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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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the Archive.

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

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This Edition

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

This week's cover illustration is *Furioso Dragon 13* by Mac M 13. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

**Gurok** by Todd Nelsen - *Jack fights in the amphitheatre of a space tyrant...* SCIENCE FICTION

On The Subject Of Funerals by C. Priest Brumley - Ol' Mrs Carol just won't lie down... HORROR

<u>State of Emergency</u> - Part Six by David Christopher - ... *Will's finger is on the trigger ...* SCIENCE FICTION

<u>Super Duper</u> - Part Nineteen by <u>James Rhodes</u> - *Murder, biscuits, and a chair...* SCIENCE FICTION

Babbage Must Die - Part Eighteen by Gavin Chappell - Brian plunders a ship with an unexpected cargo... SCIENCE FICTION

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: <u>Brigands of the Moon</u> (Part 18) by <u>Ray</u> <u>Cummings</u> - ... From this near vantage point, all of the little globe's disc was visible. The seas lay in gray patches. The convexity of the disc was sharply defined. So small a world! .... SPACE OPERA

My Mystickal Childe - Part Three by Gavin Chappell - Sian learns what her dad is really like... Ninth in the Going Underground series. URBAN FANTASY

Schlock! Classic Serial: <u>Carmilla</u> - Part Sixteen by <u>J. Sheridan</u> LeFanu - *Conclusion...* GOTHIC HORROR

GUROK by Todd Nelsen

In thunderous rolls of ear-splitting noise, the energy of the cheering crowd sent sparks into my charged body. My arms flexed. My hands clenched. I gritted my teeth and braced myself as I waited for the steel barrier before me to rise.

"Give 'em hell, Jack!" a string of voices called at my back.

I ignored those behind me. I had to stay focused; I had to stay alert. One wrong move, even the slightest hint of hesitation, could mean the difference between victory and certain death.

The gates opened.

Like a stellar wind from a hundred star systems, they were gathered and blended together as one, hording the stands: thick-bellied Cellerians, the self-replicating Selast of Talon 5, the vengeful and hot-blooded Tezra, the Diatacks and Mooloons of the frozen planet of D'ellaeve. My opponent, a knuckle-walker from the tumultuous jungles of Albaron, maneuvered its massive frame through the west gate and squatted before me. Almost godlike, the purple beast raised its bulging head to the crowd and bared its massive fangs.

"Gurok!" one spectator cried, immediately recognizing the ape and taking to his feet. Then another... and another... and yet another...

"GUROK! GUROK!" They chanted, repeating the name of the legendary combatant over and over, their praise turning to a deafening uproar above me.

Its ego satiated, my opponent turned to me, its small, dark-red eyes contemplating me with a savage intelligence. What I took to be a thin, ape-like sneer curled its upper lip. It rose to a two-legged stance and beat its gargantuan chest, its attention fully on me now. In return, I gritted my teeth tighter and spread my arms and legs wide, beckoning to its call at the feet of the cheering crowds. In the stands, yet separate from the rest, a womanly form, Krisha, resplendent and draped from head to heel in regal finery, moved further to the edge of her seat and watched on in silence.

My eyes narrowed; my heart quickened.

Our exchange was short.

The knuckle-walker charged, nearly closing half the distance between us in seconds. I bolted, in a runner's gait, attempting to close ground on the cache of gladiatorial weapons to my left before my opponent reached me. From the corner of my eye, I watched as the ape changed direction and veered toward me in a wide, impending arc. As it neared, it swiped out with a massive hand. But at the last moment, I dived, catapulting my body into a somersault, avoiding a blow that surely would have killed me, if it had connected. When I came to my feet again I was holding a three-pronged spear in my hands. Armed now, I brought the spear to sharp attention, with a snap of my wrist, and backed to the center of the ring. Not taking his eyes from me, Gurok reached for the rack of weapons, produced a barbed club of his own, and followed.

We tensely circled each other now, at the ring's epicenter, the crowd equally tense and silent. Krisha continued to regard us with avid interest, a flash of cold enthusiasm in her eyes.

"I can smell your sweat, human," Gurok said, in a low, menacing voice.

If the Albar ape expected a response, I didn't offer it: my breath was even, the distribution of the weight of the spear in my hands perfect, my muscles tight. I listened with my entire body now -- my whole instinct, my whole mind -- and continued to circle with the ape beneath the sheltered gravity of the dome. Above, the twin suns of Priscus and Verus blanketed the sky in an all-pervading white light. In the not-so-distant future, the unstable relationship of the twin stars would pull the solar system apart, like quarrelling lovers bidding for space. But until that day, the day of ultimate collision... the amphitheater of Malanchand reigned supreme; the games continued.

I darted right and slammed to a stop as the barbed club came down and struck the ground in a resounding swoosh beside me. Bringing the wooded end of the spear up, as one would a quarterstaff, I dealt a hard wack to the face of the ape and side straddled left. With hardly a grunt, Gurok took another meaty swipe at me, only to rear back ended in wide-eyed amazement, the killing end of my spear at his neck. With a dash of wild speed, I lunged, twisted the wood tight in my hands, pulled, and the trifid tips wrenched themselves free. Not losing an inch of ground, I stepped forward and jabbed, again, to the neck of the ape, nearly

burying the spear to the haft with this second thrust, and Gurok reeled backwards, falling to the floor of the amphitheater beneath with a heavy thud.

Hushed cries of astonishment filled the stands.

Straddling its legs, I raised the spear tips high, their sharp points tipped downward. "Make it quick, human," Gurok said between gasps.

\* \* \*

Albaron, with its thick, red jungles absorbing blue light. Albaron, a planet I had never seen nor would likely ever see in my lifetime. Gurok had described his lush, home world in great detail in the preceding months. He spoke of his people. He spoke of the fight against Krisha, high princess of the innermost galaxies, and her dreaded Skybone.

"They descended on us in waves, Jack, like the coming of an ocean storm. At first, we didn't understand it. But when we did understand, we fought. We fought back. Though our numbers are few, that fight continues even now --"

From the narrow confines of his cell, Gurok gazed upwards then, his eyes distant, his words uncharacteristically sound and collected; it appeared he had forgotten the chains that bound him and was in the open air of his jungle planet, once more, and gazing out.

He continued, describing how they had captured him.

"Redback was the leader of our band. He was the best and bravest of us. There were eleven of us in all: three females and their young, seven males -- all warriors, like myself. I had not chosen a mate; though I knew the day would come when I would leave Redback and the others to form a band of my own." He sighed. "When Krisha attacked, we were foraging on the fruits, tubers, and leaves of the wet lowlands, east of our roaming grounds --"

"Did you not have cities?" I asked. "Towns? Villages?"

Gurok laughed. "You humans and your civilization!" He said. "We had all the splendor of Albaron before us! What more could one desire?"

"How did you survive?" I asked. "How did you evolve?"

"It is believed our ancestors inhabited the trees once, just as your own. That was long ago, I think. We are not animals, Jack, though we do understand our relationship to them." He glanced about the narrow confines of his cell. "I think, perhaps, this is something your own people may have forgotten."

Civilization. To my own people, it was the pinnacle of our advancement -- a crowning achievement in lieu of our perfunctory past. It never occurred to me that it could be otherwise. Without even the most rudimentary of tools, how could a species survive? Yet, I could empathize with the words of the ape. I was not without hardship. When my colony was attacked, I, too, was but a child -- though I suspected much younger than Gurok had been. My memories of the attack were vague, sensations, bubbling up to the surface of my waking mind: energy blasts, Bone-crushers toppling and tearing holes into the shelter of our dome, the anguished, unheard screams of men as their gravity failed them, and they were catapulted out into space.

As if reading my thoughts, Gurok raised, then. He pointed to the circular splotches that ran edgewise from the length of his navel to his right breast. Scars. Blaster hits. Three of them. "Do you recognize these?" he asked. "These are the marks of your so-called... civilization. But as you can see, I did not die." There was a fair amount of pride in his words. "Redback, and the others --" he paused, "were not so lucky."

He returned to his haunches, deep in thought. I, too, remained silent, not wishing to pursue the matter further.

After some time, he spoke, again.

"Captivity. Loss. Before that day, I had no concept of it. But understand this, human," he said. "Minutes can turn to hours, hours to days, days to weeks, weeks to years, in the confines of a cell. I grow weary of this killing. I will not tolerate these chains much longer. There is a saying among my people, Jack. When a warrior kills, he takes a piece of the world with him... but what he leaves it will *never* be erased."

"We have the same saying among my own people," I commented.

"Then you are wise," he said. "Redback was a warrior such as this. You, too, may leave such a mark. This is why you must never forget --"

"Forget?" I asked.

"Your heart is here, human," he said, pointing. "Just as my own was, many years ago. How many planets enslaved, Jack? How many colonies wasted?"

\* \* \*

I nodded once and thrust, with the full extent of my strength and weight, into the warm body of the ape. With an upward movement, I brought the weapon high above my shoulders and leveled it down again. A thick pool of blood began to widen at my feet.

"Come," Krisha said. "Come to me. Allow me to look upon the face of our victor." Spear in hand, head down, hands bloodied, I drew in a long breath, letting it tell out slowly. I had to stay focused; I had to stay alert. One wrong move, even the slightest hint of hesitation...

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ON THE SUBJECT OF FUNERALS by C. Priest Brumley

Part 1: It Begins.

God, I hate this.

It took me three years to get over her... The scent of her over-priced perfume, the feel of her hand on mine.... And yet, the moment she calls saying she needs a huge favor from me, I come running to her side like a little boy to a brand-new action figure. I'm pathetic.

I know how I got suckered into doing this, too. I was always her mom's favorite amongst her collection of ex-son-in-laws, and when she died, that instantly put a target on my chest. Pallbearer. The word still sends a shiver down my spine. I don't deal with death well, and carrying around a corpse equates to my idea of torture.

But it's not as bad as it could be. The woman weighed next to nothing, and the coffee at the wake wasn't half-bad, all things considered. Not being able to smoke had me on edge though, and I daydreamed in my pew during the eulogy of a cigarette to go with the cup of Community Coffee in my hand. Thankfully, the minister didn't notice.

Dammit. I hate this.

The ride from the funeral home to the gravesite was long, arduous, and most of all, stressful as hell. I took the ride with my boyfriend Jim (personal epiphanies came after the divorce and in retrospect explained everything), probably the only person in this god-forsaken place that could get me to relax semi-decently. He had a hint or two as to where my stress could go.

"Baby, seriously. Chill the fuck out for a minute."

"No."

"Two seconds at least. Please?"

"Not bloody likely. You know I hate this shit," I replied, fidgeting in my seat. Jim turned to look at me with a hint of exasperation evident on his face.

"Yeah, I do. Hence the asking you to chill out. It's just a corpse! She's dead," Jim stated with finality.

"What's your point?" I asked, agitated. If there's one thing Jim was a master at, it was beating around the bush. "Spit it the fuck out."

Jim spared me a side glance from the road. "I'll tell you what my point is. You're acting like a god damned two year old about this. What's so fuckin' scary about a god damned corpse, I ask you?"

"Leave it alone, bay," I sighed. He wouldn't understand. It wasn't just the corpse, although that was a big part of it. It was the smell of the funeral home, the lavender and almond scent of old death and graveyards. The creepy old trees that shade everything in sight. The finality of death, knowing I'll never get to talk to Mrs. Carol again.

"Oooorrrrr," Jim added, drawing out the word the way a child might, "Is it the fact... Hold on..."

I turned in time to see Jim pull out a pack of Pall-Mall Lights, shake one from the pack into his lips, replace the pack, and light it with his free hand. He was from "The Great State of Texas" and not only was he damn proud of it, it showed. If I'd have tried to pull that stunt, the cabin of his 80's Ford Pickup would've been littered in Cigs.

On that thought, I pulled my own pack of Camels out from my jacket, drew one out slowly, and lit it, letting the nicotine take control of me for the first time in over an hour or so. It felt good, holding that cigarette with the numb buzz from too little smoke taking over my hand. It helped steady me for the upcoming ordeal.

"Or," Jim said, picking up where he left off, "Is it the fact that you just don't wanna see Lilly again? I know she fucked you over pretty badly, and now she's calling you up as if you're reliable? I'd've told her something real quick, me."

"I don't know, bay," I replied after taking a few drags. "I guess it just has to do with the stillness of it. She looks so alive, and yet...." I let myself trail away as I grabbed another drag. Jim looked my way from behind the wheel and shrugged. I was avoiding talking about Lilly.

Thankfully, he got the hint.

"Whatever, I just think you're being stupid about it."

"Says the redneck in the bigwig suit," I teased him. I tried for some humour, but even as the last word left my mouth, I realized my tone was off. Too serious for a joke. Luckily, he took it in stride.

"Yep. Three hundred dollar bigwig suit, and don't you forget it, baby. I bought this thing especially for today and if you think I'm gonna let it go to waste after this, you've got another thing coming."

I turned to face him better from my seat. His features were dark from long days working in the sun, with laugh lines stretching across his thin face. His receding hairline was becoming more prominent as the years went by, and the normally sun-bleached hair was now flecked with grey. Too old for thirty-five.

"And what the hell do you plan on using it for after this? Plan on attending my funeral soon?" I laughed. The thought of my own mortality hadn't come to me before this, but now that it had, I couldn't help but laugh at the thought of my friends and family mourning the loss of me.

"What's so funny?" Jim asked, seeing me shake from mirth.

"I just hadn't thought of my own funeral before.... I don't think anyone would come, save for you, baby," I choked out. "Hell, my own dog wouldn't even miss me. As Robin Williams once said, he'd just lick my corpse for the salt!"

"Don't say that. You know full well that there'd be more people there than you could count," Jim said with sadness in his eyes.

"Whatever, bay," I said with indifference.

The cigarette was about done, so I took one final drag, savoring the flavor, then rolled down my window and threw my butt out onto the side of the highway. I watched the orange sparks fly from impact and realized, with a jolt, that we had to be near our destination.

"Shouldn't we be about there by now?" I asked. We were turning onto a small paved road off of the highway, flanked by wrought-iron gates that were topped with spikes and intricately crafted fleur-de-lys. It was a gothic sight, and yet.... I had to admire the craftsmanship evident. I loved living in New Orleans.

Jim followed the line of cars in front of him, which lead him into a small and cramped parking lot. He pulled in, put the truck in park, and turned to look at me.

"Weee're heeeere," he said, in an imitation of that creepy kid from Poltergeist. I let a small laugh escape my lips, then turned and set my face in a grim mask reflective of the fear bubbling up inside of me.

No sooner had I gotten out of the car then I was set upon by the funeral coordinator, a rail-thin man in a suit much too peppy to be for proper mourning and much too well-fitted to be off the rack. Smug bastard, I thought to myself as he took me by the upper arm and dragged me to the back of the hearse. There, he arranged me and the other pallbearers (consisting of Lilly's younger brother Vincent and four men I had never met before and didn't particularly care to get to know now) in two rows of three each, barked out some instructions hastily, then stepped back and arranged himself in the manner of a man in deep mourning. Good actor.

We proceeded forward with the casket, walking the clumsy stumble of the pallbearer chain gang, eventually managing to make our way to the hole in the ground tastelessly covered in bright green felt. We set Mrs. Carol down on the raised altar behind the hole and shambled back to our significant others. I gave Jim's hand a squeeze and turned to face the minister as he began the graveside service.

And just as the minister opened his mouth came the first disturbance.

Mrs. Carol's casket moved.

Not in an eerie, floating, telekinetic way, either, but it... well, there's no other way to say it but it jumped. As if something inside it were alive and wanted to get out. It wasn't overt, and I'm not even sure anybody else noticed, but I did, and it was enough to send me into a small panic attack. Luckily, Jim noticed it starting and managed to pull me to the back of the crowd before I got deeper into it.

"Are you okay?" he asked, still squeezing my hand with his and holding me by the shoulder with the other. His eyes were filled with concern and compassion. There was a reason I loved him.

"I just saw..." I trailed off. I couldn't even bring myself to say what I saw. Hell, I couldn't even look him in the eye; mine were still attached to Mrs. Carol's casket. My mouth kept doing the fish thing, opening and closing automatically without making a single coherent sound.

"I... I..."

"Remember what I said in the truck? You need to calm down, baby. It's all okay."

He pulled me to him, kissing me lightly on the forehead, and then came the second disturbance.

For lack of a better phrase, Mrs. Carol, in all of her polite southern manner, knocked on her coffin lid. It was a slow sound, not reaching my ears for a few seconds and not reaching my comprehension for a few more after that. And the moment it did, I promptly fainted.

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# STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Six: Direct Action

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

Daisy looked at him disappointedly. Rex leaned forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I'll need a gun,' he objected.

'That can be arranged,' Rex said. 'The organisation's made contacts inLondon since Quigley was murdered.'

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

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

'Give me time to think it over,' he insisted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Fuckin' pigs,' Higgy growled. 'Who's this fucker?'

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

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

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

Will shook his head. He didn't think this was what Professor Quigley had been thinking about at all. He suddenly remembered Quigley's Manifesto, still hidden in his hotel room. He was supposed to take it to the Professor's publishers in Oxford by the autumn. That was what mattered, not all this crazy student anarchist shit. Then again, how was he going to

get it from the hotel? He'd be arrested. That wouldn't help. He looked despairingly at Rex's two associates. He was going to get nowhere like this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No,' he said slowly. 'I don't.'

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

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

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

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

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

Rex and Daisy were waiting for him in a car at the bottom of the building, a large insurance place whose caretaker was friendly with the organisation. All it took was one well-aimed shot, a sprint across the rooftop, a helter-skelter descent down a fire escape, and then he'd be in the car and out of there. What happened next was another matter.

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

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

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

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

The wind mound mournfully. He squeezed the trigger.

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SUPER DUPER by James Rhodes

# Chapter 19

In the time that it took for The Don to walk back outside, Biggy had already killed the policeman. The Don stared at what he realised was a corpse. The policeman's head tilted backwards and his neck gaped open like a sick and horrific smile. The body was still moving as the lungs struggled to breathe in blood. The Don ran to the man.

The two soldiers were patiently observing the passing of the policeman in the same manner that Smith might observe a spider building a web, distant but fascinated. The Don pulled the policeman's head forward trying to think of a way to stop the blood flow but as thick as hands became with redness in the attempt, he couldn't help but notice that the blood flow had already spent itself.

"He didn't have any useful information," said Jon. "Only the address of the police station where the handcuff keys are."

"He does know one thing now," said Biggy, "he knows not to hurt any more kids."

The Don had nothing to say to the two of them. He looked at his hands and down at the crazy idiot who had tried to arrest Ellie.

"I don't want the rest of the children seeing what happened here. Can you move that body somewhere? Please."

The Don walked to the garage and washed his hands in the tap there. He took a deep breath and prepared himself to tell Nicola what the soldiers had done.

After the whiteness faded, Smith found himself alone. He was staring up at a false ceiling made from ugly white tiles. There had obviously been a leak on one of them because it had a brown and yellow blotch on it. The floor against his back was cold and hard and he could feel something digging in to his neck. It felt a lot like the zip of a coat. He glanced around the

room. There was a fairly decent looking chair at the other side of the room. Smith decided that wherever he was he would rather be sitting in a chair than lying on the cold hard floor.

He tried to piece together his last actions, in the effort to place himself in a location. From the way that his head felt, he guessed that he had been drinking rather heavily. He was not relishing the idea of sitting upright but he realised that he would have to if he wanted to get to the chair.

The first attempt was enough to dissuade Smith from trying any further. His back ached, his muscles felt even weaker than usual and he had less energy than he ever remembered having. He chose a different tactic and on his third effort managed to roll over onto his face. Once he was there, he hoped that the discomfort would be enough to give him the motivation to drag himself hand over hand to the chair.

Smith put his hand on top of his hand and fell back to sleep.

"They're gone," said Nicola, "it wasn't your fault."

"I know that."

"But you still need to clean that."

The soldiers had left a massive bloodstain on the concrete of the car park.

"Also, what are you going to do about Smith?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's walking around with that psycho's daughter in handcuffs."

"I don't know. Hopefully Corrine will find him."

"I'll find the station on a map whilst you mop up, then you'll get Smith and take us all somewhere safe, with more food."

The Don was a tiny bit overwhelmed by the scale of the request. He nodded seriously but without much conviction.

"Just start with the cleaning," said Nicola.

"I love you," said The Don.

"You too," said Nicola and she pointed towards a mop bucket she had lain out ready for him.

The day had ebbed to the distance of dusk. Corrine and Ellie had decided to let Smith sleep for a while. The girl looked exhausted. Corrine had led her to the back room not longer after she had realised that Smith probably wouldn't make it through the night. They were sat drinking Robinson's orange squash and dipping biscuits into it.

"Is he going to die?"

Corrine wanted to give a speech about what a strong man Smith was and how if anyone could pull through the injury then it was Smith. However, she wasn't going to just tell the girl a bunch of bare faced lies so instead she said.

"Smith has surprised me more times than I can count."

"Does that mean you think he's going to die?"

"He doesn't look good, that's for sure, but you can always rely on Smith to surprise you."

Corrine pulled her digestive out of the white plastic cup. The bottom half off it swung precariously and then crumbled and splashed apart. Ellie smiled with everything except for her eyes.

"Can you check on him again, please?"

"In a minute. Let's just have our drink."

There was a loud screeching sound and a crash. Ellie jumped up and ran to investigate. Fearing the worst, Corrine scrambled after her. She swung open the doors to the room where they had left Smith and there he was his head lying against an upturned chair. Fast asleep.

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## BABBAGE MUST DIE by Gavin Chappell

## Chapter Eighteen

Brian saw a small black figure threshing about in the water beside the sinking *Mars*. With a shock, he realised it was Puss, the ship's cat.

'Someone dive in and bring me that cat!' he commanded. He glanced at the American captain. 'Take him and Piper below. Put them in irons.' He had half a mind to make Piper walk the plank... 'And take that chest to my cabin,' he added. He nodded to Boone and the American came over. 'Know anything about steering one of these things?' he asked.

'I've been a helmsman in my time,' Boone replied, 'though on nothing of this size.'

'We'll go down to the wardroom,' Brian said, 'and we'll plot our course. Then I'll be wanting you to get us there. You can be first lieutenant, if you want.'

'Begging your pardon, cap'n,' Boone replied. 'But that's a Royal Navy rank. You want to make me first mate.'

Brian shrugged. 'Okay. And we'll say no more about your surrender,' he added. Boone was about to reply when McGee came up, carrying the cat in his arms.

'Ah, well done McGee,' Brian said. The Irish oaf seemed to have transferred his loyalties to his new skipper without so much as a thought. 'I'll take that.'

He lifted the sopping wet Puss out of McGee's arms. She leapt up his arm and sat on his shoulder, a bedraggled heap. Brian headed for the wardroom to find something to dry her off with, the mournful cat sitting on his shoulder.

'Left hand down a bit,' he said half an hour later, the cat, now dry and happy, still sitting on his shoulder.

Boone looked resentfully up from the ship's wheel.

'Skipper, I'd appreciate proper instructions,' he said. 'Just as I'd appreciate going to the States before we do anything else.'

Brian shook his head and tickled the cat. 'To start with, we need more supplies. If we're to go to America with a crew this size, or even to Britain, we'll need more than we have in the hold, you know that. And secondly, I want to be in Britain by next spring. After that, you can go to America or wherever you like.'

'You mean the ship will be mine?' Boone asked, brightening. But soon he looked gloomy again. 'Could be problems if we go to Baltimore, though. They might not appreciate this act of piracy.'

'Right,' Brian said. 'So you'd be better off sticking around for a while, rather than going home. Keep your head down. All we need is supplies to keep us going.'

'You've got all that money,' Boone replied, turning the wheel slightly as they coasted over the swells. 'All that army pay. We could buy supplies with it.'

Brian looked out at the waters of the Atlantic, stretching to the horizon in all directions.

'Yeah, right. Just pop down the shops with it,' he said sarcastically. 'Look, Boone, you saw the state of those stores. There's next to nothing to keep the men going. And they're none too happy with the situation. We don't want mutiny on our hands; we need more food.'

'Well, said Boone, 'you're the one who lifted the black flag of piracy over this vessel. Why don't you just attack the next ship we meet?'

Brian stalked away and looked out across the swelling waves from the poop deck. Becoming a pirate had seemed like a good idea under the circumstances, a good way to end the clash of loyalties between the British and American crewmen. Neither side had wanted to sail under the other country's flag; understandable, since they were now officially at war – so why not the *Black Flag*, as he had renamed the ship? He only wished he could have got a skull-and-crossbones to go with it... Of course, if they were convicted of piracy on the high seas they'd hang, on either side of the Atlantic.

But the supplies were in a bad state; the American crew said most of the food had been washed overboard in the recent storms. They did not have enough to last them until they reached Ireland, let alone England.

All Brian really wanted was to get back on dry land, hopefully meet Ada if she was still around, and get back to the cellar so he could return home. Never mind Babbage. He'd hardly even thought about his original mission in what seemed like weeks. Far too much had got in the way. He just wanted to quit the nineteenth century for good.

Being a pirate was kind of cool, but going back home would be even cooler. Alright, so he had all those debts and the inevitable breakdown of automated social security system, but nothing could be as bad as this. Being perpetually unemployed was a doddle compared to the horrors of 1812.

Puss mewled in his ear, and he tickled her.

'My only real friend in this god-awful century,' he said. 'Wonder if I'll be able to take you back to the future.'

Then a cry came from the crow's-nest. 'Sail on the starboard bow! Sail on the starboard bow!'

Brian took out his spyglass and scanned the rolling waters. He saw no ships. Hang on, which was starboard? He tried the other bow. Oh yes, there it was. He could see the sail just peeking over the horizon. Coming from the east, so probably British. Or French. But presumably not American. They'd have supplies onboard, surely.

He stamped back to the wheelhouse and joined Boone again.

'Hard to starboard, Mr Boone,' he ordered.

'Hard to starboard it is, cap'n,' Boone said. The cat mewled again, as they veered wildly off course.

'Not that hard, Boone!' Brian exclaimed. 'I want to head for that ship that's just appeared.'

'You said hard to starboard,' Boone replied testily. 'I did what you said.'

Brian pursed his lips. The cat rubbed herself against the side of his head, knocking his cocked hat askew.

'Well, maybe not quite so hard to starboard,' he said, pushing his hat back hurriedly. 'Just a tad to larboard now, anyway.'

Boone gave him a resentful glance.

'A tad is not an accepted nautical expression, cap'n. Give me any more orders like that,' he added, 'and it'll be me leading the mutiny!'

'That's enough, Mister!' Brian snapped.

He went to find McGee, who he had made second mate, to tell him to prepare the crew for the attack.

With the invaluable assistance of the more helpful members of his crew, Brian brought his ship tacking towards the approaching vessel. He scanned it with his spyglass as the crew prepared themselves for the attack. Brian saw a Union Jack flying from the other ship's flagpole. The British crew wouldn't be too keen on that. But it wasn't a Navy vessel, at least; it seemed to be a merchant ship of some sort. Well, that was good. It wouldn't put up too

much of a fight, hopefully, and equally hopefully, it would have a rich cargo that would include enough food for the voyage to England.

McGee appeared and told him that the guns were ready. Brian nodded curtly.

'Give them a good pasting for a bit,' he said. 'We don't want to sink them, though, just loot 'em.'

'Aye aye, sorr,' said McGee woodenly. 'What if dey show foight, sorr?'

'Then give 'em hell!' Brian replied, thrusting his arm under his coat and stalking off to give the other ship another inspection through the spyglass. Puss mewled in his ear and rubbed herself against his head again.

As Brian's ship came closer, he gave the orders to raise the black flag. Shortly after the other ship began trying to evade them, turning about and attempting to pass them by. The pirate was a much smaller vessel, and it was faster as a result. Relentlessly they bore down on their prey. Soon they were looked like they were in range, and Brian hurried down to the gun deck.

'Are we in range yet?' he asked McGee.

McGee gave a string of orders to the crew. The ship turned until the cannons were facing the merchantman, and soon a single shot was arcing across the narrowing gap. It splashed down into the waters on the far side of the ship.

'Aye, sorr,' McGee told Brian. 'In range.'

'Fire a broadside, then, Mister,' Brian ordered. 'Give 'em hell until they surrender!'

Puss leapt from his shoulder and raced up the companionway as the cannons boomed deafeningly.

Following the cat, Brian returned to the quarterdeck, from which he watched the bombard. Cannon shot whistled through the billowing smoke, which was lit up by the flashes of the guns. Ball after ball crashed into the other ship, blowing away rigging, masts, and the odd crew member. The stink of gunpowder filled the air, reminding Brian obscurely of bacon and eggs.

The merchantman's cannon ports opened and a return barrage filled the air with smoke. Brian seized the rail as the *Black Flag* pitched and yawed. Smoke filled the air but he could see figures on the deck, including one bearded man on the quarterdeck, which looked like he might be master of the vessel. Brian produced a flintlock, primed and loaded it, and then aimed it at the man.

Again, the *Black Flag*'s guns boomed and the larger ship shook under the onslaught. Brian saw the master of the vessel shouting orders to his crew. Brian closed one eye, sighted down the barrel, and pulled the trigger. The gun banged loudly.

Almost at once, the man jerked backwards, and fell from sight. Brian grinned, and reloaded his pistol. Got the bastard! Maybe they'd surrender.

But then the enemy ship unleashed another cannonade, and Brian was dismayed by the damage he saw his own ship sustain.

He rushed down to the gun deck.

'McGee, we're closing in on them!' he told the second mate. 'Get ready to board!'

'Aye aye, sorr,' the Irishman snapped, and began issuing orders for boarding.

The first wave of the *Black Flag*'s crew swung across the narrow gap. It was now close enough for Brian, standing on the poop deck with Puss on his left shoulder, to see that the merchantman was called the *Botany Bay*. He watched as his pirates fought the sailors savagely, cutting them down with cutlasses, firing pistols and muskets. Boone joined Brian at the rail after organising the next wave of attackers, who were even now waiting at the rail.

'They weren't expecting pirates in these waters,' Boone observed.

Brian shrugged, and Puss sank her claws into his shoulder, making him yelp. 'Doesn't look like it. D'you reckon they'll have a rich cargo?'

Boone frowned. 'Not sure,' he said. 'Looks a bit down-at-heel for a merchant ship. The name's curious.'

Brian watched as his pirates forced the crewmen back towards the quarterdeck. 'Botany Bay,' he said thoughtfully. 'That's in Australia, isn't it?'

'Aye, Cap'n,' Boone replied. 'These days, it's where you send your...'

He broke off as a roar of cheering came from the pirates aboard the *Botany Bay*. Brian saw crewmen holding their hands up in sign of surrender. The bigger ship was in a bad way, battered and singed from the bombard, and the crew looked a dispirited lot.

'Looks like we've won,' he said. 'Come on, Boone; time to lead the second wave across to mop up any resistance. We'll plunder the ship and then we can make our way to England.' 'Aye aye, sir,' Boone replied.

Shortly after, they were aboard the *Botany Bay*. The crew crouched on the quarterdeck with pirates training muskets on them. Brian learnt that the master of the ship had died when he shot him, and the first mate had taken charge.

'You want our cargo?' the mate, a big, black-bearded man with a patch over one eye – he looked far more the classical pirate captain than Brian could ever hope to. 'You might not find it very lucrative.'

Brian scowled at him, and exchanged glances with Boone and McGee. 'McGee, take some men into the hold and bring the cargo up for inspection,' he snapped.

The Botany Bay's first mate laughed coarsely.

'What's so funny?' Brian demanded.

'You'll see,' the man replied, and said no more.

Unsettled by his attitude, Brian waited with his hands behind his back. He wasn't sure, but had a feeling that the first mate's attitude might be explained by the fact that Brian still had Puss on his shoulder. Okay, so a parrot would be more traditional, but Brian liked cats, and anyway, he was a pirate captain, wasn't he? He could go round with a cat on his shoulder if he wanted to.

'Listen to me, you scurvy swabs!' he roared suddenly, addressing the crew of the merchantman. 'I'm Cap'n Brian Wells of the *Black Flag*, scourge of the sea! You've surrendered to me after I defeated you in fair fight! You'll show me a bit more respect or I'll keelhaul every man-jack of yer! Arrr!' he added for good measure. McGee and the other pirates were returning from below, and they were leading several scruffy looking figures with them. 'I'll make you walk the plank, should ye defy me!' Brian continued. 'I'll have ye all flogged! I'll... McGee, where's the cargo, man?'

Helplessly, the Irishman indicated the people he had led up from the hold.

'We found dese below, in cells. Dere's a bit of food in da stores. Enough to keep us going til we reaches Oireland. But dere's no real cargo. Just dese convicts.'

Brian felt blood draining from his face.

Boone groaned. 'That explains the name. We've seized a convict ship bound for Australia!'

'Aye!' The first mate guffawed. 'What a rich cargo ye've plundered!'

'Shut yer trap, ye scurvy dog!' Brian blustered. 'Ye'll give up all the supplies ye have in your stores.' The convicts stared at him as he swaggered about the deck. 'What're ye lookin' at, ye landlubbers! I'm the ruthless pirate captain, Wells of the *Black Flag*! Stop staring at me!'

One of the convicts, a woman, stepped forward. A puzzled look was on her unwashed face.

'Brian?' she asked incredulously. 'Is that you?'

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# VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by Thomas Preskett Prest

#### CHAPTER XLV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, hear him," cried the tall man, waving his arms about like the sails of a windmill. "Yes, hear him. Sons of darkness, you're all vampyres, and are continually sucking the lifeblood from each other. No wonder that the evil one has power over you all. You're as men who walk in the darkness when the sunlight invites you, and you listen to the words of humanity when those of a diviner origin are offered to your acceptance. But there shall be miracles in the land, and even in this place, set apart with a pretended piety that is in itself most damnable, you shall find an evidence of the true light; and the proof that those who will follow me the true path to glory shall be found here within this grave. Dig up Miles, the butcher!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finding it quite impossible by bodily strength to raise the coffin of the butcher from the position in which it had got imbedded by excessive rains, a boy was hastily despatched to the

village for ropes, and never did boy run with such speed before, for all his own curiosity was excited in the issue of an adventure, that to his young imagination was appallingly interesting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He's a-coming—he's a-coming!"

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

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

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

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

But such is popularity!

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

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

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

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

"Ah, you're a rum un," said Dick, "arter my own heart. I sometimes thinks as you must be a nevy, or some sort of relation of mine. Howsomdever, here goes. Who'd a thought that I should ever had a look at old fat and thunder again?—that's what I used to call him; and then he used to request me to go down below, where I needn't turn round to light my blessed pipe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A what, do you say, Dick?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, yes; we are closer."

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

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

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

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

"Get out," said Dick, "it's all right—we've done 'em at last; and now you may depend upon it they won't be in a hurry to come here again. You keep your own counsel, or else somebody will serve you out for this. I don't think you're altogether averse to a bit of fun, and

if you keep yourself quiet, you'll have the satisfaction of hearing what's said about this affair in every pot-house in the village, and no mistake."

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#### BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

#### XVIII

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

"Where is Miko?"

"In the lounge, Gregg?"

"Can we stop there?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The passengers were all eying me. I said:

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

"Yes. Get to the turret."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You take command here?"

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

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

"Have no fear. Sit down, Moa."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. The crew works well."

The electronic streams flowed out like a rocket tail behind us. The Planetara caught their impetus. In the rarefied air, our bow lifted slightly, like a ship riding a gentle ground

swell. At a hundred thousand feet we sailed gently forward, hull down to the asteroid's surface, cruising to seek a landing space.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I flung on the landing lights; the deck glowed with the blue radiance; the searchbeams shot down beside our hull. We hung now a thousand feet above the forest glade. I cut off the electronic streams. We poised, with the gravity plates set at normal, and only a gentle night breeze to give us a slight side drift. This I could control with the lateral propeller rudders.

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

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

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

"Well done, Gregg!" said Moa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Haljan, hold our shipboard gravity normal."

"Yes."

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

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

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

"Now the women."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stand quiet! Everyone! No movement!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My breath came again; Anita nimbly retreated before Miko's angry rush. He dashed at the stewards. Three of them held a box. He took it from them; raised it at the top of the incline, poised it over his head an instant, with his massive arms like gray pillars beneath it;

and flung it. The box catapulted, dropped; and then passing the Planetara's gravity area, it sailed in a long flat arc over the forest glade and crashed into the purple underbrush.

"Give me another!"

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

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

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

"There! Go to your last resting place!"

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

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

"Ready, Haljan?"

Moa prompted me. "Tell him yes!"

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

The disembarkation was over.

"Close the ports!" Miko commanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lift, Haljan!"

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

"Lift, Halian!"

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

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

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

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

I said, "An error—yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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CARMILLA by J Sheridan LeFanu

XVI

#### Conclusion

I write all this you suppose with composure. But far from it; I cannot think of it without agitation. Nothing but your earnest desire so repeatedly expressed, could have induced me to sit down to a task that has unstrung my nerves for months to come, and reinduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after my deliverance continued to make my days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific.

Let me add a word or two about that quaint Baron Vordenburg, to whose curious lore we were indebted for the discovery of the Countess Mircalla's grave.

He had taken up his abode in Gratz, where, living upon a mere pittance, which was all that remained to him of the once princely estates of his family, in Upper Styria, he devoted

himself to the minute and laborious investigation of the marvelously authenticated tradition of Vampirism. He had at his fingers' ends all the great and little works upon the subject.

"Magia Posthuma," "Phlegon de Mirabilibus," "Augustinus de cura pro Mortuis," "Philosophicae et Christianae Cogitationes de Vampiris," by John Christofer Herenberg; and a thousand others, among which I remember only a few of those which he lent to my father. He had a voluminous digest of all the judicial cases, from which he had extracted a system of principles that appear to govern--some always, and others occasionally only--the condition of the vampire. I may mention, in passing, that the deadly pallor attributed to that sort of revenants, is a mere melodramatic fiction. They present, in the grave, and when they show themselves in human society, the appearance of healthy life. When disclosed to light in their coffins, they exhibit all the symptoms that are enumerated as those which proved the vampire-life of the long-dead Countess Karnstein.

How they escape from their graves and return to them for certain hours every day, without displacing the clay or leaving any trace of disturbance in the state of the coffin or the cerements, has always been admitted to be utterly inexplicable. The amphibious existence of the vampire is sustained by daily renewed slumber in the grave. Its horrible lust for living blood supplies the vigor of its waking existence. The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast.

The vampire is, apparently, subject, in certain situations, to special conditions. In the particular instance of which I have given you a relation, Mircalla seemed to be limited to a name which, if not her real one, should at least reproduce, without the omission or addition of a single letter, those, as we say, an agrammatically, which compose it.

Carmilla did this; so did Millarca.

My father related to the Baron Vordenburg, who remained with us for two or three weeks after the expulsion of Carmilla, the story about the Moravian nobleman and the vampire at Karnstein churchyard, and then he asked the Baron how he had discovered the exact position of the long-concealed tomb of the Countess Mircalla? The Baron's grotesque features puckered up into a mysterious smile; he looked down, still smiling on his worn spectacle case and fumbled with it. Then looking up, he said:

"I have many journals, and other papers, written by that remarkable man; the most curious among them is one treating of the visit of which you speak, to Karnstein. The tradition, of course, discolors and distorts a little. He might have been termed a Moravian nobleman, for he had changed his abode to that territory, and was, beside, a noble. But he was, in truth, a native of Upper Styria. It is enough to say that in very early youth he had been a passionate and favored lover of the beautiful Mircalla, Countess Karnstein. Her early death plunged him into inconsolable grief. It is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law.

"Assume, at starting, a territory perfectly free from that pest. How does it begin, and how does it multiply itself? I will tell you. A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That specter visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires. This happened in the case of the beautiful Mircalla, who was haunted by one of those demons. My ancestor, Vordenburg, whose title I still bear, soon discovered this, and in the course of the studies to which he devoted himself, learned a great deal more.

"Among other things, he concluded that suspicion of vampirism would probably fall, sooner or later, upon the dead Countess, who in life had been his idol. He conceived a horror, be she what she might, of her remains being profaned by the outrage of a posthumous execution. He has left a curious paper to prove that the vampire, on its expulsion from its amphibious existence, is projected into a far more horrible life; and he resolved to save his once beloved Mircalla from this.

"He adopted the stratagem of a journey here, a pretended removal of her remains, and a real obliteration of her monument. When age had stolen upon him, and from the vale of years, he looked back on the scenes he was leaving, he considered, in a different spirit, what he had done, and a horror took possession of him. He made the tracings and notes which have guided me to the very spot, and drew up a confession of the deception that he had practiced. If he had intended any further action in this matter, death prevented him; and the hand of a remote descendant has, too late for many, directed the pursuit to the lair of the beast."

We talked a little more, and among other things he said was this:

"One sign of the vampire is the power of the hand. The slender hand of Mircalla closed like a vice of steel on the General's wrist when he raised the hatchet to strike. But its power is not confined to its grasp; it leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from."

The following Spring my father took me a tour through Italy. We remained away for more than a year. It was long before the terror of recent events subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations--sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door.

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# MY MYSTICKAL CHILDE by Gavin Chappell

3

Siân glowered at Eloise. The first time she had set eyes on the Goth chick, Siân had worked her out. She was one of those crypto-Christian bleeding heart types, wasn't it? The sort who talked all the time about tolerating other people's cultures, but as soon as they found themselves faced with female circumcision or cannibalism or headhunting, or anything that differed in the slightest from mainstream western beliefs, forgot all that nauseating "noble savage" drivel they dribbled and were the first to shout 'Exterminate all the brutes.'

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

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

Eloise looked stubborn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It's as practical as any,' Menyw murmured.

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

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

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

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

'Yes,' the Pwcca hissed. 'Unless you wish to swim! Now, when will we receive these Sten guns of which you speak?'

'I will my agent contact on my return from the Hollow Earth,' said Kohl. He turned away, but the Pwcca reached out a clawed hand and restrained him.

'No, my friend,' he croaked. 'You will contact him now! Few return from the world within - and we need those weapons to end our eternal war with the elves.'

Kohl sighed and took out his mobile phone. 'I don't expect I'll get a signal,' he muttered. He rang a number and stood in silence with the phone to his ear. At last, he spoke. 'Ring me!' he snapped. 'ASAP. Kohl.' He switched off the phone and turned to the Pwcca, whose eyes glittered balefully beneath the folds of his hood. 'What more can I do, Pwcca?' he replied. 'A message I've left him.'

'My followers will not allow you aboard the submersible until we have confirmation,' the Pwcca replied.

'Come now,' Kohl replied. 'Those degenerate hippies are on my trail, Anghelides may still be following... And the elves are restless, by your own admission...'

'If the elves rise up, then you will fight them at my shoulder, friend,' said the Pwcca grimly. Kohl looked away in disgust. There was a clatter from the rocks behind them. The Pwcca turned round. 'What was that?' he hissed.

Kohl looked indifferent.

'Does it matter?' he began. The Pwcca struck him.

'Look!' he hissed, pointing a clawed hand upwards.

Kohl strained his eyes in the gloom to see three or four figures clinging to a ledge some way up the cavern wall. 'Who are they?' he asked.

The Pwcca ignored him and shouted orders at his warriors. The goblins ceased their tasks and produced bows.

'Down!' shouted Menyw as flint-tipped arrows hummed around them. One buried itself in Anghelides' chest and he staggered back against the wall. Hamish, Osborne and Menyw crouched down behind the lip of the ledge.

'Cowards!' Anghelides spat, struggling back to the edge. 'Attack them!'

'What are you talking about?' Osborne asked. 'Get down!'

Three arrows hit the undead occultist and he stumbled, but did not fall.

'After me!' he croaked, seemingly unhurt by the arrows protruding from his body. He leapt over the ledge.

Kohl was trying to follow the goblin's arrows when he saw something pitch over the ledge. They'd hit someone! The falling body plummeted closer, arms and legs flailing wildly. It was Anghelides! Kohl sneered triumphantly as the body hit the beach a few feet away - but his face fell when the occultist rose and turned to face him.

'So!' Anghelides hissed. 'This is how you intend to reach Agartha, is it? But you reckon without the *Ordo Templi Typhonis*!'

'The first thing I will do once my armies have seized control of Europe,' Kohl replied, 'is bring an end to that infamous order!'

'What are the fuck are they doing?' barked Hamish. Beneath them, they could see Anghelides bearing down on Kohl. The goblins around them seemed uncertain how to react to this foe in their midst and it was up to Kohl to defend himself.

'That's ma spear!' Hamish shouted, seeing Kohl lift the weapon up to menace Anghelides. 'Ya scunner!' he yelled and he leapt over the edge.

'Idiot!' shouted Osborne, grabbing for him. He caught Hamish by the hood of his coat, but the lad's momentum pulled him over. The pair of them toppled into the darkness.

'Oh dear me,' said Menyw worriedly. Things weren't turning out as planned.

Osborne and Hamish landed on the grey sand with a thump that knocked the breath out of them. Groaning, Osborne tried to rise, to find three flint-tipped spears at his throat. He looked about him. They were surrounded by goblins.

'Shit...' said Hamish painfully.

'Hamish, you idiot,' gasped Osborne.

Kohl thrust again with the Spear.

'You think you're immortal, don't you?' he laughed wildly, as Anghelides dodged. 'But are you immune to a divine artefact such as this? I don't think so.'

'Shall we kill him?' demanded the Pwcca suddenly. 'This is your rival, is it not? Who, then, are his minions?'

'Degenerates!' said Kohl. 'This "occult master" associates with such scum because no one else will...'

Anghelides' hand flashed out. Kohl heaved the Spear back as the occultist tried to wrench it out of his hand and fell back against the wall of the submersible. His grip on the weapon weakened and Anghelides tore it away.

The occultist raised the Spear above his head.

The Pwcca shouted something and the goblins closest to the scene put arrows to their strung bows. Anghelides looked round. About a dozen goblins menaced him. Already, his tattered body was riddled with arrows.

He seized Kohl with his free arm and pulled him against his bony chest as a human shield.

'Stay back!' he shouted. 'Don't shoot! Do these savages understand a word I say?' he added in an undertone to the Neo-Nazi.

'Don't shoot him!' Kohl cried out. 'Don't shoot me! Or you'll never get the weapons I promised you!'

The Pwcca raised a hand and his archers relaxed, although they did not lower their bows.

'You are his foe?' he asked.

Anghelides looked down at the little man.

'Correct,' he replied cautiously. 'What of it?'

The Pwcca tilted his head thoughtfully.

'Kohl wishes to enter the underworld through the maelstrom. He says that you do too. He offers us superior weapons with which to defeat our age-old enemies the *ellyllon*. And yet we have still to see these weapons he offers. We have no reason to trust him. But what about you? If you can improve on his offer, we may allow you and your degenerate minions to use the submersible...'

'What are they talking aboot?' said Hamish.

'I think Anghelides is trying to get the goblins on our side,' replied Osborne, squinting at the scene.

'On his side, you mean,' said Hamish. 'He'll forget aboot us as soon as we're no longer useful.' He winced and turned his head towards Osborne. 'What's happened to Menyw?'

Kohl cursed his treacherous associates.

'Are you such a fool you think this walking corpse is willing to do a deal with you?' he gasped. The Pwcca returned his gaze imperturbably.

'I'm not such a fool as to take your word,' he replied.

'Treacherous *untermensch*!' snarled Kohl. With an abrupt movement, he slipped out of Anghelides' grasp and sent the occultist tumbling to the ground. He seized the Spear, then turned and swung himself up the side of the submersible, towards the hatch at the top.

The Pwcca yelled something to his goblins and the air around Kohl hummed with stone-headed arrows as the goblin archers loosed.

'And kill the others!' he cried. 'We cannot trust any of the overworlders!'

Anghelides was struggling to his feet when the goblins turned on him. He sank back onto the cold sand, his grisly body pin-cushioned with arrows.

'No!' shouted Hamish as the goblins raised stone axes to despatch him. He flung one aside and tried to run, but more leapt on him. Osborne feebly tried to rise, but was knocked back by a blow from a stone axe.

It was just at that moment that Menyw floated down into the melee.

'Stop this, Pwcca!' cried the old druid.

The Pwcca raised a hand and his goblins paused. The goblin king strode forward.

'Who are you who floats down from above?' the Pwcca demanded. His eyes narrowed to baleful slits and recognition seemed to dawn. 'No... It can't be...!'

'Yes, Pwcca,' Menyw replied. 'I am the old enemy of your folk. One hundred generations ago, I and King Pretanos led the Pretani to Albion...'

'We know you from our legends,' the Pwcca spat. 'It was you and your people with your swords of sky-metal who stole our land and forced us to flee into the forests and the mountains. And now you trouble us even here!'

'It was the will of the gods,' Menyw replied. 'We tried to co-exist peacefully with you, but you attacked us again and again.' He looked weary. 'The war was long. Even today, it continues underground. But today, it is you who are the aggressors. Let us pass into the centre of the world, or people of his kind' - he indicated Kohl, still clinging to the top of the submersible - 'will control the overworld.'

'Why should we care?' the Pwcca spat. 'Whoever rules above would exterminate us all without a thought. Just as we will kill you!'

He raised his hands and the goblins rushed forward. They surrounded the druid, but Menyw turned towards the Pwcca again and laughed.

'I kept you talking long enough,' he said. Osborne, watching the confrontation from the ground nearby, was shocked by the expression on the old man's face; cold, sneering, triumphant. 'Now face your final defeat!' the druid added. A commotion from the head of the beach drew everyone's attention.

Issuing from a cave mouth were the warriors of the *ellyllon*.

Siân charged across the rocks, at her father's side. Behind her came Bhukhan, his face resolute; behind him were Nick and Eloise, resigned to fighting on the elven side. 'My enemy's enemy...' Eloise had said finally. The *coblynau* turned to face their assault.

Siân drew the bronze machete her father had given her. The melee began.

'Siân!' a voice screamed from the confusion ahead. She lashed out at the goblins swarming towards her and tried to locate the speaker.

Their guards had run off to join the defence and Hamish and Osborne were free to watch the battle as it spread out across the wet subterranean beach. Osborne had just spotted the Welsh girl.

'Never mind her, there's Eloise and Nick!' Hamish shouted. 'Eloise!' he cried. 'Eloise!'

The girl spotted them across the broiling chaos, where goblins and elves fought with hideous savagery. She waved briefly and grabbed Nick by the arm.

'Never mind them!' Menyw shouted from nearby. 'Look!'

The druid was pointing towards the submersible.

'Where do you think you're going?' demanded Siân.

Her machete was red with goblin blood and her eyes glinted. The expression on her face was something Eloise had hitherto only seen on the faces of the Little People.

'We're going to join our friends,' said Eloise defiantly. She could see a way through the battle to join them. She had also seen Kohl enter the giant metal globe behind them. What he was doing, she didn't know, but she was certain that it would not bode well for them.

'What's it to you?' Nick added. Both had joined the elven army in the hopes of finding their friends; both had viewed Siân's transformation with concern.

Siân glowered at them.

'You're not my people,' she said, as if she was trying to convince herself. 'Why should I trust you...'

'Look,' Eloise said. 'If you really want to stay with your bloodthirsty Stone Age friends, you do that. But we've got a job to do. Kohl is escaping. We've got to stop him before he gets to the Cauldron!'

Siân looked at them in an agony of indecision.

A scream of anger and pain rang out through the battlefield. They turned, to see Siân's father bearing the goblin leader to the ground. He lifted his axe, then brought it slashing down.

They watched in sick horror as Khorakh put his lips to the Pwcca's gaping neck and drank the spurting blood.

'Stop him!' shouted Menyw. The submersible hatch was closing. Kohl had disappeared within a minute ago.

Hamish, Osborne at his heels, grabbed hold of the ladder and scrambled up. He seized the hatch and set his shoulder to it, to stop it closing. Gears ground and shrieked. Osborne joined him and put his own shoulder against the hatch.

The submersible was beginning to sway, as if about to set sail upon the swirling waters of the underground river.

'Go!' shouted Bukhan.

Siân turned to her brother.

'What...' she said in amazement.

'This place is not for you,' Bukhan replied. 'We may have the same father, but you belong in the overground world. Look!' He indicated the battlefield, where the victorious elves were slaughtering the defeated goblins and others prepared fires to cook their corpses. 'These people - my people - you could never understand them! I have problems and I was only overground three years...'

'Then come with us!' Eloise said.

Bukhan shook his head. 'I fit in with my father's people no more than Siân does with her mother's,' he admitted. 'I belong here, just as she belongs overground - but look!'

He pointed towards the submersible, which was beginning to move towards the waters. Menyw stood beside it, waving desperately at them.

'Come on!' said Eloise. She ran towards the druid, Nick following. Siân turned to look at Bukhan.

'Go!' he shouted. She hesitated, then turned and followed the humans.

Bukhan followed them with his eyes as they clambered onto the submersible and tried to gain access. Then he went to join the elves as they feasted upon their fallen foes.

The travellers burst into the submersible cabin. Kohl turned to face them.

'Have you come to join me?' he sneered, looking from witch to druid, biker to skinhead, then eyeing Nick and Siân with equal scorn. 'The hatch is shut, despite your attempts. We are now entering the water. The journey to Agartha will be a long one.

'How will we pass the time?'

The current seized hold of the metal globe and they spun away across the dark, turbulent waters. Slowly, they sank beneath the surface.

The falls seized them and flung them spinning into the abyss.

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