saw them. What turns my stomach even more is taking on colonials, seditious rebels from America.’

Brian relaxed a little; obviously, the captain meant someone else. But he heard muttering from many of the other sailors; as well as Adams, there was a sizeable contingent of impressed Americans aboard, Brian had discovered. ‘But on my ship,’ the captain went on, ‘your first loyalty is not to your country, whether it is England, or Ireland, or even the colonies in America – your loyalty is to me, your captain! I will not have insubordination aboard His Majesty’s Frigate *Mars* and I will not have fighting among men who share a mess.’

A drum sounded, and crewmen craned their heads round to see two figures marched up from the gun deck by more marines. Brian’s jaw dropped. He had been wondering where Adams and Keane had got to; well, here they were. Both of them had bruises on their faces and torn clothes. Had they been fighting? Brian remembered the noises he’d heard below when he was on his way to the fo’c’sle.

After conferring briefly with the first lieutenant, the captain continued.

‘Adams here seems to believe his country is better than England because it’s a democracy. Democracy, pah! The Frogs had democracy, much good it did them. Mob rule, that’s all it is! Boney calls us a nation of shopkeepers, but what is France but a country ruled by the bloody bourgeoisie? Understandably, Able Seaman Keane took umbrage at this statement. But foolishly, rather than report these seditious words, he took it into his head to start a brawl.’

The captain nodded to Boatswain Stevens, who stepped forward accompanied by McGee, a squat, villainous-looking Irishman. Brian saw Stevens was carrying what looked like a long black stick. He flourished it and Brian saw that it was a whip – a cat o’ nine tails. He felt sick.

‘For Keane,’ Martin added, ‘ten lashes only, since he was defending his country. For our *democratic* American citizen, fifty.’

Brian heard more murmuring from the Americans. Stevens turned round and bellowed:

‘Silence in the ranks, there!’

McGee ripped off first Keane’s shirt, then Adams’. The two men were lashed to the grating beneath the quarterdeck. Then Stevens stepped up behind Keane, trailing the cat o’ nine tails on the deck. He lifted it up high and after a couple of seconds that seemed like an eternity to Brian, brought it whistling down.

Brian tore his horrified gaze away the instant the whip struck Keane’s back. His breakfast threatened to leap back up his throat, but Enfield, another of his messmates, hissed, ‘Keep looking! Keep looking or something worse might happen to you.’

Uneasily Brian complied. The whip lashed down across Keane’s shoulders again, and again, and again, leaving the flesh red with weals, and rapidly with blood. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than watching this horror - other than to be in Keane’s position.

But horrific as it was, Keane’s flogging soon ended. He was untied and carried away to have his back seen to by the ship’s surgeon. As men took him below, Stevens moved over to stand behind Adams.

The cat o’ nine tails whistled harshly in the sea air. Each savage stroke instantly drew blood. Adams managed to maintain a manful silence for the first few lashes, but soon he was crying out in agony. Suddenly he slumped sideways and hung from the grating by his bonds.

Stevens paused, holding the whip poised, and looked up at Captain Martin. The captain shook his head.

‘Take him to the water butt, revive him, and bring him back for the last thirty lashes,’ the captain commanded.

By the time it was over, Adams hung motionlessly from the ropes, his back scarlet with blood. Stevens pulled his head back and checked him for signs of life. He looked up at the captain and shook his head solemnly.

Martin sneered. ‘Weak, like all Americans,’ he grated. ‘Prepare a burial at sea. Get

this stinking offal off my vessel. And get that deck scrubbed! All hands, dismissed.’

‘Dismiss!’ shrilled the first lieutenant.

Numb with horror, Brian returned to his duties. He mucked out the pigs, filled their troughs with swill, and picked up the buckets to go and feed the chickens on the quarterdeck. The quarterdeck. Where he had just seen a man flogged to death. A man he knew personally. A man he’d regarded as a friend, the only real friend he had on this hell-ship. He knew it had happened, but it just didn’t seem to register.

Brian’s stomach mutinied as the ship went over a swell, and he staggered to the side. He was vaguely aware that his vomit was splattering down the hull only a foot away from the figurehead, a martial Grecian image. Hopefully no one would see him. He hated to think what the penalty was for puking on the figurehead.

Once he’d finished he lay there for a while, feeling feverish in the harsh sea breeze. When he began to recover, he wiped away the last of the vomit from his mouth and went back to pick up the chickenfeed. As he did so, he saw a group of sailors gathering furtively on the other side of the pigpen.

He didn’t want to be seen shirking his work, so he decided to duck down behind the pigpen and wait for them to move off. He heard an American voice talking low. The whistle of the wind carried away some of the words, but when he heard Adams mentioned, he strained to listen.

‘... bad enough that the British Navy’s pressed us, but that they’ve... Adams!’

‘...goddamn bastards! I’d flog that captain until.... arm got tired and then I’d.... his bones on the deck...’

Suddenly the wind dropped and Brian clearly heard: ‘What are we doing serving Mad King George, anyway? There’s enough of us. I say we take the captain hostage and force them to sail for the States!’

‘Keep your trap shut, Boone!’ another American voice urged. ‘Who knows ... might be listening!’

Convinced one of them had seen him, Brian tried to burrow into the deck. These Yanks were on the verge of mutiny, and he didn’t rate his chances highly if they caught him spying on them. He heard sounds of movement.

Oh god, they were coming towards him! They had seen him! What could he do? He took a quick look at the side. Maybe he could climb over the rail and hang there until they went. Or should he just jump ship? No, that would be even worse than being caught by these angry mutineers.

He lifted his head slightly, realising that the sounds of movement were receding. Relief washed over him like sea spray. He lifted his head over the line of the pigpen and saw the sailors dispersing across the deck.

He'd better wait here until they were all out of sight, or he might be spotted. He ducked down again.

As he crouched there patiently, it occurred to him that he had more in common with these mutinous Americans than he had with his fellow-countrymen. He'd liked Adams, and he detested Keane. When it came down to it, the English were ruled by a mad dictator! Okay, a king, but by all accounts Georgie-boy was doolally - and the Americans were democratic.

If it had been his own time, which side would look better? England was a fucking dictatorship, and the flogging he had witnessed before; well, that was a pretty serious human rights abuse. Most of the time Brian didn't give a stuff about politics, but it had never really affected him before. When push came to shove, he favoured democracy over tyranny, any day. Particularly when the tyranny in question was tyrannising him.

Maybe he should have a chat with the Americans.

'Wellsy!'

Brian started and leapt up. McGee, the boatswain's mate, was marching across the deck. His face darkened as he saw Brian.

'Get yer sorry arse movin', Wellsy!' he barked. 'Dose blasted chickens ha'n't been fed. Foist Lieutenant Poiper's complainin' dat doi've been disruptin' his concentroititions with deir scratchin'! He's troyin' to compose an epic poem, you lubber! Get 'em fed or it'll be you next getting' a toist o' da cat.'

Somehow, Brian didn't think this threat was a reference to the ship's moggie. He picked up the bucket of chickenfeed and hurried towards the quarterdeck.

That evening, as Brian sat with his messmates in their quarters on the lower deck, he noticed that the usually rowdy crew was subdued. Even big, jovial Pearce was quiet: usually he was loud and full of jokes.

Still, they were two down. Keane was with the surgeon; and Adams... Adams had been buried at sea.

Buried at sea! The chaplain had said a few words over his corpse and then it had been tipped over the side. Life was cheap in the Royal Navy. It made Brian sick to the heart. He shouldn't even be here.

He had only come back in time to assassinate Charles Babbage! Well, getting away from his creditors was a big factor. And getting into Ada's knickers had seemed like a good idea at the time. Little hope of that now.

But he had to get away. Never mind Babbage; never mind Ada, even. He stood no chance of returning to his own time if he remained aboard. It might be the best part of

a year before the wormhole would open in that cellar, but unless he was somewhere in the vicinity he couldn't hope to get there. This convoy was heading for Spain.

'Where are we going anyway, after we get to Spain?' he asked suddenly.

Pearce, who had been sitting in his hammock staring at the deck, looked up suddenly.

'You'd better ask the cap'n that, Wellsy!' he said. 'Us jack-tars ain't privy to such matters. Go and ask the cap'n; Excuse me, my good man, but whither do we go after Spain, sir?'

Pearce thought Brian had a posh accent; "speaks like a gennelman," was how he put it, and he ribbed him mercilessly about it. But the customary laughter of Enfield and the other messmates was muted.

Brian slithered out of his hammock and stood up.

'You know,' he said determinedly, 'I might just do that.' He made his way up the lower deck as it veered from side to side with the ship's motion. The lanterns jumped back and forth, sending dark, looming shadows dancing across the walls.

Halfway to the captain's cabin, he paused. Knowing this place, he'd earn a flogging for having the temerity to speak out of turn! As the deck pitched below him, he leant against the wall and pondered. Maybe there was a better way to make sure he got back to the cellar in time. Maybe there was a way he could get them to turn the ship round and drop him off back in Liverpool.

He headed back towards the part of the lower deck where the common sailors messed. As the deck lurched below him, he scanned the gloom until he saw where the American, Boone, had his hammock. He knew the man a little; he'd been a friend of Adams. Most of Boone's messmates were also press-ganged Americans.

'Boone,' he said as he stepped into the light of the nearby lantern. The American looked up from his hammock and scowled. 'I want to discuss something with you.'

Boone and his fellow Americans stared at Brian suspiciously.

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The Dark Place

Chapter 7

Isobel arrived back at her house at just after 10.30pm. The drive home had been mostly uneventful. She had skidded once, but only as she turned off the main road into Sandfield Park. She had negotiated her driveway slowly and had managed to park in her garage with too much trouble. The car had slid slightly as she drove off the drive and into the garage and for one moment, she thought she was going to hit the wall but the car had stopped inches away from it. She quickly locked the car and the garage and made her way across the snow-covered drive to her front door. The house

seemed unusually cold and Isobel turned up the heating and lit the fire in the lounge.

Ten minutes later Isobel was sitting on the large settee in front of the fire. She had changed into her pyjamas and dressing gown and a mug of steaming hot chocolate was on the coffee table in front of her. She lay back on the settee and thought about how her life had changed over the last week.

‘I’ve only known Martin a week,’ she thought to herself. ‘Do I love him or do I just think I love him? I don’t want to be hurt again. I need to be sure this time,’ she thought to herself. ‘I’ve had a lovely few days with Martin and he’s really been honest with me about the way he feels. Maybe he is the one and I should just do what Karen said and not fight it.’

Isobel sipped her drink and gazed at the flames of the gas fire, lost in thought. She shivered and wondered why she felt so cold tonight. The heating was on and the fire was lit, but she still felt cold. Isobel put her cup on the table, picked up the remote control and switched on the TV. The news had just ended and the impossibly slim female presenter was giving the weather forecast for the next few days. It didn’t look good, with more snow predicted and the danger of icy roads and traffic disruptions.

‘I wonder if we’ll get many customers tomorrow,’ Isobel thought to herself as she listened to the bleak weather outlook.

Isobel woke and groaned as she looked at the time on her watch.

‘Half past one,’ she thought to herself. ‘I must have fallen asleep watching the TV.’

She stretched and massaged the ache in her neck before taking her cup out to the kitchen and then returning to the lounge. Turning off the gas fire and the lights, she made her way upstairs to her bedroom and climbed into bed. She sighed contentedly as she lay back then cursed as she remembered she hadn’t turned off the heating. She slipped out of bed and downstairs in the darkness to the kitchen and switched the boiler from constant to timed. As she made her way back upstairs, Isobel stopped outside her bedroom door and screwed up her eyes as something caught her attention at the far end of the landing.

‘What’s that?’ she thought, squinting in the darkness.

Something red had flashed on the periphery of her vision as she reached out her hand to open her bedroom door. As she walked towards the far end of the landing, Isobel’s heart was thumping in her chest and her breath was coming in short shallow gasps. She wondered why she felt so scared.

‘This is stupid,’ she told herself angrily. ‘I’m in my own house for God’s sake. What can happen to me here?’

It seemed colder and Isobel’s skin was covered in goose bumps. As she reached the end of the landing, Isobel glanced out of the window and saw the red taillights of a car as it made its way slowly along Central Drive. She breathed a sigh of relief. It must have been the lights of a car reflected in the glass that she had seen. Turning on her

heel, Isobel retraced her steps along the landing towards her bedroom.

On the wall behind her, a shadowy indistinct figure with blood red eyes watched from the depths of the mirror hanging at the end of the landing.

Isobel was restless. She tossed, turned, and moaned as she slept. In the darkness at the edge of the room, a dark figure watched. In her dreams Isobel was floundering in deep water; something heavy was wrapped round her legs and even though she tried, she couldn't keep her head above water for very long. Whatever was holding her down began to claw its way up her legs. Isobel could feel the weight moving from her ankles to her knees and then her hips and waist as it moved upwards. She could feel nails like talons gripping her flesh as whatever was below the water crawled up her body.

Isobel was terrified and didn't want to look down but as she flailed and kicked in the water, she could do little else. Two blood red eyes stared at her through the murky depths. All other features were dark and hidden by the water, which churned and boiled as Isobel frantically tried to raise her head above the water's surface. Isobel was powerless to look away. The burning red eyes held her gaze as whatever was making its slow inexorable way up her body climbed higher. Isobel struggled harder and her head broke the surface of the water. She gratefully drew in great lungfuls of air as she tried to stay above the surface. Whatever was holding her down pulled her under the water again and she was forced to look into the hellish eyes once more.

Isobel awoke with a moan and threw the pillow that was across her face onto the floor. She sat up in bed gasping for breath. The room was cold, much colder than it should have been. As Isobel slowly brought her breathing under control and her eyes focussed in the darkness she started to relax as she realised it had been a nightmare. She lay back on the bed then realising her pillow was on the floor, she rolled over to reach for it - and saw the shadowy figure standing in the darkness. Isobel screamed loudly and clasped her hands over her face, tears streaming through her fingers.

Nothing happened and Isobel slowly took her hands away from her face and looked towards where the figure had been standing. There was nothing there. The room was freezing cold and Isobel shivered as she sat in bed clutching the bedclothes to her trembling body.

'What was that and why is it so cold?' her mind screamed at her as she reached for the light switch on the bedside light. She had no answer to her questions and the light from the lamp revealed nothing.

The next day was bitterly cold. Isobel was awake at 6.30 am. As she lay listening to the silence of the house she wondered just how she had managed to sleep after the dream she had. The bedside light was still switched on and she lay back staring at the ceiling and tried to rationalise what she had dreamt but it was useless she couldn't understand the dream or its meaning.

'I'll need to leave for the shop early with the snow,' Isobel thought to herself tiredly before she moved out of the warm bed. The cold caused her to shiver; and though the heating had switched on not long after she awoke, it seemed to be having little effect.

She hurried into the en suite bathroom and turned on the lights and shower. Isobel quickly showered, dressed, and after hurriedly eating a piece of toast and gulping down a cup of lukewarm tea, left for the shop at 7.30.

Isobel carefully negotiated the snow-covered roads out of Sandfield Park and arrived at the shop just before eight, to find Karen already there.

‘Hi, Karen,’ she shouted as she let herself through the door.

‘Hi Isobel,’ said Karen, coming out of the back room with a cup of tea in her hand. ‘The kettle has just boiled would you like a cup of tea?’

‘That would be lovely,’ replied Isobel as she hung her coat up. Karen made a fresh cup of tea for Isobel. ‘How was yesterday?’ Isobel asked.

‘It was pretty quiet,’ Karen replied. ‘I sold a couple of those Victorian lace napkins and the chap that bought them said he really liked the table they were displayed on but he never came back.’

‘Maybe he’ll come back today,’ said Isobel.

‘You never know.’ said Karen looking at Isobel. ‘So how was your day yesterday?’ she asked. ‘Did the new pieces arrive safely?’

‘Yes, the delivery men were at my house quite early yesterday morning and the sideboard looks lovely in the hall.’

‘How was Thursday night?’ asked Karen.

‘Thursday night was great,’ said Isobel. ‘I had a lovely time. Martin helped me unpack the new pieces yesterday and we had dinner together again last night as well.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Karen. ‘I’m really pleased that you’ve found someone nice to be with.’

As Karen looked at Isobel, she noticed the dark circles under her eyes and the tired expression. She decided not to ask any questions about Isobel’s dinner dates with Martin.

‘Are you OK, Isobel?’ she asked ‘You look really tired.’

‘I didn’t sleep very well,’ Isobel replied. ‘I got home around 10.30 and then fell asleep watching the TV. When I woke up it was half past one. I had a stiff neck from lying on the settee and then when I went to bed I had an awful nightmare.’

‘Do you think it was it something you ate?’ asked Karen, a look of concern on her face.

‘I don’t know but I don’t think so,’ Isobel replied. ‘I cooked some steaks with a blue cheese sauce but we ate those hours before I went to bed.’

At 9.30 am Martin looked out of the window at the steadily falling snow and then dialled Steve Jones.

‘Hi,’ said Jess as she answered the phone.

‘Hi Jess, it’s Martin.’

‘You’re up early,’ said Jess laughing.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Martin ‘I’ve been up since just after seven. I’ve just been looking at the weather and it’s not looking good, is it? Isobel and I were wondering if instead of going into town tonight, you and Steve fancied coming over here and we could get a takeaway. Assuming they aren’t snowed in of course,’ he said laughing.

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Jess ‘I’ll ask Steve.’ The receiver was muffled as Martin waited. ‘That sounds like a great idea,’ said Jess. ‘Shall we come over around eight?’

‘OK,’ said Martin. ‘We can decide what to order when you get here. Don’t worry about booking a taxi to go home. You might as well stay here.’

‘Fantastic,’ said Jess ‘we’ll bring some wine with us. See you later.’

‘See you later then,’ said Martin before he hung up the phone.

‘It’ll be nice to go over to Martin’s house tonight won’t it?’ Jess said to Steve as they sat in the lounge eating toast, sipping tea and watching the snow falling on the garden. The gas fire was lit and the room was warm.

‘I’d be happy enough to stay here by the fire,’ said Steve.

‘Don’t be like that Ste,’ said Jess crossly. ‘We were thinking about not going out because of the weather and now Martin’s invited us over for something to eat and we’ll get to meet Isobel.’

‘OK, sorry. You’re right,’ said Steve.

‘Spoken like a gentleman,’ said Jess, laughing, as she slapped Steve on the thigh.

‘We’d better get over to the shops and get some wine then,’ said Steve rubbing his thigh and looking at Jess with a hurt expression.

It had been a quiet day and there had been very few customers at Isobel’s shop.

‘Have you got anything planned for the weekend?’ Karen asked Isobel as they cleaned and dusted in the shop.

‘Martin did mention meeting a couple of his friends in Liverpool tonight but with the weather the way it is he said he’d ask them if they wanted to come over to his house and we’d order a takeaway.’

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ said Karen, looking out of the front window of the shop at the lightly falling snow.

‘What about you and Tom?’ Isobel asked Karen. ‘Have you got anything planned for the weekend?’

‘Tom said he’d cook a meal tonight, which will be nice, but no, we’re not going out anywhere,’ said Karen sadly.

‘How have things been with you two since Thursday?’ asked Isobel.

‘We had a long talk about things on Thursday night,’ Karen replied. ‘Tom doesn’t think anything’s wrong and he told me he still loves me but he doesn’t know why he’s so distant sometimes. Maybe it’s me,’ she said sadly. ‘Perhaps there’s something wrong with me and I shouldn’t be so demanding? I mean, he works hard and he’s probably tired when he comes home.’

‘I don’t think you should feel guilty for wanting some love and affection,’ said Isobel.

‘Maybe you’re right. Perhaps I should relax and just let things happen? I did on Monday night and that really seemed to work. I wonder if that’s what Tom wants?’ said Karen.

‘You could ask him,’ replied Isobel, smiling.

‘Maybe I will,’ said Karen thoughtfully.

As the day wore on and moved into late afternoon the snow stopped falling, but it was still bitterly cold. Karen suddenly remembered something she’d been meaning to speak to Isobel about.

‘Didn’t you say you’re great grandparents came from Estonia?’ Karen asked.

‘What makes you ask that?’ said Isobel looking puzzled.

‘Well, there was a horrible story on the news on Thursday night about a house in Estonia that had been found with all these dead bodies in it that had been drained of all their blood,’ Karen replied.

‘Yes, they came from Estonia but my family were originally Russian,’ said Isobel. ‘My great, great grandparents left Russia in the mid 1800’s and moved to Estonia. They lived in a little village called Kallaste because lots of other Orthodox Russian Christians moved there.’

‘What do you mean Orthodox?’ asked Karen. ‘There was a sort of schism in the Russian church around 1650,’ explained Isobel. ‘Nikita Minin, who was a patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, tried to harmonise the rituals of the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. Some Russian people wouldn’t adopt the new rituals and they were severely persecuted until the early 1900’s. They became known as Old

Ritualists, a name they were given during the reign of Empress Catherine the Great. At the same time, they continued to call themselves simply Orthodox Christians.'

'I'm sure that name Kallaste sounds familiar,' said Karen.

'Well, lots of the names of places in that region sound similar, so maybe it's just that,' suggested Isobel.

'You're probably right,' replied Karen. 'If your family are originally Russian how did you end up in Liverpool with the name Stevens?'

Isobel laughed. 'It's a long story,' she said. 'The short version is that my great grandfather left Estonia and moved to England sometime around 1890. My great grandfather changed the family name of Stefanovich to Stevens because he thought it would make it easier for him in business if he had an English sounding name. There was supposed to be a family secret or something attached to why he left Estonia but I have no idea what it is, or was.'

'Sounds fascinating,' said Karen. 'Maybe you should go on Who Do You Think You Are. Then you could find out what the deep dark secrets of your family are,' she added, laughing.

Isobel decided that they should close the shop early that day. There had been few customers during the afternoon so at four thirty Isobel and Karen left the shop. Isobel gave Karen a lift home, which meant Karen would be home before five. The roads were reasonably clear, although some of the side roads were deeply covered with snow.

Isobel stopped her car outside Karen's house. 'Here we are,' said Isobel.

'Thanks for giving me a lift,' said Karen. 'Tom will be surprised to see me home so early.'

'I hope you have a nice weekend,' said Isobel.

'I'm sure we will' Karen replied. 'I hope your evening with Martin's friends goes OK, as well.' Karen leant across the car and hugged Isobel. 'I'm really glad you're happy,' she said 'I'll see you on Monday morning.' Karen got out of the car and waved as Isobel drove slowly away.

Karen made her way carefully across the slippery pavement and up the pathway to her house. Isobel negotiated her way out of Croxteth Park and back to the relative safety of the clearer main roads.

'At least it's stopped snowing,' she thought to herself. As she made her way towards her house, Isobel wondered what Steve and Jess would be like. She hoped they would like her.

'Hi, Tom,' Karen called out as she let herself into the house.

‘Hi love. I’m upstairs on the computer,’ shouted Tom in response.

Karen took off her shoes and coat and made her way upstairs to see what Tom was doing on. Tom and Karen used the small third bedroom in their house as a computer room. Tom liked to play computer games so they had a games console as well as having a desk and a PC in the room and a flat screen TV mounted on the wall. Tom was looking at the BBC website when Karen pushed open the door and walked into the bedroom.

‘What are you looking at?’ said Karen as she draped her arms over Tom’s shoulders and kissed his neck.

‘I was just looking at the recipes on the BBC website,’ said Tom. ‘I’ve found a lovely recipe for prawn curry so I thought I’d do that tonight.’

‘Sounds good,’ replied Karen smiling. She hugged Tom tightly and kissed his cheek.

‘You’re going to squash me,’ said Tom laughing. ‘Then who’ll cook your tea for you?’

‘Sorry,’ said Karen releasing her hold on Tom but leaving her arms around his shoulders. ‘Can you do a search on that news story we heard the other night about those killings in Estonia?’ she asked Tom.

‘Sure,’ said Tom switching to the Google search engine and typing in Murders in Estonia. All the major news websites carried the story of the killings.

‘Where was it in Estonia?’ asked Karen. Tom navigated to the Reuters web page.

‘It says here it was in a village called Kallaste close to a lake called Peipsi. Apparently the lake is the fourth largest freshwater lake in Europe and forms part of the border between Estonia and Russia,’ he said.

‘I knew I’d got the name of that village right,’ said Karen excitedly. ‘That village is where Isobel’s great, great grandparents come from.’

‘So Isobel’s Estonian?’ said Tom.

‘Her family’s originally from Russia,’ Karen replied. ‘They moved to Estonia because of some problems with the church in the mid nineteenth century. Her great grandfather came to England sometime in the 1890s and changed their name from Stefanovich to Stevens.’

Isobel carefully pulled her car onto the drive at Martin’s house and drove slowly towards the garage. A small overnight case was perched on the back seat of her car. Martin had telephoned the shop before lunch. He told her that he had spoken to Steve and Jess and because of the weather, they had decided to come to his house that night.

‘Hopefully we’ll be able to get a takeaway or something,’ Martin had said. ‘Steve and Jess are going to stay so why don’t you?’ he had asked. ‘I’ve got enough room for you

to stay as well.'

Isobel had thought about it for a few seconds then agreed. 'I'll have a bedroom to myself and there'll be other people there as well,' she had reasoned. She had packed warm clothes for the next day as well as her toiletries and nightclothes.

Martin had seen the lights of Isobel's car as it pulled onto the drive and he came out of the house to open the garage doors. Isobel nosed the car into the garage, turned off the engine and got out of the car. Martin put his arms round her and kissed her.

'Hi,' he said as he held her close.

'Hello,' Isobel replied as she hugged him and returned his kisses. The cold night air made white clouds out of their breath as they stood in the garage.

'Let's get into the house where it's warmer,' said Martin.

Isobel retrieved her overnight case from the back of her car and once the door to the garage was securely locked, Martin and Isobel walked hand in hand across the snow-covered garden. The fresh snow crunched pleasingly under their feet as they walked towards the house. As soon as they were inside the front door Spook came into the hall and started to rub himself round Isobel's ankles.

'See? I told you she'd come back,' said Martin as Spook began to purr.

Isobel crouched down and began to stroke Spook and scratch him under the chin. 'Hello, Spook,' said Isobel. 'Has this weather kept you inside all day?' Spook seemed to purr even louder as Isobel spoke to him.

'Would you like a drink?' Martin asked Isobel.

'A coffee would be nice,' said Isobel standing up. Spook continued to purr and began to circle round Isobel's ankles.

Martin took Isobel's coat and hung it up before taking off his jacket and hanging it next to Isobel's coat and walking towards the kitchen. Isobel left her overnight case in the hall and walked after Martin with Spook following close behind. Martin made two cups of coffee while Spook jumped up on his chair and meowed at Isobel.

'See what you've done,' said Martin, laughing. 'He won't leave you alone now.'

'He's just being friendly,' said Isobel. 'Aren't you, Spook?' she said, rubbing the cat's head.

Martin took the two cups. 'Let's go through into the lounge,' he said. Isobel picked Spook up from his chair and walked after Martin.

They sat in the lounge drinking their coffee with Spook sitting between them. Isobel was rubbing Spook's back and he was purring contentedly.

Isobel wore the black jeans she had bought on her first date with Martin and a pale green long sleeved top. She was also wearing an emerald necklace, which matched the colour of her eyes. The scooped neckline of the top enhanced the colour of the necklace against her pale skin.

‘That’s a fantastic looking necklace,’ said Martin.

‘It was my mother’s,’ said Isobel, ‘and I’m pretty sure it was my grandmother’s and possibly my great grandmother’s and maybe even my great, great grandmother’s.’

‘It’s beautifully made,’ said Martin, slipping his fingers beneath the necklace and lifting it away from Isobel’s body to examine it. The green gems seemed to catch the light from the recessed spotlights in the ceiling and reflect shards of green fire back from their surface. ‘It matches your eyes perfectly,’ said Martin awed by the beauty of the necklace. ‘I hope you’ve got it insured. It must be worth a small fortune.’

‘It’s only insured for the value of the stones and the gold,’ said Isobel, ‘but it means a lot to me. My mother used to say there was a dark history associated with the necklace. She wouldn’t tell me what the story was though.’

Steve was sitting in the lounge sipping a bottle of beer. He had showered and changed and was now waiting for Jess to get ready. He glanced at his watch. It was now seven o’clock and the taxi was booked for 7.30. Their overnight case was packed and waited by the door. Steve went to the bottom of the stairs and called up to Jess.

‘C’mon babe, hurry up. It’s seven o’clock. The taxi will be here soon.’

‘OK, Ste,’ Jess called out. ‘Stay there a minute.’

Steve wondered what Jess wanted him to stay at the bottom of the stairs for. ‘What do you think?’ said Jess as she appeared at the top of the stairs wearing a short black sleeveless dress.

‘That’s very nice,’ said Steve guardedly.

‘What do you mean, “very nice”?’ said Jess. ‘What’s wrong with this dress?’

‘We’re going to visit Martin and his new girlfriend,’ said Steve, ‘not clubbing it.’

‘Stay there,’ said Jess moving out of Steve’s line of sight. She returned in a black mini skirt and a low cut silver top with a black belt round her waist.

‘What about this?’ she asked.

‘Same as before,’ Steve responded.

‘OK, hang on,’ said Jess as she disappeared again.

‘How about this,’ Jess said, as she stepped out on to the top of the stairs in a pair of red panties and a red bra.

‘Now that I like,’ said Steve, laughing. Jess pushed her shoulders forwards, emphasising her cleavage and pouted her lips at Steve.

‘I’ll put my jeans and a t-shirt on then,’ she said as she made her way back into the bedroom. Steve walked back into the lounge smiling to himself and sat down to finish his beer.

At just after eight Steve and Jess arrived at Martin’s house. The taxi had taken a bit longer than they expected due to the state of the roads.

‘I haven’t known it this cold before,’ said Steve as they waited for Martin to answer the doorbell. Jess was stamping her feet to get the snow off her boots when Martin opened the front door.

‘Come in you two, get out of the cold,’ said Martin, opening the door wide for Steve and Jess. Steve passed a large carrier bag to Martin.

‘As promised, some wine,’ Steve said at the sound of the glass bottles inside the bag knocking together.

‘How many have you brought?’ said Martin, miming lifting a heavy weight and laughing.

‘Enough,’ said Steve laughing.

They took off their heavy coats and Martin hung them up. Steve and Jess followed Martin into the lounge where Isobel was sitting on the settee with Spook. Isobel got up as they came into the room and moved towards Jess with her right hand extended.

‘Hi, Jess. I’m Isobel,’ she said as they shook hands. Turning towards Steve, she repeated the greeting. Steve and Jess both said hello to Isobel.

‘Right,’ said Martin. ‘Who’d like a glass of wine?’ Isobel and Jess both asked for red wine and Steve said he’d give Martin a hand with the bottles. Martin and Steve made their way out to the kitchen leaving Jess and Isobel in the lounge.

‘That is a seriously good looking woman,’ said Steve, as he and Martin selected a couple of bottles of wine.

‘I know,’ Martin replied. ‘We’ve spent a lot of time together over the last couple of days and it’s been absolutely fantastic. I don’t want to be away from her. Today she was in work and I was here on my own and I didn’t know what to do with myself.’ Martin said looking sheepish.

‘I do believe you’re falling for Miss Stevens,’ said Steve, laughing, ‘and it’s only been a week!’

Martin grinned at Steve. ‘Maybe you’re right,’ he said. ‘I know I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. So if this is love then bring it on, because it feels great.’

The two men laughed as they opened the wine bottles and poured wine into large wine glasses. Martin took some blue cheese out of the fridge and cut some pieces, which he put on a cheese board with a few grapes.

‘That’s very decadent,’ said Steve. ‘Cheese and grapes before we eat?’

‘It’s just something to nibble on till we order the food,’ replied Martin.

‘I love your necklace,’ Jess said. ‘It looks lovely with that green top.’

‘Thank you,’ Isobel replied. ‘It used to be my mother’s and her mother’s as well so it’s quite old.’

‘Martin told us you have an antiques shop,’ Jess said.

‘Yes,’ replied Isobel. ‘We deal mostly in Georgian and Victorian pieces because they’re my favourite eras in British history.’

‘Where are you based?’ asked Jess.

‘One shop is on Smithdown Road and the other is on Watergate Street in Chester,’ replied Isobel.

‘We only live in Aigburth,’ said Jess, ‘so we’re not that far away from Smithdown Road. We’ll have to call in and have a look around.’

‘That would be nice,’ said Isobel smiling. ‘I’ll give you a ten percent discount if you see anything you like.’

‘Right,’ said Martin as he came into the lounge carrying a tray with four glasses on it. ‘Steve and I have gone for the cabernet but we’ve also got pinotage and merlot so which would you like?’

Both Jess and Isobel decided on pinotage. Martin poured the dark red wine into two glasses, which he handed to the two women.

‘Cheers!’ they all said as they touched glasses.

‘So Isobel’s family are originally from Russia,’ said Tom thoughtfully. Karen and Tom were in the kitchen stacking dishes in the dishwasher. They had left the computer after looking at the Reuters website. Tom had cooked the curry he had promised.

‘That’s what she said,’ answered Karen.

‘She doesn’t sound Russian,’ said Tom.

Karen sounded exasperated, as she said, ‘Obviously not. I told you, her great grandfather came to England around 1890, so any kind of Russian accent would be

well gone by now wouldn't it?

'Can she speak Russian?' Tom asked.

'How should I know?' said Karen angrily.

'Don't get mad,' said Tom. 'I was only asking.'

'Sorry,' Karen said apologetically. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. The only things I know about Isobel and Russia are the things I've told you.'

'Maybe we should have another look on the Internet and see if we can find out a bit more about Kallaste and what's going on?' suggested Tom. Karen hadn't seen Tom so interested in anything for months. He hadn't touched his computer games for ages. 'Or me,' thought Karen ruefully so to see him wanting to find out about something was great. 'OK,' she said. 'Let's get these dishes stacked in the dishwasher first, though.'

Karen and Tom quickly finished loading the dishwasher, before heading upstairs to the computer. Karen brought a small chair from their bedroom and sat next to Tom who was seated in front of the monitor. Tom logged on and navigated to the Google search engine.

'So what shall we search for?' he asked Karen.

'Go back to the Reuters site and see if there's been any updates,' she replied. The Reuters page loaded and Tom typed Kallaste into the search feature.

'Look at that!' Tom exclaimed pointing at the latest update from Estonia. 'The police have identified some of the bodies they found and their surname is Stefanovich. Didn't you say that was Isobel's great grandfather's name?'

'Yes, I did,' Karen replied 'but I'll bet it's a really common name or something. It would be a real stretch for them to be related to Isobel after all this time wouldn't it?'

'Well, according to the report, five of the twelve bodies have the surname Stefanovich,' said Tom.

'I suppose they could be related,' mused Karen, 'but if her great grandfather came over here around 1890 that would be well over a hundred years ago. I'm sure Isobel wouldn't have a clue about any relations in Russia after such a long time.'

'The police are still baffled as to how they died,' said Tom continuing to read the story. 'All they'll say is that the bodies were drained of blood but they couldn't find any blood close to the bodies at the scene. That's bizarre.'

'Well, I think it's creepy and horrible,' said Karen. 'I thought I wanted to try and find out some more about Kallaste and Isobel but all this is just awful. Come on let's turn this off and go and sit by the fire shall we?'

‘OK,’ Tom replied shutting down the computer. As they made their way downstairs to the lounge, Tom asked Karen if she’d like a glass of wine.

‘That would be lovely,’ said Karen.

‘Just the one, though,’ said Tom grinning. ‘You know what happened on Monday night, after you had two glasses.’

‘I didn’t hear you complaining,’ Karen replied smiling.

‘I know,’ said Tom, winking at Karen. ‘I’ll go and get the wine.’

Martin and Steve had walked down to the village to pick up a Chinese banquet for four. Between the four of them, they had decided on Chinese but none of the local takeaways were delivering because of the weather. Although it had stopped snowing, many of the side roads were thick with snow. They had ordered by phone so the waiting time at the takeaway was minimal.

‘My God, but it’s cold tonight,’ said Steve as he and Martin made their way along the snow-covered road on the way back to Martin’s house. Their breath plumed in large white clouds as they spoke and laughed.

‘At least the takeaway was reasonably close,’ Martin observed. ‘If I’d had to cook for us all I think it would have been bacon on toast or something. I don’t think there’s anything in the freezer.’

‘I’m sure we won’t go hungry,’ said Steve. They each had a large carrier bag containing food.

‘There must be enough here for eight people, never mind four.’

‘That may be right,’ Martin replied ‘but I’ll bet you’re hungry within an hour of finishing.’

They laughed together as they walked. The white snow reflected the illumination from the streetlights creating circular pools of brilliance that contrasted sharply with the darkness between.

‘I’ll bet Spook doesn’t like this weather,’ Steve said as his feet kicked up clouds of powdery snow.

‘You’re right there,’ Martin replied. ‘He went out this afternoon and when he came back through the cat flap he had snow right up his legs and his fur was dripping. You should have heard the noise out of him.’

Isobel and Jess were laughing as they chatted. They were relaxed with each other and both were sipping their second glass of wine. Spook was curled up in front of the fire. Jess had been describing Martin’s best man speech at her and Steve’s wedding.

‘He was really funny,’ she said. ‘He had loads of funny stories about some of the

things the pair of them got up to when they were younger.’

‘I didn’t realise they’d known each other for so long,’ said Isobel.

‘They’ve known each other since secondary school and they went to university together,’ said Jess. ‘Steve studied English and politics and Martin medicine. I think Steve wanted to be a journalist or something but he got a job with the bank and he progressed really quickly. I think he still has romantic ideas of being a foreign correspondent or something for one of the major papers but his job pays well and he seems to enjoy it.’

‘What about you?’ Isobel asked. ‘What do you do?’

‘I work for an insurance company. I suppose I’m the office manager but I also look after my boss’s diary and any other things no one else wants to do.’ Jess frowned briefly and looked away. When she turned, back to face Isobel the frown had disappeared and she was smiling again. ‘So tell me,’ she said ‘how did you come to have two shops?’

‘The shop in Liverpool originally belonged to my parents,’ Isobel replied. ‘I’d always planned to go into the antiques business with them but about eight years ago they died within months of each other. My mother died first and I think my dad just gave up after that, he missed her so much.’

‘That’s so sad,’ said Jess reaching over and holding Isobel’s hand. ‘I took over the Liverpool shop and about eighteen months ago, I opened the shop in Chester,’ continued Isobel.

‘It must be fantastic to be your own boss and have your own business,’ said Jess.

‘It was difficult at first,’ said Isobel. ‘I felt at first I was trading on my parent’s reputation but after a few months I think people realised that I knew what I was talking about. I worked hard and now both shops are doing well. I’ve got a couple of fantastic people who work for me though and sometimes I think I’d be lost without them.’ Both women turned their heads as Martin shouted hello from the front door.

Martin and Steve took the bags of food into the kitchen. ‘Right,’ said Martin. ‘I’ll get some plates sorted out and you can pour us both a glass of wine’

‘I hear and obey, master,’ said Steve laughing. ‘You staying on the cabernet?’

‘I think so,’ Martin replied. Isobel and Jess came into the kitchen.

‘That food smells lovely,’ said Isobel.

‘We’ve got enough to feed the entire street,’ said Steve, ‘but Martin assures me I’ll be hungry within an hour of finishing’

‘You can always have seconds if there’s that much,’ said Jess laughing. Between them, they chose what they wanted to eat and took their plates of food and their

glasses of wine into the lounge.

Outside Martin's house, in the shadows next to the garage, a part of shadow appeared darker than the surrounding area and no light penetrated this darkness. The shadow had a roughly human shape and size but made no impression in the newly fallen snow and seemed suspended in the freezing night air. A hint of red seemed to glow from within the upper part of the shadow, but apart from this, the darkness was total and complete. As the four people inside walked into the lounge the darkness seemed to move effortlessly towards the house.

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Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE THREAT.—ITS CONSEQUENCES.—THE RESCUE, AND SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S DANGER.

Sir Francis Varney now paused again, and he seemed for a few moments to gloat over the helpless condition of her whom he had so determined to make his victim; there was no look of pity in his face, no one touch of human kindness could be found in the whole expression of those diabolical features; and if he delayed making the attempt to strike terror into the heart of that unhappy, but beautiful being, it could not be from any relenting feeling, but simply, that he wished for a few moments to indulge his imagination with the idea of perfecting his villany more effectually.

Alas! and they who would have flown to her rescue,—they, who for her would have chanced all accidents, ay, even life itself, were sleeping, and knew not of the loved one's danger. She was alone, and far enough from the house, to be driven to that tottering verge where sanity ends, and the dream of madness, with all its terrors, commences.

But still she slept—if that half-waking sleep could indeed be considered as any thing akin to ordinary slumber—still she slept, and called mournfully upon her lover's name; and in tender, beseeching accents, that should have melted even the stubbornest hearts, did she express her soul's conviction that he loved her still.

The very repetition of the name of Charles Holland seemed to be galling to Sir Francis Varney. He made a gesture of impatience, as she again uttered it, and then, stepping forward, he stood within a pace of where she sat, and in a fearfully distinct voice he said,—

"Flora Bannerworth, awake! awake! and look upon me, although the sight blast and drive you to despair. Awake! awake!"

It was not the sound of the voice which aroused her from that strange slumber. It is said that those who sleep in that eccentric manner, are insensible to sounds, but that the lightest touch will arouse them in an instant; and so it was in this case, for Sir Francis Varney, as he spoke, laid upon the hand of Flora two of his cold, corpse-like

looking fingers. A shriek burst from her lips, and although the confusion of her memory and conceptions was immense, yet she was awake, and the somnambulistic trance had left her.

"Help, help!" she cried. "Gracious Heavens! Where am I?"

Varney spoke not, but he spread out his long, thin arms in such a manner that he seemed almost to encircle her, while he touched her not, so that escape became a matter of impossibility, and to attempt to do so, must have been to have thrown herself into his hideous embrace.

She could obtain but a single view of the face and figure of him who opposed her progress, but, slight as that view was, it more than sufficed. The very extremity of fear came across her, and she sat like one paralysed; the only evidence of existence she gave consisting in the words,—

"The vampyre—the vampyre!"

"Yes," said Varney, "the vampyre. You know me, Flora Bannerworth—Varney, the vampyre; your midnight guest at that feast of blood. I am the vampyre. Look upon me well; shrink not from my gaze. You will do well not to shun me, but to speak to me in such a shape that I may learn to love you."

Flora shook as in a convulsion, and she looked as white as any marble statue.

"This is horrible!" she said. "Why does not Heaven grant me the death I pray for?"

"Hold!" said Varney. "Dress not up in the false colours of the imagination that which in itself is sufficiently terrific to need none of the allurements of romance. Flora Bannerworth, you are persecuted—persecuted by me, the vampyre. It is my fate to persecute you; for there are laws to the invisible as well as the visible creation that force even such a being as I am to play my part in the great drama of existence. I am a vampyre; the sustenance that supports this frame must be drawn from the life-blood of others."

"Oh, horror—horror!"

"But most I do affect the young and beautiful. It is from the veins of such as thou art, Flora Bannerworth, that I would seek the sustenance I'm compelled to obtain for my own exhausted energies. But never yet, in all my long career—a career extending over centuries of time—never yet have I felt the soft sensation of human pity till I looked on thee, exquisite piece of excellence. Even at the moment when the reviving fluid from the gushing fountain of your veins was warming at my heart, I pitied and I loved you. Oh, Flora! even I can now feel the pang of being what I am!"

There was a something in the tone, a touch of sadness in the manner, and a deep sincerity in these words, that in some measure disabused Flora of her fears. She sobbed hysterically, and a gush of tears came to her relief, as, in almost inarticulate accents, she said,—

"May the great God forgive even you!"

"I have need of such a prayer," exclaimed Varney—"Heaven knows I have need of such a prayer. May it ascend on the wings of the night air to the throne of Heaven. May it be softly whispered by ministering angels to the ear of Divinity. God knows I have need of such a prayer!"

"To hear you speak in such a strain," said Flora, "calms the excited fancy, and strips even your horrible presence of some of its maddening influence."

"Hush," said the vampire, "you must hear more—you must know more ere you speak of the matters that have of late exercised an influence of terror over you."

"But how came I here?" said Flora, "tell me that. By what more than earthly power have you brought me to this spot? If I am to listen to you, why should it not be at some more likely time and place?"

"I have powers," said Varney, assuming from Flora's words, that she would believe such arrogance—"I have powers which suffice to bend many purposes to my will—powers incidental to my position, and therefore is it I have brought you here to listen to that which should make you happier than you are."

"I will attend," said Flora. "I do not shudder now; there's an icy coldness through my veins, but it is the night air—speak, I will attend you."

"I will. Flora Bannerworth, I am one who has witnessed time's mutations on man and on his works, and I have pitied neither; I have seen the fall of empires, and sighed not that high reaching ambition was toppled to the dust. I have seen the grave close over the young and the beautiful—those whom I have doomed by my insatiable thirst for human blood to death, long ere the usual span of life was past, but I never loved till now."

"Can such a being as you," said Flora "be susceptible of such an earthly passion?"

"And wherefore not?"

"Love is either too much of heaven, or too much of earth to find a home with thee."

"No, Flora, no! it may be that the feeling is born of pity. I will save you—I will save you from a continuance of the horrors that are assailing you."

"Oh! then may Heaven have mercy in your hour of need!"

"Amen!"

"May you even yet know peace and joy above."

"It is a faint and straggling hope—but if achieved, it will be through the interposition of such a spirit as thine, Flora, which has already exercised so benign an influence upon my tortured soul, as to produce the wish within my heart, to do a least one

unselfish action."

"That wish," said Flora, "shall be father to the deed. Heaven has boundless mercy yet."

"For thy sweet sake, I will believe so much, Flora Bannerworth; it is a condition with my hateful race, that if we can find one human heart to love us, we are free. If, in the face of Heaven, you will consent to be mine, you will snatch me from a continuance of my frightful doom, and for your pure sake, and on your merits, shall I yet know heavenly happiness. Will you be mine?"

A cloud swept from off the face of the moon, and a slant ray fell upon the hideous features of the vampire. He looked as if just rescued from some charnel-house, and endowed for a space with vitality to destroy all beauty and harmony in nature, and drive some benighted soul to madness.

"No, no, no!" shrieked Flora, "never!"

"Enough," said Varney, "I am answered. It was a bad proposal. I am a vampyre still."

"Spare me! spare me!"

"Blood!"

Flora sank upon her knees, and uplifted her hands to heaven. "Mercy, mercy!" she said.

"Blood!" said Varney, and she saw his hideous, fang-like teeth. "Blood! Flora Bannerworth, the vampyre's motto. I have asked you to love me, and you will not—the penalty be yours."

"No, no!" said Flora. "Can it be possible that even you, who have already spoken with judgment and precision, can be so unjust? you must feel that, in all respects, I have been a victim, most gratuitously—a sufferer, while there existed no just cause that I should suffer; one who has been tortured, not from personal fault, selfishness, lapse of integrity, or honourable feelings, but because you have found it necessary, for the prolongation of your terrific existence, to attack me as you have done. By what plea of honour, honesty, or justice, can I be blamed for not embracing an alternative which is beyond all human control?—I cannot love you."

"Then be content to suffer. Flora Bannerworth, will you not, even for a time, to save yourself and to save me, become mine?"

"Horrible proposition!"

"Then am I doomed yet, perhaps, for many a cycle of years, to spread misery and desolation around me; and yet I love you with a feeling which has in it more of gratefulness and unselfishness than ever yet found a home within my breast. I would fain have you, although you cannot save me; there may yet be a chance, which shall

enable you to escape from the persecution of my presence."

"Oh! glorious chance!" said Flora. "Which way can it come? tell me how I may embrace it, and such grateful feelings as a heart-stricken mourner can offer to him who has rescued her from her deep affliction, shall yet be yours."

"Hear me, then, Flora Bannerworth, while I state to you some particulars of mysterious existence, of such beings as myself, which never yet have been breathed to mortal ears."

Flora looked intently at him, and listened, while, with a serious earnestness of manner, he detailed to her something of the physiology of the singular class of beings which the concurrence of all circumstances tended to make him appear.

"Flora," he said, "it is not that I am so enamoured of an existence to be prolonged only by such frightful means, which induces me to become a terror to you or to others. Believe me, that if my victims, those whom my insatiable thirst for blood make wretched, suffer much, I, the vampyre, am not without my moments of unutterable agony. But it is a mysterious law of our nature, that as the period approaches when the exhausted energies of life require a new support from the warm, gushing fountain of another's veins, the strong desire to live grows upon us, until, in a paroxysm of wild insanity, which will recognise no obstacles, human or divine, we seek a victim."

"A fearful state!" said Flora.

"It is so; and, when the dreadful repast is over, then again the pulse beats healthfully, and the wasted energies of a strange kind of vitality are restored to us, we become calm again, but with that calmness comes all the horror, all the agony of reflection, and we suffer far more than tongue can tell."

"You have my pity," said Flora; "even you have my pity."

"I might well demand it, if such a feeling held a place within your breast. I might well demand your pity, Flora Bannerworth, for never crawled an abject wretch upon the earth's rotundity, so pitiable as I."

"Go on, go on."

"I will, and with such brief conclusions as I may. Having once attacked any human being, we feel a strange, but terribly impulsive desire again to seek that person for more blood. But I love you, Flora; the small amount of sensibility that still lingers about my preternatural existence, acknowledges in you a pure and better spirit. I would fain save you."

"Oh! tell me how I may escape the terrible infliction."

"That can only be done by flight. Leave this place, I implore you! leave it as quickly as the movement may be made. Linger not—cast not one regretful look behind you on your ancient home. I shall remain in this locality for years. Let me lose sight of you, I will not pursue you; but, by force of circumstances, I am myself compelled to linger

here. Flight is the only means by which you may avoid a doom as terrific as that which I endure."

"But tell me," said Flora, after a moment's pause, during which she appeared to be endeavouring to gather courage to ask some fearful question; "tell me if it be true that those who have once endured the terrific attack of a vampyre, become themselves, after death, one of that dread race?"

"It is by such means," said Varney, "that the frightful brood increases; but time and circumstances must aid the development of the new and horrible existence. You, however, are safe."

"Safe! Oh! say that word again."

"Yes, safe; not once or twice will the vampyre's attack have sufficient influence on your mortal frame, as to induce a susceptibility on your part to become coexistent with such as he. The attacks must be often repeated, and the termination of mortal existence must be a consequence essential, and direct from those attacks, before such a result may be anticipated."

"Yes, yes; I understand."

"If you were to continue my victim from year to year, the energies of life would slowly waste away, and, till like some faint taper's gleam, consuming more sustenance than it received, the veriest accident would extinguish your existence, and then, Flora Bannerworth, you might become a vampyre."

"Oh! horrible! most horrible!"

"If by chance, or by design, the least glimpse of the cold moonbeams rested on your apparently lifeless remains, you would rise again and be one of us—a terror to yourself and a desolation to all around."

"Oh! I will fly from here," said Flora. "The hope of escape from so terrific and dreadful a doom shall urge me onward; if flight can save me—flight from Bannerworth Hall, I will pause not until continents and oceans divide us."

"It is well. I'm able now thus calmly to reason with you. A few short months more and I shall feel the languor of death creeping over me, and then will come that mad excitement of the brain, which, were you hidden behind triple doors of steel, would tempt me again to seek your chamber—again to seize you in my full embrace—again to draw from your veins the means of prolonged life—again to convulse your very soul with terror."

"I need no incentives," said Flora, with a shudder, "in the shape of descriptions of the past, to urge me on."

"You will fly from Bannerworth Hall?"

"Yes, yes!" said Flora, "it shall be so; its very chambers now are hideous with the

recollection of scenes enacted in them. I will urge my brothers, my mother, all to leave, and in some distant clime we will find security and shelter. There even we will learn to think of you with more of sorrow than of anger—more pity than reproach—more curiosity than loathing."

"Be it so," said the vampyre; and he clasped his hands, as if with a thankfulness that he had done so much towards restoring peace at least to one, who, in consequence of his acts, had felt such exquisite despair. "Be it so; and even I will hope that the feelings which have induced so desolated and so isolated a being as myself to endeavour to bring peace to one human heart, will plead for me, trumpet-tongued, to Heaven!"

"It will—it will," said Flora.

"Do you think so?"

"I do; and I will pray that the thought may turn to certainty in such a cause."

The vampyre appeared to be much affected; and then he added,—

"Flora, you know that this spot has been the scene of a catastrophe fearful to look back upon, in the annals of your family?"

"It has," said Flora. "I know to what you allude; 'tis a matter of common knowledge to all—a sad theme to me, and one I would not court."

"Nor would I oppress you with it. Your father, here, on this very spot, committed that desperate act which brought him uncalled for to the judgment seat of God. I have a strange, wild curiosity upon such subjects. Will you, in return for the good that I have tried to do you, gratify it?"

"I know not what you mean," said Flora.

"To be more explicit, then, do you remember the day on which your father breathed his last?"

"Too well—too well."

"Did you see him or converse with him shortly before that desperate act was committed?"

"No; he shut himself up for some time in a solitary chamber."

"Ha! what chamber?"

"The one in which I slept myself on the night—"

"Yes, yes; the one with the portrait—that speaking portrait—the eyes of which seem to challenge an intruder as he enters the apartment."

"The same."

"For hours shut up there!" added Varney, musingly; "and from thence he wandered to the garden, where, in this summer-house, he breathed his last?"

"It was so."

"Then, Flora, ere I bid you adieu—"

These words were scarcely uttered, when there was a quick, hasty footstep, and Henry Bannerworth appeared behind Varney, in the very entrance of the summer-house.

"Now," he cried, "for revenge! Now, foul being, blot upon the earth's surface, horrible imitation of humanity, if mortal arm can do aught against you, you shall die!"

A shriek came from the lips of Flora, and flinging herself past Varney, who stepped aside, she clung to her brother, who made an unavailing pass with his sword at the vampyre. It was a critical moment; and had the presence of mind of Varney deserted him in the least, unarmed as he was, he must have fallen beneath the weapon of Henry. To spring, however, up the seat which Flora had vacated, and to dash out some of the flimsy and rotten wood-work at the back of the summer-house by the propulsive power of his whole frame, was the work of a moment; and before Henry could free himself from the clinging embrace of Flora, Varney, the vampyre was gone, and there was no greater chance of his capture than on a former occasion, when he was pursued in vain from the Hall to the wood, in the intricacies of which he was so entirely lost.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Nine: The Warlord

Rience's forces swept on towards Arthur and his men. A barrage of rockets enveloped them but Arthur's forces were beginning to withdraw, despite all he could do to forestall them.

'I never thought I'd see this,' Kay shouted bitterly over the roar of battle. 'The army that sent Lot running for home, running from a bandit like Rience.'

Arthur swallowed uneasily. Would it have been better to give his men more time to rest? But by then Rience might have defeated Lord Cameliard utterly, leaving no one for Arthur to rescue and no chance of a stronger army to lead against the heathen. If only Merlin were here... Arthur needed the old man's advice, crazy and contrary and unpredictable as he could be.

'Hold!' he shouted over the walkie-talkie to his officers. 'We can't let them force us back!'

Was it the right decision? Maybe they would be better drawing Rience's forces away

from the town; some of Carohaise might be spared. Above him, the aerial combat continued unabated. The lines of Rience's men swarmed towards him, firing as they came. Arthur's heart sank.

Then his spirits rose as he saw movement from the Carohaise suburbs. A column of trucks and armoured cars was issuing from the town gate. As Arthur watched, the defenders poured out, overrunning Rience's gun emplacements and firing towards Rience's men, now with their backs to Leodegrance's forces. Soon Rience's men became aware of the attack from behind them as their rearguard opened fire on the new threat.

'Come on, men!' Arthur cried. 'We've got them between us; in a vice! Time to step up the pressure! Charge them!'

He drew the sword from the stone from its scabbard.

'On!' he shouted. 'On!' He sheathed the sword and grabbed his assault rifle. He blazed away at the bandits closest to his position. The whole mass of Rience's men was breaking up in confusion as they tried to fight off their attackers on two fronts. They hadn't been expecting this assault from the cowed defenders of Carohaise. Leodegrance had been biding his time.

Arthur led Kay and Bedivere forward, firing into the mass of men. He leapt onto the side of a stalled truck, and turned to shout at his advancing infantry.

'Come on! We've got them! We –'

He broke off as a terrible pain ripped through his body, centring on a point directly below his left shoulder. He turned, as the entire battle seemed to slow almost to a stop, desperately trying to see what had hit him. But he lurched like a drunk as the sky seemed to spin above him and the churned up ground shot up towards him.

He was dead to the world before he hit the muddy earth.

As Lot's chopper hurtled towards the border town of Carduel, he gazed out at the embattled land below him. Towns and villages were ablaze. The heathen onslaught had raged from sea to sea. Only in the uttermost west was there safety. Heathens were spreading across the countryside, professional soldiers and irregulars, some from Germany and Scandinavia, some from the heathen settlements in Yorkshire and the south east. They spread death and devastation in their wake.

The rescue chopper had come not a moment too soon; most of Lot's men defending the house had been shot, and the heathen had gained entrance and were fighting their way up from the ground floor. One of Lot's surviving men had sacrificed himself to ensure that the Lord Protector had sufficient time to climb aboard the chopper sent by Urien from his new base in Carduel, on the Borders. The other man, a dour, taciturn fellow seconded from the religious police, gripped his assault rifle in the back of the chopper and glared down at the land below. Now they had left behind the centres of population, and Lot could see the dark shape of the Caledonian Forest stretching across the rolling hills.

He had good reason to look like that, Lot reflected. The floodgates had been opened fully. All that he had warned people about, all that he had feared, all that he had fought against, was coming true. The country was going down under a tide of immigration, invaders who spoke another tongue, who worshipped heathen idols. They targeted churches with especial bitterness, and every town and city that fell into their hands saw its churches go up in flames.

And Lot had the most to fear of all his people; it was he who would meet the heathens' greatest wrath. He had passed emergency legislation against the heathen in Britain that had meant their every move coming under scrutiny, that had banned them from all jobs but security work – the latter a mistake, Lot realised now. He should have ensured from the outset that heathens in Britain should have no access to weapons.

He had wanted to sweep the heathen from these shores entirely, had been horrified by Uther's compromises, but on seizing power he had seen their merit: Britain was too weak and divided to carry out a full programme of ethnic cleansing. Now the heathen were everywhere.

The chopper began to descend onto a helipad at the back of Uriens' house near the centre of Carduel which Lot's supporters had chosen as the centre of their base of operations. Lot saw a group of men assemble on the tarmac, awaiting him. As they came close enough, Lot recognised the tall figure of Urien at their head.

Lot flung open the hatch the moment they touched down and he climbed out. Crouching low as the rotor blades thudded to a halt Lot went to meet the assembled men.

'Lord Protector,' Urien greeted him. Lot saw that he was accompanied by Lord Garlot, Lord Ireland, Lord Carnarvon, and several others of his ardent supporters. They were not looking so ardent now.

'Lord Protector!' Lot echoed bitterly. 'A redundant title. Merlin's meddling has weakened us forever; now the vultures descend. The heathen are everywhere. Did I not warn of this? Rivers of blood.' Like a latter-day Jeremiah, he looked around him disapprovingly.

Urien gripped him by the arm. 'You're despondent, man,' he said. 'What happened when you returned to your house? Where's your wife, your children?' He looked searchingly at Lot, his eyes filled with concern.

Lot shook his head. 'Safe,' he said, 'with luck. For the time being. We must do something about this invasion.'

Urien led Lot and the others into his house. They gathered in a large study that had been hastily converted into an operations room. Soldiers saluted smartly as the Lords entered.

'We must find some way to defeat the invaders,' Lot said obsessively. 'As I flew here, I saw that they have spread out across the countryside. Nowhere is safe. What word do we have of their advance?'

Urien shook his head. 'Reports are coming in all the time of massacres, of rape; even of human sacrifice.'

Lot's skin rippled with horror. 'Sacrifice?' he said, almost in a whisper. 'Is this confirmed?'

'A journalist reports eye-witness accounts of the heathen sacrificing captives to their idol Termagant,' Urien replied. 'It's at second hand and from an untrustworthy source...'

'No, it's entirely believable,' Lot said. 'These heathens... Nothing is too evil for them. They're the Devil's own horde. What can we do to stop them?'

'Compromise has always worked in the past,' Urien began.

'Compromise!' Lot exclaimed. 'It's compromise that got us into this mess. We should have pushed the murdering scum back into the sea when we overthrew Vortigern! Uther settled for compromise, and see what happened to him! The heathens were so keen to compromise, they murdered him!'

Urien fixed Lot with cold eyes. 'We both know the circumstances surrounding the king's murder,' he reminded Lot. Lot looked away.

He had forgotten that Urien had known about the plot against Uther, the plot that had brought down the Pendragon regime and yet achieved little against the heathen flood they had hoped to stem. They had achieved nothing final; this new invasion made that very clear. And he knew in his heart that he was a traitor, guilty of high treason. Should this ever become common knowledge... It was one good reason to keep Urien on his side.

'What do you suggest we do?' Lot asked, more meekly.

Urien folded his arms. 'I have sent messengers to speak with the warlord who leads them. Ash, they call him. He has agreed to enter into talks with us.'

'Just like that?' Lot asked. He felt perturbed. 'What are his terms?'

'An end to discrimination against his people,' Urien said. 'Civil liberties, enfranchisement, all the usual rot. But do we have any alternative? Their military strength is equal to ours, if not greater. We have Arthur at our backs. If we are to settle him, we must ensure that the heathen threat is dealt with, in whatever way is most effective. Perhaps we can find a way to neutralise both our enemies.'

Lot looked sharply at Urien.

The meeting with the heathen warlord, Ash, was scheduled for the following day. In the meantime, a temporary ceasefire came into effect, to last until more permanent arrangements were agreed. By Lot's calculations, most of Lowland Scotland, Yorkshire, East Anglia and Kent were under the control of the heathen. Only in the west did the feeble flame of freedom continue to gutter.

It was a dark day for Britain when Lot, accompanied by his fellow Lords, met the heathen leader as Ash disembarked from his helicopter gunship, flanked by his black-clad elite guards. He was a tall man, the warlord, tall and spindly, with a narrow face, seeming narrower due to his close-cropped hair. Intelligent eyes regarded Lot from behind circular-lensed spectacles. He leaned upon a long ebony cane.

‘So you are the Lord Protector,’ he said later, as he faced them across the conference table. His English was impeccable, with only the slightest trace of a Teutonic accent, his voice soft and gentle. ‘It is you who are the oppressor of my people.’

Ash’s bodyguards, each man with flowing black hair in contrast to their leader’s shaven head, each with their faces painted corpse white, immaculate in black combat fatigues, gazed inscrutably at Lot.

He looked back in disdain. ‘Your people invaded my country,’ Lot said. ‘Naturally we are unwelcoming.’

Ash shook his head politely. ‘My father came here at the behest of your leader, Vortigern, to fight his enemies. Rebels who, as I recall, lived in these northern regions. Perhaps you were one of them. I remember that well, for this is not my first visit to this area. I led my father’s troops into battle against the northern rebels while my father remained in Kent – the lands Vortigern gave us in return for our work.’

Lot stiffened with outrage. Indeed the Scots had been foremost in the rebellion against Vortigern. Lot had spoken out against the Vortigern regime, and he had joined King Uther at the first opportunity. The dictator had overthrown the government, killed or exiled the Royal Family... and finally, when no one would fight for him, he had employed foreign mercenaries to oppress his people; forced native British farmers off their own lands to give land to the heathen.

Lot wanted to say this, but he realised that Ash was trying to provoke him. The heathen had sunk their claws into the bleeding flank of Lot’s country. Their removal would require a softer approach.

‘You were paid for your work with land,’ Lot conceded. ‘As Lord Protector, like King Uther before me, I respected this arrangement.’

‘You mean you realised you couldn’t shift us,’ Ash replied, with a quiet smile.

Urien growled. ‘You might do well to remember that this is a diplomatic meeting.’

Lot frowned at him before returning his attention to the warlord. ‘But your people were not happy. Your greed became clear when you mutinied against Vortigern and ravaged the countryside.’

Ash looked sorrowful. ‘We were not paid,’ he said. ‘The arrangement included more than land, it included financial subsidies. Those dried up remarkably quickly.’

‘There was an economic recession,’ Lot replied. ‘A crash so severe that money became worthless. Land became the only currency – and we had paid you in land, some of the best in the country.’

Ash coughed. ‘We heard none of this. All we knew was that our people were starving. We came here as professional soldiers, even if farmers and peaceful people followed. We knew that our military strength was greater than your own.’

Lot smiled, thin-lipped. ‘Not after the Royal Family returned from exile. King Uther had become a soldier in the meantime. He defeated you, and then sued for peace. But it was the heathen who murdered him.’

‘Not under my orders,’ Ash said quietly, ‘though I had cause. He killed my father. But this is the stuff of documentary. In another world, another life, I taught European History at Wittenberg University. Never did I expect to become a history maker. But now I concern myself with the present. You, Lord Protector, have oppressed my people ever since we have lived at peace...’

‘They represented a security threat!’ Lot snapped. ‘The assassination of King Uther made that plain.’

‘A few radicals, a few militants,’ Ash murmured. ‘The circumstances of the king’s death remain a mystery to most of us.’ He looked levelly at Lot, who found it difficult to remain sanguine. Did the man know the truth? Was his treason common knowledge even among the heathen?

‘We were prepared to live in peace with you,’ Ash went on, ‘our people settling peacefully in the south east while yours lived on in the north and west. Yet you passed unjust laws against us, forced us to carry ID cards, spied upon us, and kept unlawful databases containing intimate details of our community leaders, restricted our free movement, and harassed us with missionaries and constant demands that we renounce our own belief in Termagant and the other gods for your pallid, sickly Christianity; all for what? To crack down on radicalism? You fool, Lord Protector! It was your actions that increased radicalism and militancy among my people; that shocked and appalled our relatives in the Fatherland – and eventually resulted in this invasion.’

Lot was equally appalled. Everything he had done had been for the benefit of the British. He had hated the presence of the heathen in his country, had done all he could to discourage them once it became clear that military superiority was theirs. Had his policies led him to this – the country invaded, the British divided and unable to defend themselves, and he in a position where he had little or no bargaining power?

‘What are your demands?’ he asked at last.

Ash leaned on his cane. ‘Remove all oppressive anti-heathen laws from the statute books. Allow my people to live at one with your own. Let us share this country in peace and amity.’

‘What of the war crimes your forces have committed?’ Urien demanded. ‘Are war-criminals to go unpunished?’

Ash looked bewildered. ‘What war crimes?’

‘We have reports of massacres, mass rape, mutilation, targeting of civilians, and human sacrifice,’ Urien replied.

Ash shook his head slowly. 'Nonsense. Where do you get your intelligence, the tabloid press? This is propaganda. I assure you, there will be an inquiry as soon as we secure peace, and my men will be exonerated. Until then, it will continue.'

'The war crimes?' Urien snapped.

'There is no war crime, only war,' Ash replied. 'Regrettably, the war will continue until you accept our demands.'

Lot withdrew slightly to speak to Urien. 'We have very little choice,' he said. 'On one side Arthur is breathing down our necks, Ash is on the other. Much as I dislike the notion, it seems we must accept the heathen. We haven't the resources to withstand them.'

'Nonsense,' Urien replied. 'Divide and conquer, man. You don't see the opportunity that presents itself. It'll be like two birds with one stone.'

Lot looked after him in doubt as Urien returned to the warlord. What was he planning?

'Time for negotiation,' Urien told Ash. 'You want to live peacefully amongst us. We want peace too. It is in our best interests to end this war. But other aggressors are at large. A young militant - who is nothing but the puppet of Vortigern's old crony, Merlin - has risen up against the Lord Protector. He claims to be king - on very slender grounds. He has attacked us already. He is the true threat in Britain today...'

'We know all about your internecine squabbles,' Ash replied. 'It gave us the perfect opportunity to...'. He coughed. 'Divide and conquer.'

Lot and Urien exchanged guilty glances. Urien hurried on. 'The threat of Arthur will not go away; he will not welcome your presence. Even if we agree to your demands, we cannot speak for him or persuade him to respect any treaty between us. He is an insurgent, a rebel. We have fought him and lost.'

'Something you must be getting used to,' Ash said with a slight smile.

'Your military superiority might save the day,' Urien replied, ignoring the warlord's insolence. 'If we unite against Arthur, and crush him, then and only then can we think of our two peoples living together in peace...'

'No!'

Both men turned to see Lot staring at them in horror.

'Go against Arthur?' he said. 'We can't!'

Urien looked bewildered. Ash smiled superciliously. 'Divide and conquer, gentlemen,' he said. 'I suggest you come to some agreement. In the meantime, the war continues.'

He led his men from the conference room. Urien scowled at Lot. 'What's got into you, you fool?'

Lot stared back, stricken. 'I sent my wife and children to Arthur for safety,' he stuttered at last.

Urien's eyes widened. He punched the wall in frustration. Then he slumped against it.

'You fool,' he repeated, as Lot moved to his side. He looked resignedly at the Lord Protector. 'Lot, old friend – it's a question of priorities. What matters more to you – your country, or your family?'

Lot looked at the ground, indecisive. How could anyone expect him to make such a choice?

'With power comes responsibility,' Urien continued remorselessly. 'This war with the heathen – we can't win it. We must negotiate. Compromise. Or else pitch them against Arthur, play both ends against the middle. If we do that, we're bound to come out on top. Whoever wins will be weakened by the struggle. Then we can snuff them out.'

'For all we know, that's what Arthur thinks about us,' Lot replied helplessly. 'If he really was king, surely he'd come to the defence of his people?'

Urien looked at him long and hard. 'Don't tell me you're accepting his claim to the throne.'

Lot shook his head wearily. 'But he's British,' he said. 'A Christian. We should all unite against heathens and foreign invaders, not fight amongst ourselves. In unity lies strength.'

An aide rushed in, halted, and saluted Lot.

'Your grace,' he said, 'the heathen warlord has gone. But shortly after he left, we had another visitor. He wants to talk to you.' The aide paused. 'Your grace, I think the man is a sky pirate.'

Lot shook his head. 'A sky pirate? Is he offering to enlist? We can't afford to be fussy – but a sky pirate showing that much public spirit! It only demonstrates the magnitude of our problems. See, Urien? Unity is strength.' He smiled at the aide. 'Thank this sky pirate and direct him to the enlistment tent, man.' The aide remained still. 'Well, what is it?' Lot added irritably.

'Your grace, I don't think enlistment is uppermost in his mind. He says to tell you that Arthur defeated him.'

'Arthur?' Lot said. He was starting to guess who this visitor might be. 'Alright, send this man in. We'll get to the bottom of this mystery.' At least it took his mind off the heathen invasion.

Shortly after, the aide returned with a tall man Lot recognised at once.

'Rience!' he exclaimed. He saw the aide looking quizzically from him to the sky pirate and back. 'You may go,' he snapped. The aide saluted and marched out.

Rience studied the gathered Lords across the conference table.

‘I’m here to report what happened when I went against Leodegrance,’ he said. ‘Things went well to begin with. Then I was attacked by Arthur himself. What happened? I was supposed to keep Leodegrance occupied while you crushed the upstart...’

‘Things didn’t go that simply,’ Urien said wryly. ‘But what about Arthur? Did you see him?’

‘I saw his forces,’ Rience replied. ‘I saw his whole army as I made my escape. But not the king himself. For all I know, he could be dead...’

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Brigands of the Moon

X

I had not been able at first to understand why Captain Carter wanted Miko left at liberty. Within me there was that cry of vengeance, as though to strike Miko down would somehow lessen my own grief. Whatever Carter's purpose, Snap had not known it. But Balch and Dr. Frank were in the Captain's confidence—all three of them working on some plan of action.

It was obvious that at least two of our passengers were plotting with Miko and George Prince; trying on this voyage to learn what they could about Grantline's activities on the Moon—scheming doubtless to seize the treasure when the Planetara stopped at the Moon on the return voyage. I thought I could name those masquerading passengers. Ob Hahn, supposedly a Venus mystic. And Rance Rankin, who called himself an American magician. Those two, Snap and I agreed, seemed most suspicious. And there was the purser.

I sat for a time on the deck outside the chart room with Snap. Then Carter summoned us back, and we sat listening while he, Balch and Dr. Frank went on with their conference. Listening to them, I could not but agree that our best plan was to secure evidence which would incriminate all who were concerned in the plot. Miko, we were convinced, had been the Martian who followed Snap and me from Halsey's office in Greater New York. George Prince had doubtless been the invisible eavesdropper outside the radio room. He knew, and had told the others that Grantline had found that priceless metal on the Moon and that the Planetara would stop there on the way home.

But we could not incarcerate George Prince for being an eavesdropper. Nor had we the faintest possible evidence against Ob Hahn or Rankin. And even the purser would probably be released by the Interplanetary Court of Ferrok-Shahn when it heard our evidence.

There was only Miko. We could arrest him for the murder of Anita. But if we did that now, the others would be put on their guard. It was Carter's idea to let Miko remain at liberty for a time and see if we could identify and incriminate his fellows. The murder

of Anita obviously had nothing to do with any plot against Grantline Moon treasure.

"Why," exclaimed Balch, "there might be—probably are—huge Martian interests concerned in this thing. These men aboard are only emissaries, making this voyage to learn what they can. When they get to Ferrok-Shahn, they'll make their report, and then we'll have a real danger on our hands. Why, an outlaw ship could be launched from Ferrok-Shahn that would beat us back to the Moon—and Grantline is entirely without warning of any danger!"

It seemed obvious. Unscrupulous criminals in Ferrok-Shahn would be dangerous indeed, once these details of Grantline were given them. So now it was decided that in the remaining nine days of our outward voyage, we would attempt to secure enough evidence to arrest all these plotters.

"I'll have them all in the cage when we land," declared Carter grimly. "They'll make no report to their principals!"

Ah, the futile plans of men!

Yet, at the time, we thought it practical. We were all doubly armed now. Bullet projectors and heat ray cylinders. And we had several eavesdropping microphones which we planned to use whenever occasion offered.

Only twenty-eight hours of this eventful voyage had passed. The Planetara was some six million miles from the Earth; it blazed behind us, a tremendous giant.

The body of Anita was being made ready for burial. George Prince was still in his stateroom. Glutz, effeminate little hairdresser, who waxed rich acting as beauty doctor for the women passengers, and who, in his youth, had been an undertaker, had gone with Dr. Frank to prepare the body.

Gruesome details. I tried not to think of them. I sat, numbed, in the chart room.

An astronomical burial—there was little precedent for it. I dragged myself to the stern deck where, at five a.m., the ceremony took place.

We were a solemn little group, gathered there in the checkered starlight with the great vault of the heavens around us. A dismantled electronic projector—necessary when a long range gun was mounted—had been rigged up in one of the deck ports.

They brought out the body. I stood apart, gazing reluctantly at the small bundle, wrapped like a mummy in a dark metallic screen-cloth. A patch of black silk rested over her face. Four cabin stewards carried her; and beside her walked George Prince. A long black robe covered him, but his head was bare. And suddenly he reminded me of the ancient play-character of Hamlet. His black, wavy hair; his finely chiseled, pallid face, set now in a stern patrician cast. And staring, I realized that however much of the villain this man might be, at this instant, walking beside the body of his dead sister, he was stricken with grief. He loved that sister with whom he had lived since childhood; and to see him now no one could doubt it.

The little procession stopped in a patch of starlight by the port. They rested the body on a bank of chairs. The black-robed chaplain, roused from his bed and still trembling from excitement of this sudden, inexplicable death on board, said a brief, solemn little prayer. An appeal: That the Almighty Ruler of all these blazing worlds might guard the soul of this gentle girl whose mortal remains were now to be returned to Him.

Ah, if ever God seemed hovering close, it was now at this instant, on this starlit deck floating in the black void of space.

Then Carter for just a moment removed the black shroud from her face. I saw her brother gaze silently; saw him stoop and implant a kiss—and turn away. I did not want to look, but I found myself moving slowly forward.

She lay, so beautiful. Her face, white and calm and peaceful in death. My sight blurred.

"Easy Gregg," Snap was whispering to me. He had his arm around me. "Come on away."

They tied the shroud over her face. I did not see them as they put the body in the tube, sent it through the exhaust chamber and dropped it.

But a moment later I saw it, a small black, oblong bundle hovering beside us. It was perhaps a hundred feet away, circling us. Held by the Planetara's bulk, it had momentarily become our satellite. It swung around us like a moon. Gruesome satellite, by nature's laws forever to follow us.

Then from another tube at the bow, Blackstone operated a small zed-co-ray projector. Its dull light caught the floating bundle, neutralizing its metallic wrappings.

It swung off at a tangent. Speeding. Falling free in the dome of the heavens. A rotating black oblong. But in a moment distance dwindled it to a speck. A dull silver dot with the sunlight on it. A speck of human Earth dust, falling free....

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The Hollow Hills

Part Two

This time, Eloise broke the ensuing silence.

‘We’ve got to find some way out of here,’ she said firmly. ‘It’s no use just running up and down the tunnels - especially if they conceal... other dangers. We’ve got to find this other entrance. Now, er...’ There was a flare of light and Eloise appeared in the flickering flight of another Zippo. ‘I’d forgotten I had that,’ she murmured. ‘Er, what’s your name, please?’

‘Me?’ said Roberts. ‘My name’s Roberts.’

‘Now then, Constable Roberts,’ said Eloise. ‘Do you have any idea where we might be?’

‘Not at the moment,’ he admitted, glancing round the bleak, characterless tunnel and eyeing the bottomless shaft. ‘Though I bet my da’ would have recognised it.’

Eloise rooted through the backpack that served her as a handbag.

‘What are ye looking for?’ Hamish demanded. ‘You’re not doing your nails again are you?’

Eloise fixed him with a frosty glare, then triumphantly produced a compass.

‘I always knew being in the Girl Guides would have some use one day!’ She looked at the dial. ‘We seem to be in a north-south passage,’ she said. ‘Does that give you any idea which way we should go?’

Roberts looked pensive. He shook his head.

‘My mind’s blank,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry - it’s the shock. Rhys and Ellis... And I’m not as young as I used to be.’

‘Which direction is the other entrance?’ Eloise asked gently.

‘It all depends on which level we’re on, but I don’t remember going downwards at any point, so we must be on the same level as the southern entrance. The northern entrance is on the third level down, so we’ll need to find a way to get down there. Then, if we just bear north, the tunnels all link up sooner or later, so we’ll be alright. We should find our way out.’

Osborne stood up.

‘Well, there’s been no sign of whatever did for the other copper,’ he said. ‘I suggest we get going. Which way?’

‘Northwards,’ said Roberts.

‘Northwards and to Hell,’ said Osborne ominously.

They gathered together their possessions and walked off into the darkness.

Behind them, Rhys’ body lay, slowly stiffening.

The journey seemed endless. To conserve fuel, they resolved to use their lighters only when illumination was utterly necessary and the rest of the time, they trudged on through the blackness in a line, each with their hand on the next one’s shoulder. Roberts and Eloise led the way, with Nick in the middle and Hamish and Osborne bringing up the rear. The mine tunnels were silent as they proceeded, except for the

sound of their own feet.

But as Nick followed Eloise, he found himself picking up strange distant noises; a creaking of rock, a distant whispering sound that he felt almost secure in dismissing as some freak effect and a howling of wind far-off that suggested some tunnel ahead of them led out onto the mountainside.

His eyes were accustomed to the dark now and he felt could make out the tunnel walls around him. Eloise was a soft dark shape in the gloom ahead, black against the blackness; beyond her strode the solid form of Roberts, leading them ever onwards into the gloom, his hands held out in front of him. Nick cast his mind back to his first exploration of these tunnels, back when he was about ten. He'd had a proper miner's hat with a torch on it and had been wearing waterproofs, not a soggy German Army coat. He began to feel nostalgic for those days, back when his mum still had her job at Kwik-Save and could afford to take her kids to a caravan-park in Wales every summer.

Light flared up from ahead and the procession halted. Nick blinked painfully in Eloise's direction.

'Why have we stopped?' Hamish demanded from behind him.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Eloise, why have we stopped?' He glanced around, to see that they had come out into a large cavern. Two tunnels led off to left and right. Eloise turned to them, glancing briefly down at her compass.

'We're not sure which way to go,' she explained.

Nick looked around again. 'I remember this bit,' he said suddenly. 'I went through here with me mum.'

Roberts turned wearily to him. 'Where did it lead?' he asked.

Nick frowned. 'There was this flooded bit,' he said slowly. 'There were these rowing boats and you could row across the water to another bit of the mine. There was some kind of interpretation centre there, a museum thing or something, I think.' He frowned. 'We didn't go there, because me little sister was tired and we had to turn back. But...' He broke off and frowned. 'There was something about some natural caverns the miners had found, with all these stalactites and that. Really beautiful, the brochure said. But our Sharon didn't want to go.'

Roberts' eyes lit up.

'Natural caverns!' he exclaimed. 'My dad told me about them. They were mining one section when they broke through into a natural cavern. It flooded out that section of the mine, but when they explored it they found a chasm that actually led directly to the north face. They left it alone after that, because they lost one party - no one was quite sure what happened to them... There was a public inquiry, but their findings were... hushed up...' He broke off suddenly and looked round at the others, horrified

realisation dawning on his face.

‘Och, shite,’ said Hamish. ‘That disnae sound good.’

‘Yes, but if we can get straight down to the north entrance,’ said Eloise excitedly, ‘we can get away from all this! Besides, do we have any better ideas? We don’t really know how to get to the entrance any other way, do we?’

‘It’s a gamble,’ said Roberts. ‘But it should be worth it.’

Ten minutes later, they stood on the shores of a dark and silent lake.

The tunnel ended here, sloping into the flooded cavern beyond, but on the shore beside the group lay a couple of inflatable dinghies, both large enough to fit three people.

‘I don’t like the look of that,’ Eloise murmured.

‘What’s that?’ asked Hamish.

‘We’re going to have to go in twos and threes,’ she said. ‘We’ll be split up.’

‘Only briefly,’ said Osborne, putting his arm around her. She slipped away, irritably and he looked hurt.

‘Just another point,’ said Nick. ‘Can anyone row?’

‘Ah can,’ declared Hamish. He glared around at the others. ‘Can any of you?’

‘I once went on a rowing boat on t’ Ouse,’ said Osborne, shrugging. ‘Unless Nick or Eloise or Constable Roberts here can top that, it’ll have to do.’

‘Useless, the lot of you,’ growled Hamish in satisfaction. He strode over to the closest boat and heaved it out into the water. Nick’s lighter began to flicker.

‘Nick, put that out,’ Eloise said absently.

‘Come on,’ said Hamish, when it was dark. ‘Who’s gaun with me?’

Eloise and Nick joined him, clambering up onto the bobbing boat and squatting down on either side of their rower. Hamish unshipped the oars and started to row out into the flooded cavern towards the invisible further shore.

‘Wait for us,’ Osborne called. He and Roberts hurriedly organised themselves and were soon rowing after the others.

Uncomfortable, Eloise fidgeted like a cat. She tried to lean back, but the boat was too unstable. She fidgeted some more. Hamish paused in his powerful strokes.

‘Will ya stop that?’ he growled.

‘Sorry,’ Eloise replied. ‘But I can’t get comfortable.’

‘Och, we’re not on a fucking pleasure cruise,’ snapped the Scot.

‘Quiet!’ Nick hissed.

‘Fuck off!’ Hamish snarled. ‘Don’t tell me to...’

‘No,’ Nick insisted. ‘I thought I heard something.’

Hamish paused and listened. Nothing.

‘Och, it was probably the others,’ he said and started rowing forward.

‘No, it was from up ahead,’ Nick replied dogmatically.

‘What did it sound like?’ asked Eloise, leaning forward.

‘I couldn’t really hear it,’ said Nick. ‘Because you two were bickering again.’

‘What do you mean, again?’ demanded Eloise.

‘The pair of you,’ said Nick, ‘you’re like a married couple... Ssh!’

‘I didn’t say anything...’ Eloise began. Then something sloshed in the waters close by. ‘What was that?’ she hissed.

‘Only us,’ said Osborne from the darkness beside them. ‘Hey, where are we heading for?’

‘We just want to sail straight across,’ Nick replied. ‘As far as I can remember.’

The black waters erupted.

Something darker than the darkness burst out of the still lake and roared towards them. It hit Osborne’s boat and there was a hissing sound as the rubber dinghy began to deflate.

‘Shit!’ shouted Osborne.

‘What is it?’ screamed Eloise.

‘Iesu Grist!’ roared Roberts, dropping into his own tongue. ‘Yr afanc!’

It threshed through the waves, clashing its teeth and roaring in the all-encompassing darkness. Eloise could hear Osborne and Roberts splashing round in the water and the thing roaring.

‘Hamish!’ she shouted over the terrifying noise.

The skinhead seemed to jerk back into consciousness. ‘What? What?’ he screamed. There was a sharp, gargling cry from the water.

‘Where’s your spear?’ she demanded. ‘What did you do with it?’

‘Shit, yeah,’ he shouted back. ‘It’s in ma bag.’

Hamish had been given the Spear on the mystic Isle of Abalos. He had been carrying it with him ever since, in a long, anonymous bag. It had proved useful before. Would it work this time? Eloise heard Hamish rooting round in the darkness.

There was a shout of defiance from Hamish, the dinghy lurched to one side and suddenly the invisible creature was roaring and shrieking. Eloise distinctly heard the sound of metal piercing flesh and the creature roared a second time.

As it screeched what she hoped were its death-throes, Eloise was caught by a desire to see the thing.

‘Nick,’ she shouted. ‘Your lighter!’

The flame flickered briefly into life, then sputtered out again. But in that split-second, Eloise saw everything. Osborne and Roberts floundering in the water - Roberts bleeding from a savage set of wounds across his chest - Hamish standing up, with his spear raised, his face dark with black ichor - and the creature towering fifteen feet above the spreading waters. A titanic mouth bursting with teeth split open and it roared again...

Then the lighter went out and they saw no more. There was a crash of water and the boat rocked again, this time sending Hamish flying into Eloise. But then the cavern fell silent.

‘Hamish!’ Eloise said indignantly. ‘Get off me!’

The Scot heaved himself off her and growled, ‘Is that awe the thanks Ah get? Ah save everyone from the mauchit monster and that’s awe ye’ve got to say?’

‘I’m sorry,’ replied Eloise. Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Hey...’ said Hamish, his voice low. ‘Ah’ll have to do this more often...’

‘Oi, you two,’ snapped Nick. ‘Stop canoodling! What about Roberts and Osborne?’

‘Roberts has been wounded,’ Osborne’s voice drifted across the still slopping waters.

Eloise pushed Hamish off and thought quickly. ‘Is your boat still there?’ she called.

‘No,’ Osborne shouted back. ‘That... thing burst it. I’m treading water here and

Roberts - I think he's unconscious.'

'Grab hold of him,' Eloise said, 'and swim towards us. There's not enough room for all of us in this dinghy, so you'll just have to hang on to the side while we row.

Hamish - get ready to row.'

'Och, has anyone seen those fuckin' oars?' the Scot said.

They found them floating in the water beside the dinghy and Hamish started rowing the boat towards the northern shore. They reached the far side of the underground lake without further mishap, the waters remaining still and silent. Finally, the dinghy came into contact with dry land. Another dinghy was pulled up on the shore.

'Here we are,' said Hamish cheerily. 'Next stop, Port o' Glasgow.'

'Someone come and help me with Mr. Roberts,' Osborne commanded.

'Oh, Nick - will you do it?' asked Eloise. 'I would, but I'm a little tired.'

Nick went to help Osborne and Eloise followed Hamish onto the shore.

'That was very brave of you...' she whispered. 'Fighting that thing. It was huge! I was so scared.'

'Och, it was nuhin', Hamish mumbled. 'Awe in a day's work.'

She touched his arm. 'No, I mean it,' she persisted. 'Which was why I kissed you.'

'Yeah?' said Hamish. 'Finished your fling with that greaser?'

A week or two ago, Eloise had slept with Osborne and Hamish had found out. Although there had never been anything between the Scot and Eloise, Hamish was extremely angry and all in all, it had put a strain on their friendship. But this wasn't what Eloise had been talking about.

'Hamish,' she said with a sigh. 'We were never going out in the first place. I can do what I want with who I please. That thing between me and Osborne - it was a mistake. But that doesn't mean I want to go out with you, alright? You're my friend and I like you. Most of the time. Just not when you're being so, so...'

'Here's Roberts,' said Osborne from just next to them.

'I think he's coming round,' added Nick. He flicked on his lighter. Its dying glow revealed the policeman lying on the ground with Osborne and Nick looking down on him.

'Are you all right?' Eloise asked Roberts. He gazed up at her.

'I don't know,' he coughed. 'Mercy me, an afanc!'

‘A what?’ asked Nick curiously.

‘Oh, just another old Welsh legend,’ said Roberts. ‘This kind of Loch Ness Monster creature...’ He trailed off and coughed. Pink spittle frothed on his lips.

Eloise glanced down at his wounds and winced.

‘We’d better get you to hospital,’ she murmured. Some selfish part of her cursed the way they’d been lumbered with this lackey of the establishment. If they took him to hospital, the chances were that questions would be asked and the police would get hear about them. Even she had several crimes on her conscience. All of them committed for honourable reasons, admittedly, but it was unlikely that the narrow-minded, hidebound police would take that into account. They really did not want to get involved with the law.

Still, they couldn’t just abandon Roberts.

‘Let’s just get moving,’ she said. ‘We really need somewhere to rest, but in this place...’

‘Hang on,’ said Nick. ‘There’s that interpretation centre pretty close. Kind of hut in the next cavern, I think, before the entrance to the natural caves. We should be okay there.’

‘Right,’ said Eloise. ‘We’ll take Mr. Roberts to this centre. Come on, Hamish, you help Osborne.’ Hamish and the biker took Roberts’ arms and helped him along the tunnel.

‘And while we’re on our way,’ Eloise added, ‘tell me more about this afanc you mentioned, Mr. Roberts.’

Their footsteps receded into the darkness. For a few minutes, the underground lake was silent.

Then something splashed into the water over on the far side. The muffled sound of oars drifted across the black waters. Slowly, a set of tiny red lights became visible in the far-off darkness. Like a cloud of fireflies.

Or glowing red eyes.

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Carmilla

VIII

Search

At sight of the room, perfectly undisturbed except for our violent entrance, we began

to cool a little, and soon recovered our senses sufficiently to dismiss the men. It had struck Mademoiselle that possibly Carmilla had been wakened by the uproar at her door, and in her first panic had jumped from her bed, and hid herself in a press, or behind a curtain, from which she could not, of course, emerge until the majordomo and his myrmidons had withdrawn. We now recommenced our search, and began to call her name again.

It was all to no purpose. Our perplexity and agitation increased. We examined the windows, but they were secured. I implored of Carmilla, if she had concealed herself, to play this cruel trick no longer--to come out and to end our anxieties. It was all useless. I was by this time convinced that she was not in the room, nor in the dressing room, the door of which was still locked on this side. She could not have passed it. I was utterly puzzled. Had Carmilla discovered one of those secret passages which the old housekeeper said were known to exist in the schloss, although the tradition of their exact situation had been lost? A little time would, no doubt, explain all--utterly perplexed as, for the present, we were.

It was past four o'clock, and I preferred passing the remaining hours of darkness in Madame's room. Daylight brought no solution of the difficulty.

The whole household, with my father at its head, was in a state of agitation next morning. Every part of the chateau was searched. The grounds were explored. No trace of the missing lady could be discovered. The stream was about to be dragged; my father was in distraction; what a tale to have to tell the poor girl's mother on her return. I, too, was almost beside myself, though my grief was quite of a different kind.

The morning was passed in alarm and excitement. It was now one o'clock, and still no tidings. I ran up to Carmilla's room, and found her standing at her dressing table. I was astounded. I could not believe my eyes. She beckoned me to her with her pretty finger, in silence. Her face expressed extreme fear.

I ran to her in an ecstasy of joy; I kissed and embraced her again and again. I ran to the bell and rang it vehemently, to bring others to the spot who might at once relieve my father's anxiety.

"Dear Carmilla, what has become of you all this time? We have been in agonies of anxiety about you," I exclaimed. "Where have you been? How did you come back?"

"Last night has been a night of wonders," she said.

"For mercy's sake, explain all you can."

"It was past two last night," she said, "when I went to sleep as usual in my bed, with my doors locked, that of the dressing room, and that opening upon the gallery. My sleep was uninterrupted, and, so far as I know, dreamless; but I woke just now on the sofa in the dressing room there, and I found the door between the rooms open, and the other door forced. How could all this have happened without my being wakened? It must have been accompanied with a great deal of noise, and I am particularly easily wakened; and how could I have been carried out of my bed without my sleep having been interrupted, I whom the slightest stir startles?"

By this time, Madame, Mademoiselle, my father, and a number of the servants were in the room. Carmilla was, of course, overwhelmed with inquiries, congratulations, and welcomes. She had but one story to tell, and seemed the least able of all the party to suggest any way of accounting for what had happened.

My father took a turn up and down the room, thinking. I saw Carmilla's eye follow him for a moment with a sly, dark glance.

When my father had sent the servants away, Mademoiselle having gone in search of a little bottle of valerian and salvolatile, and there being no one now in the room with Carmilla, except my father, Madame, and myself, he came to her thoughtfully, took her hand very kindly, led her to the sofa, and sat down beside her.

"Will you forgive me, my dear, if I risk a conjecture, and ask a question?"

"Who can have a better right?" she said. "Ask what you please, and I will tell you everything. But my story is simply one of bewilderment and darkness. I know absolutely nothing. Put any question you please, but you know, of course, the limitations mamma has placed me under."

"Perfectly, my dear child. I need not approach the topics on which she desires our silence. Now, the marvel of last night consists in your having been removed from your bed and your room, without being wakened, and this removal having occurred apparently while the windows were still secured, and the two doors locked upon the inside. I will tell you my theory and ask you a question."

Carmilla was leaning on her hand dejectedly; Madame and I were listening breathlessly.

"Now, my question is this. Have you ever been suspected of walking in your sleep?"

"Never, since I was very young indeed."

"But you did walk in your sleep when you were young?"

"Yes; I know I did. I have been told so often by my old nurse."

My father smiled and nodded.

"Well, what has happened is this. You got up in your sleep, unlocked the door, not leaving the key, as usual, in the lock, but taking it out and locking it on the outside; you again took the key out, and carried it away with you to some one of the five-and-twenty rooms on this floor, or perhaps upstairs or downstairs. There are so many rooms and closets, so much heavy furniture, and such accumulations of lumber, that it would require a week to search this old house thoroughly. Do you see, now, what I mean?"

"I do, but not all," she answered.

"And how, papa, do you account for her finding herself on the sofa in the dressing room, which we had searched so carefully?"

"She came there after you had searched it, still in her sleep, and at last awoke spontaneously, and was as much surprised to find herself where she was as any one else. I wish all mysteries were as easily and innocently explained as yours, Carmilla," he said, laughing. "And so we may congratulate ourselves on the certainty that the most natural explanation of the occurrence is one that involves no drugging, no tampering with locks, no burglars, or poisoners, or witches--nothing that need alarm Carmilla, or anyone else, for our safety."

Carmilla was looking charmingly. Nothing could be more beautiful than her tints. Her beauty was, I think, enhanced by that graceful languor that was peculiar to her. I think my father was silently contrasting her looks with mine, for he said:

"I wish my poor Laura was looking more like herself"; and he sighed.

So our alarms were happily ended, and Carmilla restored to her friends.

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