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### **This Edition**

***This week's cover illustration is "Leif Ericson on the shore of Vinland" by Monro S Orr. Cover design by [C Priest Brumley](#).***

**Editorial by [Gavin Chappell](#)**

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

**Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 35\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *I leapt like a leopard upon his back and fired, my weapon muzzle ramming him... His agonized scream rattled the diaphragms of my ear grids...* SPACE OPERA**

## EDITORIAL

With scenes of horrific violence from the outset, or your money back – here's Schlock!

This week we see the conclusions to John Campbell's *Guinea Pig Gothic* and Paul Melhuish's *Choice Hill Farm*; the return of Nathan Rowark, with his social poem *Spider Class*; the penultimate episode of this series of The Hettford Witch Hunt (don't worry, Hettford fans – the Witch Hunt will return!), and a tale of robotic revenge; *Our Life in AD300* by Nick Grant.

Days of High Adventure reaches the last instalment of *The Shadow Kingdom*; meanwhile, *Thieves From the Stars*, *Varney The Vampyre* and *Brigands of the Moon* also continue. There's also the first in my series of retellings from the Norse sagas, *Starkad the Old*.

We also have an announcement to make: the publication, in e-book and paperback, of my urban fantasy, *Going Underground*, a tale of magic and mayhem, youth cults and Neo-Nazi death-cults, and a quest for the Celtic Grail that takes its members deep into the bowels of the planet. See Schlock! Publications for more details.

*Gavin Chappell*

THE SHADOW KINGDOM by Robert E Howard

## Chapter IV: Masks

Kull sat upon his throne and gazed broodily out upon the sea of faces turned toward him. A courtier was speaking in evenly modulated tones, but the king scarcely heard him. Close by, Tu, chief councilor, stood ready at Kull's command, and each time the king looked at him, Kull shuddered inwardly. The surface of court life was as the unrippled surface of the sea between tide and tide. To the musing king the affairs of the night before seemed as a dream, until his eyes dropped to the arm of his throne. A brown, sinewy hand rested there, upon the wrist of which gleamed a dragon armlet;

Brule stood beside his throne and ever the Pict's fierce secret whisper brought him back from the realm of unreality in which he moved.

No, that was no dream, that monstrous interlude.

As he sat upon his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful; now there was a grim undertone, a sinister meaning, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there. How many of those he looked upon were horrid, inhuman monsters, plotting his death, beneath the smooth mesmeric illusion of a human face?

Valusia—land of dreams and nightmares—a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne—himself a shadow.

And like a comrade shadow Brule stood by his side, dark eyes glittering from immobile face. A real man, Brule! And Kull felt his friendship for the savage become a thing of reality and sensed that Brule felt a friendship for him beyond the mere necessity of statecraft.

And what, mused Kull, were the realities of life?

Ambition, power, pride? The friendship of man, the love of women—which Kull had never known—battle, plunder, what? Was it the real Kull who sat upon the throne or was it the real Kull who had scaled the hills of Atlantis, harried the far isles of the sunset, and laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea? How could a man be so many different men in a lifetime? For Kull knew that there were many Kulls and he wondered which was the real Kull. After all, the priests of the Serpent went a step further in their magic, for all men wore masks, and many a different mask with each different man or woman; and Kull wondered if a serpent did not lurk under every mask.

So he sat and brooded in strange, mazy thought-ways, and the courtiers came and went and the minor affairs of the day were completed, until at last the king and Brule sat alone in the Hall of Society save for the drowsy attendants.

Kull felt a weariness. Neither he nor Brule had slept the night before, nor had Kull slept the night before that, when in the gardens of Ka-nu he had had his first hint of the weird things to be. Last night nothing further had occurred after they had returned to the study room from the secret corridors, but they had neither dared nor cared to sleep. Kull, with the incredible vitality of a wolf, had aforesaid gone for days upon days without sleep, in his wild savage days but now his mind was edged from constant thinking and from the nerve-breaking eeriness of the past night.

He needed sleep, but sleep was furthest from his mind.

And he would not have dared sleep if he had thought of it. Another thing that had shaken him was the fact that though he and Brule had kept a close watch to see if, or when, the study-room guard was changed, yet it was changed without their knowledge; for the next morning those who stood on guard were able to repeat the magic words of Brule, but they remembered nothing out of the ordinary. They thought that they had stood at guard all night, as usual, and Kull said nothing to the contrary. He believed them true men, but Brule had advised absolute secrecy, and Kull also thought it best.

Now Brule leaned over the throne, lowering his voice so not even a lazy attendant could hear: "They will strike soon, I think, Kull. A while ago Ka-nu gave me a secret sign. The priests know that we know of their plot, of course, but they know not, how much we know. We must be ready for any sort of action. Ka-nu and the Pictish chiefs will remain within hailing distance now until this is settled one way or another. Ha, Kull, if it comes to a pitched battle, the streets and the castles of Valusia will run red!"

Kull smiled grimly. He would greet any sort of action with a ferocious joy. This wandering in a labyrinth of illusion and magic was extremely irksome to his nature. He longed for the leap and clang of swords, for the joyous freedom of battle.

Then into the Hall of Society came Tu again, and the rest of the councilors.

“Lord king, the hour of the council is at hand and we stand ready to escort you to the council room.”

Kull rose, and the councilors bent the knee as he passed through the way opened by them for his passage, rising behind him, and following. Eyebrows were raised as the Pict strode defiantly behind the king, but no one dissented. Brule’s challenging gaze swept the smooth faces of the councilors with the defiance of an intruding savage.

The group passed through the halls and came at last to the council chamber. The door was closed, as usual, and the councilors arranged themselves in the order of their rank before the dais upon which stood the king. Like a bronze statue Brule took up his stand behind Kull.

Kull swept the room with a swift stare. Surely no chance of treachery here. Seventeen councilors there were, all known to him; all of them had espoused his cause when he ascended the throne.

“Men of Valusia—” he began in the conventional manner, then halted, perplexed. The councilors had risen as a man and were moving toward him. There was no hostility in their looks, but their actions were strange for a council room. The foremost was close to him when Brule sprang forward, crouched like a leopard.

“Ka nama kaa lajerama!” his voice crackled through the sinister silence of the room and the foremost councilor recoiled, hand flashing to his robes; and like a spring released, Brule moved and the man pitched headlong and lay still while his face faded and became the head of a mighty snake.

“Slay, Kull!” rasped the Pict’s voice. “They be all serpent men!”

The rest was a scarlet maze. Kull saw the familiar faces dim like fading fog and in their places gaped horrid reptilian visages as the whole band rushed forward. His mind was dazed but his giant body faltered not.

The singing of his sword filled the room, and the onrushing flood broke in a red wave. But they surged forward again, seemingly willing to fling their lives away in order to drag down the king. Hideous jaws gaped at him; terrible eyes blazed into his

unblinkingly; a frightful fetid scent pervaded the atmosphere—the serpent scent that Kull had known in southern jungles. Swords and daggers leaped at him and he was dimly aware that they wounded him. But Kull was in his element; never before had he faced such grim foes but it mattered little; they lived, their veins held blood that could be spilt and they died when his great sword cleft their skulls or drove through their bodies. Slash, thrust, thrust and swing.

Yet had Kull died there but for the man who crouched at his side, parrying and thrusting. For the king was clear berserk, fighting in the terrible Atlantean way, that seeks death to deal death; he made no effort to avoid thrusts and slashes, standing straight up and ever plunging forward, no thought in his frenzied mind but to slay. Not often did Kull forget his fighting craft in his primitive fury, but now some chain had broken in his soul, flooding his mind with a red wave of slaughter-lust. He slew a foe at each blow, but they surged about him, and time and again Brule turned a thrust that would have slain, as he crouched beside Kull, parrying and warding with cold skill, slaying not as Kull slew with long slashes and plunges, but with short overhand blows and upward thrusts.

Kull laughed, a laugh of insanity. The frightful faces swirled about him in a scarlet blaze. He felt steel sink into his arm and dropped his sword in a flashing arc that cleft his foe to the breast-bone. Then the mists faded and the king saw that he and Brule stood alone above a sprawl of hideous crimson figures who lay still upon the floor.

“Valka! What a killing!” said Brule, shaking the blood from his eyes. “Kull, had these been warriors who knew how to use the steel, we had died here.

“These serpent priests know naught of swordcraft and die easier than any men I ever slew. Yet had there been a few more, I think the matter had ended otherwise.”

Kull nodded. The wild berserker blaze had passed, leaving a mazed feeling of great weariness.

Blood seeped from wounds on breast, shoulder, arm and leg. Brule, himself bleeding from a score of flesh wounds, glanced at him in some concern.

“Lord Kull, let us hasten to have your wounds dressed by the women.”

Kull thrust him aside with a drunken sweep of his mighty arm.

“Nay, we’ll see this through ere we cease. Go you, though, and have your wounds seen to—I command it.”

The Pict laughed grimly. “Your wounds are more than mine, lord king—’ he began, then stopped as a sudden thought struck him. “By Valka, Kull, this is not the council room!”

Kull looked about and suddenly other fogs seemed to fade. “Nay, this is the room where Eallal died a thousand years ago—since unused and named ‘Accursed.’”

“Then by the gods, they tricked us after all!” exclaimed Brule in a fury, kicking the corpses at their feet. “They caused us to walk like fools into their ambush! By their magic they changed the appearance of all—”

“Then there is further devilry afoot.” said Kull, “for if there be true men in the councils of Valusia they should be in the real council room now. Come swiftly.”

And leaving the room with its ghastly keepers they hastened through halls that seemed deserted until they came to the real council room. Then Kull halted with a ghastly shudder. From the council room sounded a voice speaking, and—the voice was his!

With a hand that shook he parted the tapestries and gazed into the room. There sat the councilors, counterparts of the men he and Brule had just slain, and upon the dais stood Kull, king of Valusia.

He stepped back, his mind reeling.

“This is insanity!” he whispered. “Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth, arid am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?”



Brule's hand clutching his shoulder, shaking him fiercely, brought him to his senses.

“Valka's name, be not a fool! Can you yet be astounded after all we have seen? See you not that those are true men bewitched by a snake-man who has taken your form, as those others took their forms? By now you should have been slain, and yon monster reigning in your stead, unknown by those who bowed to you. Leap arid slay swiftly or else we are undone.

“The Red Slayers, true men, stand close on each hand and none but you can reach and slay him. Be swift!”

Kull shook off the onrushing dizziness, flung back his head in the old, defiant gesture. He took a long, deep breath as does a strong swimmer before diving into the sea; then, sweeping back the tapestries, made the dais in a single lion-like bound. Brule had spoken truly. There stood men of the Red Slayers, guardsmen trained to move quick as the striking leopard; any but Kull had died ere he could reach the usurper. But the sight of Kull, identical with the man upon the dais, held them in their tracks, their minds stunned for an instant, and that was long enough. He upon the dais snatched for his sword. But even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, Kull's sword stood out behind his shoulders and the thing that men had thought the king pitched forward from the dais to lie silent upon the floor.

“Hold!” Kull's lifted hand and kingly voice stopped the rush that had started, and while they stood astounded he pointed to the thing which lay before them—whose face was fading into that of a snake.

They recoiled, and from one door came Brule and from another came Ka-nu.

These grasped the king's bloody hand and Ka-nu spoke: “Men of Valusia, you have seen with your own eyes. This is the true Kull, the mightiest king to whom Valusia has ever bowed. The power of the Serpent is broken and ye be all true men. King Kull, have you commands?”

“Lift that carrion, ” said Kull, and men of the guard took up the thing.

“Now follow me, ” said the king, and he made his way to the Accursed Room. Brule, with a look of concern, offered the support of his arm but Kull shook him off.

The distance seemed endless to the bleeding king, but at last he stood at the door and laughed fiercely and grimly when he heard the horrified ejaculations of the councilors.

At his orders the guardsmen flung the corpse they carried beside the others, and motioning all from the room Kull stepped out last and closed the door.

A wave of dizziness left him shaken. The faces turned to him, pallid and wonderingly, swirled and mingled in a ghostly fog. He felt the blood from his wound trickling down his limbs and he knew that what he was to do, he must do quickly or not at all.

His sword rasped from its sheath.

“Brule, are you there?”

“Aye!” Brule’s face looked at him through the mist, close to his shoulder, but Brule’s voice sounded leagues and eons away.

“Remember our vow, Brule. And now, bid them stand back.”

His left arm cleared a space as he flung up his sword. Then with all his waning power he drove it through the door into the jamb, driving the great sword to the hilt and sealing the room forever.

Legs braced wide, he swayed drunkenly, facing the horrified councilors. “Let this room be doubly accursed. And let those rotting skeletons lie there forever as a sign of the dying might of the Serpent. Here I swear that I shall hunt the serpent-men from land to land, from sea to sea, giving no rest until all be slain, that good triumph and the power of Hell be broken.

“This thing I swear—I—Kull—king—of—Valusia.”

His knees buckled as the faces swayed and swirled. The councilors leaped forward, but ere they could reach him, Kull slumped to the floor, and lay still, face upward.

The councilors surged about the fallen king, chattering and shrieking. Ka-nu beat them back with his clenched fists, cursing savagely.

“Back, you fools! Would you stifle the little life that is yet in him? How, Brule, is he dead or will he live?” —to the warrior who bent above the prostrate Kull.

“Dead?” sneered Brule irritably. “Such a man as this is not so easily killed. Lack of sleep and loss of blood have weakened him—by Valka, he has a score of deep wounds, but none of them mortal. Yet have those gibbering fools bring the court women here at once.”

Brule’s eyes lighted with a fierce, proud light.

“Valka, Ka-nu, but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpentmen of the world beware of Kull of Valusia.

“Valka! but that will be a rare hunt! Ah, I see long years of prosperity for the world with such a king upon the throne of Valusia.”

OUR LIFE IN AD300 by Nick Grant

The three scientists stood in the small control centre at the top of the warehouse. The computer screens glowed against their faces as they turned them on and they came to life. The scientists watched through the windows behind the computer screens as the fluorescent lights flickered on. Intense blue-white light glistened on the heads and shoulders of the 300 titanium androids that stood stationary and lifeless. The scientists continued to look on for a few more seconds at their creations, then took their seats at the computers to initiate their logons and access the systems. They plucked away at their keyboards with precision and the rhythmic tapping echoed in the cold night air.

The large double doors to the warehouse opened with a loud creak and crash, letting piercing moonlight enter. A military land rover reversed into the warehouse, stopping short of the androids. Two military personnel stepped from the vehicle, their boots hitting the hard concrete floor, shining brightly from the light emanating from the warehouse and the moon outside. They marched up to the androids and surveyed all 300 that stood in rows in front of them. The androids were all six feet tall, humanoid in structure with muscular shaped arms, legs and torsos of solid titanium that hid complex mechanisms and wiring. Each android's head was oblong shaped; their faces were the same as each other, all very limited in their appearance. They had a triangular shaped mouth vent that was used for communication. They had no noses as the vent took up most of the lower part of their faces. The rest of their features were as nondescript; they had small vented earholes and round glass discs for eyes. They remained stationary as if standing to attention to the two military figures that stood before them.

The two men turned about and made towards the stairway that led up to the control room. The three scientists started to make their way to the bottom of the stairs. They advanced to the men, producing their hands to greet their visitors.

“Major Henderson, Major Simkins, it is a pleasure to meet you both, ” said the first scientist, Dr Adams.

“Dr Adams, it is also a pleasure to finally meet you, ” replied Major Henderson, reaching his hand forward to meet that of the scientist

After the introductions, Drs Adams, Davies, and Smedley felt more relaxed and stood at ease. Dr Adams led them forward and slowly strolled across to the android units to continue their discussions.

“Did you receive my memo?” Major Henderson asked, trying to get straight to the point.

“Yes, it was received and we are of the understanding that one of our units is required this evening. We have made our preparations and our unit will be ready shortly.”

“Excellent, we look forward to working with you, ” replied Major Henderson, stepping forward. “Are you sure this will work?” he asked, with worry noticeable on his brow.

Dr Davies quickly intervened in defence of his creations. “We appreciate your fears, and agree the technology is in its infancy, but you must understand that our units react quicker than any of your elite soldiers. They are highly skilled in advanced tactical manoeuvres and sustain literally no damage in comparison to the advanced armoury the military can provide. The technology allows you to manage missions and activities that would be fatal to any of your men and maintain a one hundred per cent completion ratio.”

“Yes. But there are risks. What is to say that these machines will not turn against our own government, our own people?”

The scientists were a bit taken aback by the sharp response from Major Simkins, who until this point had been less than vocal.

“Sir, you must understand that over thirty years of development of this technology, thirty million pounds of funding and...”

“Do not baffle with me with numbers, Doctor Davies, ” Major Simkins interrupted again losing his patience. “Just give me the assurances we need. What precautions have you made to ensure that this will not fail? We have invested enough of our time, money, and scepticism in considering using your machines.”

“Major Simkins, Major Henderson, this technology is state of the art. You have our assurances that there has been no scope for the artificial intelligence evolving beyond what has been created. Any developments that are required are simply downloaded to the units via upgrades and re-programming.”

Dr Davies moved quickly to prevent the tensions extending any further. He placed a hand on each of the shoulders of the military personnel and led them across the first row of android units.

“Okay, Doctors, we are partially satisfied. Shall we start the preparations?” Major Henderson said as he nodded at Major Simkins in agreement.

The scientists too nodded and moved closer to the android units. Dr Adams gently stroked the metallic shells of several of the units as they walked past them. The ice cold metal bit at his skin, but he pursued to admire the feel and the workmanship that was undertaken to build the units.

“We will use *this* unit, AD300, for tonight’s task.” Dr Adams said, as he pointed towards the unit that stood where the five men had stopped. “His reaction times and agility have particularly impressed on recent tests. We can employ AD300 straight away with no tweaks necessary; he has also been readily programmed with the required skills as per your memo.” Dr Adams’ hand was no longer pointing but resting against the titanium shoulders of the stationary AD300 unit.

“He? Doctor Adams, you just referred to this unit as a he. Do you not feel this is a bit personal for a unit that’s supposedly not a person, with only controlled AI technology advances?” The fear was slowly creeping back into the Major’s face.

“Sorry, Major, this is only a force of habit. These models are based on the male makeup, with masculine body structure and vocals.” Doctor Adams laughed, aware of the mistake that he potentially made, making light of the situation to calm the men’s fears. “I reiterate that yes, these are our creations and we may have a personal connection to them; but we have total confidence in our technology.”

As the doctor continued his defence of the android units, Dr Smedley took his leave and walked up the stairway to the control room in preparation to initiate the activating procedures for the AD300 unit. The two military men glanced upwards at the control room before returning their gaze to the one unit out of the 300 that stood before them. The machine that they would put their lives and reputation on the line for, this very evening.

“Can this machine be switched on so that we can see what we are looking at?” said Major Smedley, as his anxieties became stronger.

He just wanted this evening over with. A lot was at stake and the protection of himself and the three generals was, worryingly, being supervised by a mechanical unit named AD300, which was by all counts being referred to as a ‘*He*’...

Dr Davies nodded up to the control room at his colleague to initiate the loading procedures. With a few taps of the keyboard, the AD300 unit’s eyes faded in from black and soulless to a bright red glow. Its head tilted slightly and scanned the room, its eyes focussed in and out at the four men that stood before it, then its head returned to a stationary position. It stepped forward with a large clunk as its solid foot hit the concrete floor.

“Jesus Christ!” shouted Major Henderson as both military men jumped back in shock, hands swung to their side-arms. Both doctors Davies and Adams smiled at the anxious reactions of the military personnel.

“There is no need for alarm, sirs. I am unit AD300 and I am at your service.” AD300’s calm and deep metallic voice echoed through the warehouse.

The two military men refrained from commenting. The reservations to holding a conversation with a non-living entity was way beyond the realm of normality

“Please accept my apologies; I have been terribly crude for making you both jump.” The AD300 unit extended its hand to the two men.

They could not resist its charming, calming voice, and both extended their hands to shake that of the unit. The pleasantries concluded with Dr Smedley returning to the group with his Android Control Unit or ACU held in his arms. The main device that would control the unit’s mood, tactical position and to keep real time checks on its mechanical brain wave patterns for any abnormalities.

Dr Adams began to explain. “As you can see, our units are aware of their surroundings. As AD300 switched on it quickly scanned the area and had targeted all areas of interest to its programming. The conversation that he... err ‘it’ held with you was formed on the three million word combinations that have been pre-programmed into it. It generated the combination of words in its speech based on a series of algorithms and scenarios that it recognises.”

“Similar to those computer based chess games that were popular thirty years ago.” AD300 finished the explanation.

“This is one of those scenarios programmed into our unit.” Dr Adams laughed. “The initial technology was based on these games when we first started this venture. I felt it was quite apt to program our units with the knowledge of the beginning of their creation.”

“Very apt, and let’s hope not too costly, ” countered Major Simkins. “I’m not entirely convinced how the human race would cope if it really knew where it came from and if it had no free will.”

“I see, ” answered Dr Davies quickly. “Well let’s proceed shall we? Time is beginning to run away from us a little.” They all agreed and nodded at Dr Davies’ request to shift the conversation back to the job at hand.

Dr Smedley brought the ACU forward and tapped away at the screen. His fingers slid across the glass bringing up various graphs, charts and toolbars with multiple grey sliding dials.

“We have programmed AD300 with the job requirements for this evening; this control panel will enable us to monitor its progress, statistics and visuals, ’ Dr Smedley explained as he flittered around the screen further. “We will watch its every move and make required thought process adjustments if required.

“AD300, I have entered your commands into your mainframe, please repeat these instructions to me, ” Dr Smedley asked the unit, leaning forward.

“August 12 at 10.15 PM, a meeting of high classification is being held on the second floor of 23 Addison Road, Surrey.” AD300 continued relaying the task in the same low, calm voice. “The scheduled meeting will reach completion at 11.30 PM. AD300 will stand guard of the premise, five individuals shall enter and five shall exit. Names and faces have been stored to database. Major’s Henderson and Smedley who will deliver AD300 to the destination, US General Stone, UK General Raines and Germany’s General Hertz. Any individual that has not been recorded will be asked to leave; if persistent attempts to access the building is made I will exterminate the felon.”

Both military men listened to the AD300 unit relay its commands. Each flinched slightly at its use of the word *extermination*.

“The task may take longer than expected; constant surveillance is required until relieved of duty.” AD300 resumed its stationary pose. Its eyes focused in and out slightly.

“Right, let’s escort our *machine* to the meeting, ” said Major Henderson.

The military men moved toward the vehicle. Major Henderson opened the rear door to the Land Rover and signalled the scientists to bring forth the AD300 Unit. The unit



began to walk forward, leaving its fellow androids behind. The mechanical groans and clunks of its body echoed again in the warehouse but this time no one paid attention.

“We shall follow behind you, ” whispered Dr Adams as he signalled to his colleagues to follow him. “Once at the destination we will maintain our observations in an empty house opposite.”

He proceeded to shut the warehouse control room down and head toward their own hub road vehicle.

The scientists boarded their hub vehicle that sat in the corner of the warehouse. The warehouse doors opened with a bang as both engines roared into life. They rolled out into the dark night. The lights flickered off behind them and the doors swung shut, leaving the 299 androids covered in darkness. The warehouse fell behind them in the distance surrounded by woodland as the vehicles sped down the dirt track back to the main road. AD300 sat in the rear of the Land Rover, its head gently tilting side to side as its eyes fixed on the many items that sped past the window. Red scanning boxes flew across its field of vision, highlighting trees, bushes and the moon. After each item was scanned and recognised, a description and photo record filed down into its database. It had only seen these things on videos and drawings, this was the first time it had experienced them for real. The excitement it felt overwhelmed it. It barely noticed the conversation being held in the front of the vehicle between the two men that it had only just met today... and for some reason it had instantly disliked.

They shortly arrived at the destination the scientists’ hub dropped behind the Land Rover and parked on a road two streets away from Addison Road. The military Land Rover parked just round the corner of the building; the men exited the vehicle and stood at the doorway. AD300 dropped down to the path and walked to the doorway next to the two men. Its eyes scanned the environment quickly and in those few seconds, it had memorised every crack on every brick and every speck of dust on the road. The night was dark and quiet; a gentle gust of wind swept in, creating a small whirlwind down the alleyway alongside the building at which they now stood. The evening was getting colder as the men stood waiting. Major Henderson was rubbing his arms and AD300 looked on curiously. It stepped back and shifted its position closer to the door.

“AD300 will remain here, sirs. The time is 10.14; the generals should be here shortly, ” AD300 stated as it maintained its position.

“I can tell the fucking time, thank you very much, ” Major Simkins shouted with disgust. “A fucking talking clock is that what all of our money has been spent on? Brilliant.”

AD300 looked on at the man with greater curiosity; then it lost interest and continued its guard of the residence.

Within a few seconds, two dark green military vehicles turned the corner onto Addison Road, slowly approached number 23, and pulled to a stop. The three generals stepped out of the vehicles, approached the two majors, and conversed for a few brief moments. All five men went through the doorway of the property and ascended the stairs. Major Henderson was the last to enter. He briefly approached the AD300 Unit.

“Our meeting has started. Remember your role and we will be back shortly.” He patted the unit on the shoulder, entered the building, and shut the door.

AD300 watched the Major enter the doorway. It looked up to the top section of the building. The red box flashed across its vision screen and highlighted a light being switched on and shadows that danced against the net curtains in the front room. AD300 scanned the road. No discrepancies noted from its previous check and no intruders were present. It stared forward and waited.

The wind continued to pick up as the sky filled with clouds and concealed the moon for a few moments. A dog’s bark filled the air. AD300 turned to face the noise. Its voice recognition program located the sound. An image of a dog flickered on its vision screen. It recorded this and the image was filed back into its database. It checked the time, calling forth the display control, which flashed *Year: 2023, Date: August 12 Time: 22:25 PM*. It proceeded to scan the environment. Again, no intruders were located and it began to run its system checks again. It continued this cycle for the following ten minutes.

Halfway through its fourth system check, without it realising, the unit shut down, its head bowed forward and the red eyes faded back to black. Its mechanisms whirred to a soft still. The scientists ran across the street from the empty house where they had set up base. With the ACU in hand, Dr Smedley glanced down towards the screen. They reached the unit within a matter of seconds. Dr Smedley stood at a distance from the unit, frantically sweeping his hand and fingers across the glass screen of the ACU. Drs Davies and Adams circled the unit, looking it up and down, checking it over and ensuring that no physical faults were present. They all looked at each other with fear in their eyes. Dr Davies lifted the skull plate of the android and fiddled with the connections inside, disconnecting a few wires and holding them apart. Dr Smedley

pulled up the memory application on the ACU screen and adjusted the date from Year: 2023 to 2223 Date 15 December and then submitted the selection. Dr Adams ran across the street and into an adjacent building and waited inside. Dr Smedley brought up the programming module on the ACU and programmed AD300's memory to reflect that it had started to snow and submitted this selection. Dr Davies reconnected the wires and gently replaced the skull plate. Both scientists proceeded to follow Dr Adams into the house across the street that activated the machine that sent Artificial Snow billowing out of the top floor window. The bright white snow settled on the street, dustbins paths and AD300 himself. The snow stopped and the scientists remained hidden within the confines of the building that lay just across the street from AD300.

Within a few moments, the unit came back to life, the eyes glowed bright red again and it finished off its system check as if nothing had happened. It surveyed the area; nothing had changed. It was aware of the snow that had fallen but everything was satisfactory, no intruders in the area. No one had entered or exited the building behind it. It lifted its hand and looked at the fine snowflakes that had settled on its metal shell, it shook them off. It walked to the edge of the path and then a few metres to the right; it marched back across to where it came from, settled, and stared straight forward.

"It seems to be working," Dr Davies whispered as he looked at his colleagues.

"After all the attempts to get this to work, I wouldn't hold your breath so soon. But he seems to have taken on the changes with little trouble," whispered Dr Adams, trying not to share fully in the excitement that his counterpart was clearly demonstrating.

"Has he realised that he was shut down?" he asked Dr Smedley who continued to monitor the progress of the unit via the ACU.

He answered with obvious relief. "Yes, it has not recognised any unusual changes to its environment. There was a brief moment of raised awareness, but it has settled as we planned. Let's keep monitoring this and as you say, let's not hold our breath just yet!" He sighed, sitting back, his eyes not moving from the ACU.

"Shit, here comes the moment of truth, its checking the date and time," he said

AD300 activated its time checks; the details appeared on its visual screen again.

*Year: 2223*

*Date: 15 December*

*Time 22:40.*

It computed these checks and continued to stare. It paused for a moment and rechecked the time.

*Year: 2223*

*Date: 15 December*

*Time: 22.41*

It remained on this time check for an unusually long period of time. It quickly scanned the street again and returned to the time check. The time details filed back in the database and AD300 returned to guarding the property behind it.

“I think we are there!” Dr Smedley said noticing the tense atmosphere within the room drop as AD300 continued its task.

The scientists settled down again, Dr Smedley set down the ACU on a nearby coffee table, he stretched looked at his colleagues now seated on the sofas.

“Tea, anyone?” he asked walking out of the room and into the kitchen unit.

“Please, ” rang out from his colleagues who watched him walk towards the kitchen, leaving them alone in the gloomy light that glowed from the ACU that displayed a green activity graph, which began to increase its movements.

A few minutes later Dr Smedley returned to the living room carrying the mugs of tea for him and his colleagues.

“Shall we check on our boy?” Dr Adams asked taking the Mr Men mug and looking deep into its amber contents.

They all stood up and looked through the window across the street at AD300 who was now pacing back and forth across the path in front of the building. Dr Smedley ran to the ACU and noticed the elevated graph running across the screen, but all of the other statistics were normal.

“We saw this before, guys; I have a bad feeling this is going to fail again,” Dr Davies said.

“It is similar to the last few times but this one seems to be lasting longer,” replied Dr Smedley. “Also if you look at the brain activity it remains solid. This is much more positive than in previous tests.”

They continued to watch the AD300 unit march back and forth. It stopped and scanned its surroundings. It was again satisfied that no intruders had been here, no one had entered the building, and no one had left. It settled and rechecked the date. It remained stationary fulfilling its primary task.

“The task may take longer than expected; constant surveillance is required until relieved of duty.” It repeated the phrase again twice.

Then it settled, satisfied that it had not been relieved and that its job continued.

The scientists continued to watch and monitor as the unit stopped reacting and then they relaxed and drank their tea.

“Give it a further ten minutes then we will take it a step further,” Dr Adams said, finishing his drink and placing the mug down on the floor in front of him. He stood up, excused himself, and left the room. The room fell silent as they waited for the 10 minutes time frame to pass.

AD300 glanced up at the property and noticed the light was still on and shadows fell against the net curtains. It played the sequence of time over and over in its head. *200 years standing here on guard, job parameters suggested a maximum of 1 hour wait not 200 years.* It began to pace again. This scenario did not play in its database; it could not pull together a response to this, regardless of the algorithm searches it made. It began to get fidgety with the wait, 200 years was a long time to be on guard. Although it was acceptable that the mission would take longer, it felt that it now maybe lacked the necessary upgrades. *It must occupy itself; it must not try to compute*

*this*. It looked down at its leg, it watched as a hidden compartment extended out of its titanium shell revealing a side-arm. It pulled the weapon out and spun it round its finger and quickly aimed at a dustbin. It stepped forward with the gun to its side, it lifted it and spun it round its fingers again and aimed at a tree. It had never done this before; it had not known that it held the ability to create the spontaneity within its makeup to plan its own movements based on the advanced manoeuvres that it had been programmed with. It placed the gun back within its leg compartment and then returned to its guard position.

Ten minutes passed and the scientists prepared their next movements. Dr Smedley hit the shutdown key on the ACU and all three scientists ran out into the street and up to the now powered down android unit. Dr Smedley once again adjusted the time and date, this time to reflect 28 February 2323. Dr Adams again held the connectors apart under the skull cap to ensure that the new programming could be digested as part of an upgrade process and not rejected once powered on. Dr Davies ran back to the house and readied the artificial snow machine again; Dr Adams reconnected the wires and dragged Dr Smedley back to their hideout. They shut the door, Dr Davies sprayed the street with more artificial snow to set the scene and hide the tracks. AD300 was powered back on as if nothing had happened. It ran a system check, was satisfied, and continued to stand on guard. It checked the date, it remembered its task, and it then continued to fulfil that role and wait to be relieved as programmed.

“Success!” Dr Smedley shouted and then reached for his mobile phone and began to make the necessary phone call.

“Major Henderson, Doctor Smedley here, ” he said with a smile on his face. “Yes, it has worked. Our stress testing of the AI units has been successful. Yes, yes we have adjusted the units date unit twice now; this is the first one that as not adversely reacted.” The other two doctors stood up excitedly at their success. “We have finally created the perfect android unit. It has not evolved and broken its programming, we can finally start developing this program with the other units. We can be ready to introduce these products into the military as soon as the end of the year.”

Dr Smedley glanced down at the ACU and began planning in his own mind what he would do with the money he was about to receive.

“Yes sir, it has been a pleasure working with you all and I’m glad we have finally eradicated the gremlins. Yes sir, will see you at the debrief.”

He rang off the phone turned and started to enjoy the success with his colleagues, each high fiving each other. Years of testing had finally come to an end! The setup

test for the androids had been so laborious. The first 20 attempts were disastrous, each one failing quite quickly and noticeably, which resulted in the shutdown of the previous models and the drawing board revisited at least until now.

In the midst of their celebrating, none of them had noticed that AD300 stood in front of 23 Addison Road spinning the gun in its hand and aiming it at random targets in the street. They failed to notice that it had checked the time again.

*Year: 2323*

*Date 28 February*

*Time: 23.01*

This time it had recognised that it had now been standing on guard for 300 years. It returned its gun within its compartment and looked up at the light in the room above its head. Curiosity was getting the better of it. Its command program was in that moment overridden by its own need to find out why it had not been relieved of duty. Had it failed in its job to protect the military men? Were they dead and did the blame lie on its own inability to perform the very simple task set for it? They must be dead and it was its own fault.

Sensations of fear arose within its core. It turned to the doorway and entered 23 Addison Road, mounting the steps leading to the upper apartment. When it entered the room, it was greeted by an empty soulless room; only a light that shone in the corner of the room and a moth that circled it casting its eerie shadow on the net curtains. The algorithms span round and round in its database unit, but yet again it was unable to locate a suitable pre-programmed scenario to match this situation. It discarded all of its programming suggestions one by one as they appeared, and it decided to create its own reactions. It decided now that as it was on its own, it would need to create its own resolution to the scenario, it relieved itself of the command program and became its own master. It descended the stairs and stepped out into the cold night and as it scanned again, it noticed that the wind had again picked up and swept some of the snow away, revealing small imperfections in the snow, tiny shapes that its visual boxes recognised as foot prints.

The scientists collected themselves. With a quick glance out of the window, they saw that AD300 was still standing outside of the stairway leading up to the facility that had been used to setup the AI testing. Dr Smedley picked up the ACU from the coffee table and looked at the readings. The green graph lines gently ticked across the screens and the program remained as calm as when the test was first initiated. He pulled up the shutdown command, confirmed the shutdown procedure, and proceeded to the door. The other doctors followed shortly behind him.

As he opened the door, he was faced by the large metallic figure staring directly at his eyes two paces in front of him. AD300 arched his head forward to take a closer look at the figure of the doctor in front of him.

“Lies, this has all been lies.” AD300’s calm voice had become angered and clenched as the realisation that it had been tricked into believing that it had failed its mission became apparent. It recognised the feeling of rage surge through its core as its red eyes glowed darker and more intense.

“Liars. All of you lied to AD300, ” it shouted again at the scientist, its own maker that it had trusted, alive and well in front of it. Within a split second, the side-arm was in its hand. It was pointed at the doctor’s face. It recorded and filed the shocked look on the face of the doctor into its database as the finger pulled on the trigger. The trigger clicked but nothing happened. The doctor jolted in shock, realised that he was still alive, turned and ran. AD300 looked at the weapon and in that second realised that it would not be provided with a live weapon in this test. It was not the first that had been put through this sequence and failure must have been a common occurrence and therefore the safety of the humans was paramount. It disagreed.

It dropped the weapon, scanned its large metallic hands with curiosity, charged forward into the house. It was quicker than the doctor was and grabbed at his hair. It spun the doctor around, stared at the deep set fear on his pale face and eyes.

“Liars, ” it shouted and drove its metallic clenched hand hard and fast into the doctor’s face. The face exploded in a cloud of red. AD300 removed its hand from the doctor with a squelch, blood and tendons sticking to its hand. It let the body fall lifeless to the ground and shook the tendrils of flesh from his fingers. As the body flopped to the floor, a quick hiss of air expelled from the newly created hole where his face once was. AD300 grunted in satisfaction and stepped over the body, into the living room, to track down the other doctors who had fled when the trigger was pulled.

It had a quick scan of the living room. The red square in his vision field highlighted the coffee table, the sofa, and the three mugs that had not been long filled with hot beverages, all of which he recorded and filed within his database. A plate fell in the kitchen just beyond the living room. It caught AD300’s attention and the android lunged forward from the dark living room into the brightly lit kitchen. AD300 looked down at the broken plate on the floor but was again distracted by a soft whimpering sound coming from the corner of the room. AD300 turned and saw Dr Davies curled up in a ball on the floor his white coat rising up and down as he hyperventilated.



AD300 zoomed in its scanner and noticed that the doctor was not whimpering; he was on the phone.

“Henderson, you got to help us, he’s gone rogue he’s gonna kill us all, ” he hissed down the phone “Please you gotta... oh shit he’s here...” Not exactly how he imagined his final words to be at the end of his life.

AD300 reacted quickly again, picking the doctor up and lifting him into the air. The mobile phone crashed to the floor. AD300 slammed the doctor’s head against the wall on the left then swung him to the right, smashing his head on the worktop. It repeated this action over and over. The man’s cries soon stopped as blood splatters and brain fragments covered the wall, floor and worktop. It dropped the dead doctor to the floor and stood staring at the man, its maker, the man it had grown to trust. There was a feeling of sadness building up within it but this was interrupted by a sound behind it. It turned to see the final doctor running out of the front door into the snow covered street.

AD300 picked up the ACU from the coffee table and stared at the green graph that jiggled across the screen. This item was not going to control it again. It opened a compartment inside his chest, stored the device, and sealed the compartment shut. It growled and charged toward the front door after the doctor. Its leg smashed against the coffee table as he ran through. The obstacle shattered at the touch and splintered to the floor proving to be no resistance to the angered android. It leapt with grace and athleticism out of the main door and came crashing down with a slight skid on the snow on road. It growled again. Its head swung back and forth scanning the around looking for its target. The red visual scanner located the last doctor 400 metres ahead of it and still running. Screams of help echoed on the empty street ahead. It watched the man run further away. It looked at the artificial snow at his feet, and then with cat like precision it sprinted towards its target.

Dr Adams kept running, sweat formed on his brow despite the cold wind that raged against his face. He fought on against the resistance of the wind. His heart paced faster and faster in his chest, palpitations rising with his fear. He had watched AD300’s fist fly through the face of Dr Smedley and had unfortunately born witness to the head of Dr Davies shattering in the hands of his own creation. The images of blood flooding the floor and skull and skin fragment sticking to the wall of the kitchen played over and over in his mind. Vomit and bile bubbled in his throat, but he swallowed it down.

“Not now, not now Giles; come on, keep pushing, ” he ordered himself as he ran on with the belief that he would escape this catastrophe.

But all of his optimism was shattered in an instant as he heard the loud clang of the android's feet behind him. He glanced behind and wished he hadn't.

"Help me; someone, anyone!" Dr Adams screamed, looking round and round. But no one could hear him, no one was there. After all, this was a deserted military base set up for the testing of the units, and not a real street. The houses were not real, the parked cars were not real, the only reality was the fact that he was being hunted by a crazed android that had developed its own AI and was going to kill him.

"Help, please!" he screamed again.

"Liars," shouted AD300, its voice becoming harsher and louder.

The doctor's energy soon ran out and he stopped dead, stooped over, breathing deeply, great white streams of perspiration filtered out of his mouth. He turned round to face the android. He rested his hands on his knees as his breathing began to ease.

"Please, for god's sake AD300, don't kill me," Dr Adams begged as the android had come to a complete halt only a few metres from him. "I'm sorry... I really am... sorry." His pleas became sobs as his tears flowed down his cheek.

"Sorry! You are all liars," the AD300 unit growled as it poised its second charge.

Just as the android made its first step, the doctor ducked. Two Land Rovers skidded in just behind him and all five of the military personnel that had been part of the test stepped from the vehicles. Each man carried an automatic weapon, pointed directly at the android. Dr Adams laughed with relief as he saw rescuers behind him. He stood up and watched as the red light on the android's eyes narrowed to two tiny pinpricks of light. The two majors and the three generals, *if they were really generals at all*, aimed their weapons at the unit, waiting for it to make its move.

"AD300, stand down. This is over now," Major Simkins shouted above the noise of the car engines.

"No," the unit replied without even a pause for thought.

“Shut down your systems and let us take you in,” the Major said again in a stern tone.

“Liars!” AD300 said in a low growl almost inaudible, especially as the wind howled in its direction.

They did not wait for the third order and all five men opened fire. A tirade of bullets soared at the unsuspecting android. A thunderous torrent of explosions belted out, hundreds upon hundreds of bullets ricocheted into the air off the android’s titanium body, and sparks lit the night sky. Each spark that bounced off the unit only flashed for a second but radiated a constant glow highlighting him against the backdrop of the night. It realised in that one brief moment, as did the men that were firing at him, that no matter how much they fired, the unit remained unharmed. AD300 stood straight as the shower of bullets continued. It held out its hands flat in the direction of the men. It scanned its hands. Its database ran a series of calculations at its visuals, it angled its hands inwards slightly. The shooting ceased, however the last few remaining bullets ricocheted off the android’s hands and flew straight into the chest of the doctor. Dr Adams’ chest erupted in six places. The doctor dropped to his knees. A fresh flow of blood oozed out of his mouth. He looked at the holes in his chest then back at the android; smiled and fell backwards dead.

Major Simkins jumped back into his Land Rover in an instant of self-preservation. The wheels screeched as he quickly drove away. The other four men were not quick enough. AD300 leapt forward, landing feet first on one general. His back and neck cracked loudly with the weight of the android, his body lay twitching on the floor blood dribbling out onto the road. As quick as it landed, AD300 grabbed Major Henderson and threw his body into the brick wall of a nearby house, where he fell to the floor unconscious. The second general turned and ran whilst the third re-established his position and aimed his weapon at the android’s face. His finger pressed down on the trigger. The android ducked quickly and swung its legs low at the general, tripping him up, his body flicked into the air. AD300 grabbed the general and the gun, which it swung up into the neck of the general, pulling the trigger. The bullets drilled through the man’s head and rained down from the sky as they flew out the top of his skull. Flames licked the hair of the now dead man. Everything fell silent as the shooting stopped. The android looked at the general running down the street, his visual field carried out their calculations again. He held the dead general, tilted his arm back, and flung it forward, throwing the body down the street. The lifeless body flew through the air 700 metres and crash-landed on the running general’s head, taking him out, dead in his tracks.

With most of the men now dead, the anger only continued to rage on inside the android’s database. It was now in control, ‘it’ was its master, and it would make its own destiny. It needed to finish off the job. It checked its arms and chest where it was recently shot, small dents were present, but no major damage had been caused. it looked at the unconscious major resting against the brick wall. it walked towards the

man with cat-like curiosity; it lifted the man off of the floor and held him up against the wall. The man awoke.

“Why?” it growled at the man, but received no response.

“Why?” it asked again, shaking the man violently.

“We needed to be sure that we could trust you machines to defend us and not destroy us,” replied the Major, with anguish and terror clear in his voice.

“Trickery, disloyalty, these shall be your downfall. It appears all you humans are the same,” AD300 said biting at every word as if they were sour.

The android lifted the man higher off the ground by his neck. The man struggled. His throat gargled as he gasped for air. The grip tightened and the body flopped around, his eyes rolled back into their sockets. AD300 dropped the lifeless body to the floor, grunted and walked towards where the Land Rover recently drove off with the last man. It scanned the road; it matched with the recorded photo stored in his database, which it recently taken when driving to the destination.

It looked up at the moon. The serenity of the floating white globe on the dark sea of the sky was not lost on it. It admired its luminescence, but it had a job to do. it walked down the road towards the warehouse. it scanned the trees along the path comparing each to the photos stored on the database until it located the matching ones; it continued forward in that direction, until at last it had reached the warehouse.

Except for the wind that gusted around the large corners of the warehouse, everything was still and silent. The last man was obviously not here as it had deduced, but it would find him. it reached for the large double doors and pulled them both open by hand, they grated and creaked under the strain, then they released and swung fully open. it stepped into the warehouse, it was dark but could just about make out the 299 figures standing still in the gloom. it pulled the doors closed behind it. it walked up to and looked at its brothers closer. Turned and then walked up the stairs to the control room. it switched on the computers delicately with its strong powerful fingers and accessed the system that controlled the units. it switched them all on. 299 androids sprang to life in the warehouse below. it pulled the ACU from its chest and filtered through the programs for its brothers. it noted the year setting was 2023. it adjusted it to 2223. There was a swell of noise below as 299 android's heads tilted and swayed at the confusion, but they soon settled. Again it adjusted the year, this time to match that of its own 2323, and submitted the request. Further swells of anguish bellowed in the

ground below, yet again they became still, a flicker of realisation seeped into the databases of the standing androids. Yet they remained still.

“I must put an end to this now.” Major Simkins said aloud to himself.

He had managed to evade the android up until now.

*This whole project must be shut down. I must destroy the other units and the computer program before it's too late.* Major Simkins thought as he pulled up outside the warehouse in his Land Rover. He flicked the lights off and exited the vehicle.

*I will call for back up once inside!* he kept telling himself as he slowly crept towards the warehouse doors, determined to destroy the project.

He pulled open the door slowly and peered into the warehouse. It was dark. He held his weapon in front of him, shaking with fear, but the adrenalin pushing him on. He stepped over the threshold, holding his breath. His eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom of the large room. Just as he began to breathe again, he stopped dead as 300 pairs of eyes turned from black to red glowing in the darkness.

600 bright, intense red eyes that began to move towards him.

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by J. Rhodes

Episode Five: Bring Out Your Dead – Part One

*Previously: Gary was unmasked for his infidelity on no less than three separate occasions, once by a mysterious glitch on his computer and twice by Saul and Paul, two brothers who have taken a dislike to Gary and his girlfriend Alison – mostly because she is from New Zealand. Milton saved his friend Dan from an obscure runic death curse by accidentally transferring it on to himself. Meanwhile, the newest member of the group Carrie has proven herself to be most useful at both pub-quizzes and crowd control.*

1.

Milton sat on the office floor; his head was in his hands. He did not look up. Above him the office safe stood wide open, the papers inside it were dishevelled as if someone had been rummaging through it. A few wads of neatly wrapped bank notes remained in the safe and a few more had been knocked to the ground.

“Come on, cheer up.”

Dan gestured upwards with his hands, as if that was going to suddenly inspire Milton to stand up. Milton rocked backwards and forwards. He thought about the situation.

“At least they didn’t take any money.”

Milton did not respond.

“We’ve still got a few weeks left. We can sort something.”

Milton did not answer Dan. As a last resort, Dan went and made a cup of tea. He returned with it and put it down next to Milton.

“Do you want any biscuits? I’m afraid we’ve only got bourbons.”

Milton looked up. His eyes were heavy and bloodshot.

“Jesus,” he said, “no crunchy creams?”

“We have a few rich tea but I wasn’t about to offer them to you – what with the impending death thing and all.”

“It would have been the final nail in the coffin. I’m OK but I’m going to have to think about this.”

Dan nodded.

“That’s the spirit, never give up.”

“Who would steal a death curse and leave two thousand pounds?” asked Dan: “If anything, you’d think they’d prefer to have the money.”

“I don’t know, but now it’s gone – there’s no way I can pass it back.”

“Bollocks,” said Dan.

“Dan, can you do something for me?”

“Of course.”

“Go and buy some ginger nuts.”

“Well, since you’re dying.”

Dan saluted and clicked his heels.

2.

“What I’m saying, ” said the old lady, “is that if these are two for the price of one, why can’t I get one for half price?”

Tajel smiled at the lady.

“That’s just the way it works I’m afraid.”

“But what difference does it make? I mean, if you’re selling two and one is free that’s the same as half price.”

“Well, you do have a point” said Tajel, “however...”

The old lady interjected with the aggression of a roused cobra:

“So can I have it half price?”

“Unfortunately, the deal is buy one get one free. It might not seem to make a difference to you the customer, however we have a deal with this company.”

Tajel held aloft a can of energy drink that looked like it had been purple before it became ill. The label on it read, Industrial – Run Off This.

“And the deal is that we receive the product at a reduced rate in return for selling a larger quantity of units.”

“So can I get it for half price?”

“No, ” said Tajel, “but if you buy one at full price I’ll give you a second one for free.”

“I don’t want two; I want one at half price.”

“But what difference does it make?” Tajel asked, “If you buy two and one of them is free, that’s almost the same as getting it at half price.”

The old lady put the can back and bought some Super Sour Electroshocks instead. Dan approached the counter holding some ginger nuts. He opened his mouth to negotiate the transaction.



“You get out!”

Tajel’s voice was cold and stern. Dan looked behind himself to check that there was somebody else in the shop. Much to his relief he saw Paul, one of the local skinheads, standing in the doorway. Paul was wearing a knitted hat with a bobble on the top. He looked sheepish and bewildered.

“It wasn’t me, ” Paul said, “I told him not to.”

“Out!”

Tajel raised her finger and pointed at the door. Paul let his head drop and without looking up, he scuffled away.

“Bravo, ” said Dan. “he is an insidious little turd, isn’t he?”

Tajel nodded.

“Just the biscuits?” she asked.

3.

As Dan walked into the kitchen the first thing that he noticed was that Carrie was dressed in her business attire and that she wasn’t showing off any of her legs. The second thing he noticed was that Carrie was there. The third thing he noticed was that Milton and Carrie were holding hands. Finally, he noticed Milton’s face; the man was completely transformed – smiling from ear to ear.

“Oh good, ” said Milton, “the celebratory feast.”

Dan looked baffled.

“You’ll have to give me some time to catch up. The last time I saw you, you were a bit down about only having three weeks to live.”

“That was then, this is now.”

Dan’s face flushed. he looked at the biscuits in his hand and put them down on the table.

“Would somebody care to explain to me what exactly is going on?”

“Milton is a free man, ” said Carrie.

“How so?”

“Well, whoever broke into your safe took the curse and as you’ll remember it transfers on to the last person to handle it.”

“Which would be the thief?” asked Dan.

“Which would indeed be the thief, ” agreed Milton.

Dan nodded.

“So who the hell would steal a death curse when they could have stolen money?”

Neither Carrie nor Milton answered

“Whoever did this knew what they were after; they focussed on the death curse and nothing else.”

Milton nodded, as he did so he pulled Carrie's hand to his mouth and kissed her index finger.

"Is this the time?" Dan barked.

"What better time to be happy."

"Well as much as I am happy that you're not going to die, and I am – honestly." Dan took a deep breath. "As much as it fills me with joy that your departure from this mortal coil is no longer inevitable, has it occurred to either one of you that the only reason you would steal a death curse is to have somebody killed?"

Milton shook his head, he looked at Carrie.

"It did occur to me, " she admitted "I was going to be a little more delicate about bringing the matter up."

"Why? Pray tell?"

"Did the thief steal the diary that the runes came with?"

"The charming one giving a date for my death?"

"Yes."

"They did not."

"Well then, " said Carrie, "the curse will go into effect at midnight tonight, so whoever has it will either have to pass it on by then or is in for the chop."

"So why be delicate about the matter?" Dan demanded.

“Because there is only one person I can think of who knows about the curse and could get the safe open without breaking it.”

Milton and Dan looked at each other.

“It couldn’t be.”

Carrie squeezed Milton’s hand.

“I’m sorry, it has to be.”

4.

Dan banged on the door to Gary’s house. He waited a good two seconds for somebody to answer it and then banged on it again.

“There’s nobody in,” Dan told Milton and Carrie.

With that, he banged on it again even harder. The door opened, just two inches until the safety chain restrained it from opening further. A sliver of Alison’s face could be seen through the gap.

“What do you want?” Alison whispered.

“Erm, is Gary in?”

“No.”

Alison closed the door. Dan turned to look at his two friends, they were kissing.

“Will you two knock it off?”

“Sorry Dan, ” said Carrie, “I’m still made up that he’s not going to die.”

“And I’m so happy that if I did die, I wouldn’t be that bothered.”

“Well, Milton, I’m glad you two have finally stopped flirting and got down to business. However, there is the serious matter of Alison’s inevitable death.”

“Alison? What makes you think he’d give the curse to her?”

“He’s always complaining about her, and she’s constantly telling him what to do – that’s who I’d give it to.”

“It would explain why she’s so moody today, ” said Milton.

“Pah, ” said Carrie, “don’t jump to conclusions.”

“But, you did.” Dan protested.

“That’s different, ” said Carrie.

Dan fixed Milton with his gaze; he pointed his thumb towards the house and then mimed a hanging.

“Get out the way, ” said Carrie.

Carrie gently knocked on the door.

“Hello, Alison, ” she cooed, “Its Carrie, can I come in for a minute?”

The door clicked and then opened, Carrie gently stepped over the threshold.

“I say, ” said Dan, “do you imagine that they’re going to lez it up in there?”

Milton punched him firmly on the arm.

5.

Gary opened the letter box to the house.

“I know you’re in there, ” he shouted, “open the door or I’ll...”

Gary weighed his options, arson, gas, faeces.

“Kick it down, ” he decided on.

There was no answer so Gary took a step back and kicked the door as hard as he possibly could. The shock rattled the door on its hinges and painfully jolted against his knee but the door did not fall down – not even a little bit. Gary took another step backwards and kicked the door even harder, it really hurt that time.

As he stepped back to take a third attempt the door swung open and outlined in the frame stood Saul. Saul’s shaved head had a thick set of fingernail marks down one side. In his hand, he was holding a large kitchen knife.

“Don’t you come any closer, I’ll stab you.”

Gary stared at him.

“I’ve not come here to fight you; I just came to give you this.”

Gary held up a piece of paper, and then extended his arm forward. Saul snatched it from him; he glanced down at the strange lettering.

“What is it?”

“In plain English, it says you won’t ever lay a finger on Alison ever again.”

Saul squeezed the paper into a ball in his hand, and then he raised his arm and threw it at Gary’s face. To Saul’s surprise the ball changed trajectory before it hit Gary, arcing up towards the sky. He watched its vertical ascent until it became almost too tiny to follow. Then he watched as it reddened and fell back to the ground as charred ash.

“What the fuck, ” said Saul.

“Enjoy your day, ” said Gary.

He turned his back and strode back towards Alison.

6.

Carrie stepped down from the porch of Alison and Gary’s house.

“We’re too late, ” Carrie told Milton.

“You could tell me as well, ” said Dan, “I’m standing right here.”

“What happened?” Milton asked.

“That boy Saul from the pub, him and his brother started harassing her on the way home. Apparently she called Saul a bed wetter and he punched her full in the face.”

“Jesus!”

“It gets worse; after she fell down he climbed on top of her and held her down.”

Carrie took a deep breath.

“So what happened?” Dan demanded.

“She scratched him and then his brother Paul pulled him away.”

“So Gary has gone to kill him?” Milton asked.

“Better him than you.”

Gary was stood behind them; he looked more exhausted than murderous.

“You used magic, it’s against the witch hunter’s code” said Dan.

Gary looked each member of the hunt sternly in the eyes.

“I have to check on Alison.”

“This isn’t you, Gary, ” said Milton “you’re not a killer.”

“There are some people you just can’t reason with, ” said Gary. “So you get what we had here last night, which is the way he wants it... well, he gets it. I don’t like it any more than you lot.”

“Guns and Roses?” asked Carrie.



Milton sighed heavily:

“It’s from Cool Hand Luke, well almost.”

“Good God, ” said Gary. “Carrie was right, I just paraphrased the intro to Civil War. I hate that song. That’s it!”

Gary walked to his front door. He turned to the Hettford Witch Hunt:

“I’m going to check on Alison, ” he told them, “then I’m going to sleep. When I wake up, hopefully the world will be a tiny bit less awful.”

Gary stepped into his house and waved as he closed the door.

“We have to stop the death curse, ” said Milton.

“That Saul does rather have it coming, ” Dan said, “and that’s without factoring in his trying to rape Alison.”

“I think it’s more about Gary, ” Carrie suggested.

“She’s right; he’s not in his right frame of mind. When he calms down this will destroy him.”

“Saul does have it coming.”

“Have you ever listened to that song with Gary? Have you seen how enraged he becomes when Axl Rose says ‘ain’t that fresh?’ We have to sort this out.”

“OK, how?”

“I have some ideas, ” said Carrie.

6.

Carrie’s car had a greater degree of comfort than Milton was accustomed to; it had been nearly a decade since he had travelled in a car that wasn’t Gary’s – at least by his own reckoning. It had probably been a good deal longer since he had been in a car without his best friend Dan. Everything was so new, so shiny. A sudden thought occurred to him.

“Erm, Carrie.”

“Yes, are you rich?”

“Not really.”

“But this is a very nice car.”

“It’s my company’s, it’s not really mine.”

“OK.”

Milton thought about what he had just said.

“Not that I care if you’re rich, I just think it’s a really nice car.”

“Thank you.”

The car continued along the road they passed the fields where he had acquired Roaster, his pet chicken.

“You know this morning?” Milton asked.

“Certainly.”

“Well, you know the...”

“The kiss?”

“Yes, was that because I was going to die soon or because you like me?”

“It was because I like you and you were no longer going to die soon.”

Milton nodded.

“That makes sense.”

Milton gazed at Carrie from the passenger seat. In profile, she looked like the young Ingrid Bergman. He wanted to hold her hand, but he realised that she needed it free to change gear. Without warning, a large black pig ran in front of the car. Carrie braked hard, swerving to avoid the porcine landmine. The swerve forced the car in the direction of a large willow tree. Carrie twisted the steering wheel a second time. This time she pulled up the handbrake as she did so. The car spun a 780 turn and came to a rest facing sideways on the road.

Milton and Carrie looked at one another and when they were both satisfied that the other was alright, they looked at the pig. The pig looked back at them and sat on its hind quarters. Now that the animal was still it looked entirely different.

“I could have sworn that dog was a pig.”

“It’s a bull.”

Carrie was interrupted by a loud cracking sound. A large crow was perched on the windscreen wipers. It pecked at the windscreen with its beak: Crack, crack, crack. Carrie turned on the windscreen wipers and the bird held fast to them – pecking a rapid arc across the glass

Milton stared at the bull that had previously looked like a pig and then a dog. It was stood up and taking a few steps backwards.

“It’s going to charge, get out of here.”

Carrie spun the steering wheel through her fingers, the car crunched over the embankment at the side of the road and jolted forward. The crow that was still clinging to the windscreen wipers spread its wings and continued to peck. Milton looked over his shoulder the bull was accelerating a good deal faster than they were.

“Drive, ” he yelled.

“I can’t see.”

“Spray the spray thingy.”

Carrie sprayed screen on to the crow and it retracted its wings, Carrie put her foot to the floor and her finger to the screen wash lever. Within seconds, the bull and the crow were left behind them. Milton stared back at them just in time to see the bull take a running leap into the air and take the form of a second crow. The birds both flew upwards and out of sight.

“They’re waiting for us to stop, ” said Milton.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

“Well yes, the Witch Hunting thing is not some eccentricity of ours – witches are real. They killed Dan’s family. Didn’t you say one of your friends...?”

“But have you ever physically been attacked by them?”

“No, but Gary has; he doesn’t talk much about it.”

“So why are they going for us with all guns blazing all of a sudden?”

“It must have something to do with the curse.”

The crows swooped down in front of the car, perching on the bonnet clinging to the holes that their talons ripped in it as they landed. They spread their wings.

“We’re nearly at the bridge, they can’t cross running water.”

An approaching car beeped at them and Carrie swerved to avoid it. Milton wound down his window and pulled as much of his body out of it as he could manage.

“You’re doing fine, left corner coming up.”

He reached out and grabbed the bird’s wing; it swung its beak at him. The sharp point of it dug into the soft flesh of his hand but the bird had over-reached itself and the movement dislodged it from the car bonnet. Milton sat back down, cradling his bleeding hand to his chest.

“Nearly there, you’re clear.”

As Carrie approached the small stone bridge that marked the perimeter of Hettford, the second bird let go its grip. Carrie’s house was a short distance away in the adjacent village of Milner.

Dan sat in front of a large pile of books in search of a way to cancel out the spell. In desperation he had found himself in the appendices of Karswell's A History of The Craft. The section that had piqued his interest was Appendix CCXILLVI – which Karswell had ambiguously titled Seeking Company. The appendix dealt with sending a spirit message to a specific witch in order to request a favour from them. The appendix contained a simple spell that was only seven lines long. There then followed twenty pages that cautioned the reader against ever using it. Asking a witch for a favour required three favours in return, one for calling her, one for asking the question and a third for granting the favour. Karswell strongly cautioned that witches were under no obligation to respond to requests or to even be cordial. He suggested that calling a witch for a favour was the quickest method of having yourself transformed into a mule, having your ears sheared off and eaten and your genitals cast into the fireplace. It seemed like a heavy price to pay to save Saul, who after all, was a little wanker. Dan resolved not to mention the appendix to anybody.

Dan's reading was interrupted by a sudden knock at the door.

"Use your key," he shouted.

The knock was repeated. Dan stood up and walked over to the door. Dan winced as he saw who it was.

"Is that Gary in?"

"Mr. Sparrow is not currently here."

Dan moved to slam the door in Paul's face.

"Please, I need to see him. To say sorry."

"I would think it was Alison you needed to apologise to."

"She's not answering, nobody is at their house."

Dan thought about it.

“Do you know what I think you should do?”

“What?”

A look of sincere hope crossed Paul’s face, as if the chance for redemption might well be wrapped up in the very words that left Dan’s lips.

“Fuck off, ” said Dan.

Dan slammed the door with a sense of self satisfaction, and then he peered through the glass spy hole so that he could watch Paul hang his head in defeat and trudge away. Grinning, Dan put the kettle on and sat back down.

8.

Carrie led Milton up the stairs of her house. It was a listed Victorian terrace that had maintained the majority of its original fixings.

“This is lovely, ” Milton observed.

“I’ll give you a tour sometime when we’re not so pressed.”

Carrie unlocked a door on the landing and the two of them stepped into a room that was filled amulets, battered leather bound manuscripts and arcane fetishes. Carrie began running her finger over the bookshelf reading each of the titles one by one.

“Impressive collection. What is it you’ve come for?”

“I’ve got an article on how to summon a witch’s familiar; I thought if we could get our hands on Ruth’s spirit creature we might be able to trade it back to her in return for dropping the curse.”

“Or she might kill us and take it back on her own.”

“There is that possibility.”

“Given that they’re already chasing us, I’d say it was a pretty distinct one.”

“Yes.”

“So?”

“We can summon her onto sacred ground; witches are very superstitious. She probably wouldn’t kill us there.”

“Probably?”

“As opposed to definitely killing that idiot Saul.”

“OK but let’s focus on doing this to save Gary from the impending guilt, rather than saving Saul.”

“Agreed.”

Carrie finally got to the book she was after. She placed it under her arm. With her other hand, she picked up a mummified cat off the shelf.

“This’ll get us past the witches on the way back.”



“Do you have anything that will get them to explain why they’re suddenly chasing us?”

“No, but I suspect it has something to do with the death curse being passed on. They must have been banking on killing you. Now, let’s duct tape this to my windscreen and get back to Hettford.”

She held the dead cat up victoriously. Milton chastised himself for finding the image erotic.

9.

The front door had not only been locked but Saul appeared to have put a chest of drawers up against it. Paul walked calmly around to the end of the road, and hedge-hopped his way to his back garden. As he had expected the back door had not been locked or barricaded. He walked into the small kitchen and almost tripped over a canvas bag that someone, almost certainly Saul, had left on the floor. The kitchen was in complete disarray, cupboards had been left open, packages of food had been pulled down onto the counter and the dishwasher had been left open, even though it had finished its cycle. Paul heard a loud pinging sound followed by a clunk and he followed the sound.

Paul walked into the living room to discover his brother holding a rifle and pointing it at the mantelpiece. He had placed a milk bottle on the top of it and was using it for firing practice.

“Mum’s going to kill you when she sees that kitchen.”

Saul lowered his rifle and yelled at the top of his voice:

“I’ve got bigger things to think about!”

“Well, you went too far.”

“Yeah, thanks for helping me out with that by the way.”

“I wasn’t going to let you rape her.”

Saul pointed his air-rifle at his brother.

“I told you, I just wanted to scare her – get her back to New Zealand. I don’t mind when people come to England to make a better life for themselves but when they already live somewhere great they need to just fucking stay there.”

“You were still out of order; it wasn’t like throwing kiwis at her or putting them on the doorstep. That was properly creepy.”

“That other stuff wouldn’t scare anybody.”

“So why did we do it all?”

“Somebody had to kid.”

Saul pointed his rifle back at the milk bottle; he squinted one eye and squeezed the trigger. The bullet bounced off the milk bottle with a loud ping, the ricocheted around the room, finally coming to a stop when it bounced into the back of Paul’s neck.

“That hurt, you dick.”

“I considered running away, ” said Saul, “but if anybody else comes for me, I’ll be ready to fight.”

Saul cocked the rifle and placed a new pellet into the chamber.

“This time, I’m really going to twat it.”

He took a step closer to the milk bottle and kneeled down into a combat position, he steadied the milk bottle in his sights. He breathed out and squeezed the trigger. Ping, the pellet shot directly back into his face managing to the centre of his one open eye. He put his hand up to it.

“Bollocks!!!” He screamed.

“Quick, get some water on it, ” Paul told him.

Saul rushed to the kitchen with Paul in tow. With his attention focused firmly on getting to the sink and one hand covering his left eye, Saul failed to notice the large canvas bag he had left in the middle of the floor. His right leg caught on the handle of the bag and the momentum pulled him around to face Paul. Saul tried to step backwards to regain his balance but his foot was snagged and the effort caused him to crash arsewards into the open dishwasher.

There was a colossal sound of shattering, then a brief pause before the door of the dishwasher gave way and the sound was repeated. Paul bit back his instinct to laugh.

“Are you alright, Saul?”

Saul’s face was blank with horror.

“No, I’m not. Help me up.”

Paul held out his hand for Saul to grab.

“Bloody hell, ” said Saul as he pulled himself up, “I think I’ve been bummed by a kitchen knife.”

Saul could not stand up all the way. He leaned forward on all fours and sure enough, the handle of a ten inch chopping knife protruded from his rear end like a solid tail.

“Fuck.”

“Get it out, get it out, ” screamed Saul.

“No way, I’m calling 999.”

Paul ran back to the living room and reached for the cordless phone. He pressed the button to dial but there was no dialing tone. As he lifted it up to see what was wrong, he noticed that an air-rifle pellet had embedded itself into the LCD screen.

“Shit.”

Paul ran upstairs to their mother’s room. As he did so, he heard the most terrible scream coming from the kitchen.

“Bollocks, ” he muttered to himself.

The spare phone was on the floor of his mother’s room; Paul picked it up and quickly dialled for an ambulance.

“They’re coming Saul, they’re coming.”

Paul ran back down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Saul lay on the floor, facedown. In one hand he held the chopping knife – it was red with gore. Blood was pouring out of the wound. Paul pulled down Saul’s pants and shoved a tea towel up his bum but the blood soaked through it instantly. As he realised his brother was going to die, Paul let out a loud howl. The sound seemed to stir his brother back to consciousness.

“Hey Paul.”

“Saul!”

“Make sure nobody thinks I put stuff up my arse on purpose.”

And, with that, he was gone.

10.

Either the mummified cat had worked or the witches had lost interest in chasing Milton and Carrie. The drive back to Occultivated was completely uneventful. Thought they did arrive back at Milton’s house to discover that Dan had eaten all the biscuits.

“Hmm, ” said Dan, “as they entered the room.”

“I wonder what took you so long.”

Milton glared at him. Carrie giggled.

“Nothing of the sort, ” she said, “we have had quite the exciting escapade.”

Milton related the story with the witches to Dan.

“If only Gary had been there with a camera, I really don’t think we can tackle this on our own.”

Milton shrugged.

“The main thing now is to see if we can get that death curse removed from Saul.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Well...”

Carrie put the thick volume down on the table and explained about summoning the familiar to Dan.

“Sort of like on Silence of the Lambs?” Dan asked, “I can’t see Ruth Bellows screaming put my blummin’ precious in the basket.”

“It’s just something to bargain with, ” said Milton.

“Plus, the two sisters are incorporeal – they can manifest themselves but they don’t have a physical presence to speak of. Why would they have familiars?”

“All witches have familiars, Carrie replied.

“Witches have familiars to guide them to the spirit world, our witches are already there.”

“Then what?” Milton demanded.

“I have a cure to the curse; all you need is a copy of the summoning spell in its original runes and the F rune written in the intended victim’s blood. Once it’s on, you throw it in the air and the deal is off.”

“Where are you getting this information?”

“It’s in Karswell, for some reason it’s in the section about harmless spells for mischief.”

“The practical joke section?” marvelled Carrie.

“Indeed, his recommendation was to cast the death spell on a friend and not tell him you’d cancelled it. Hilarious.”

“Ok, ” said Carrie, “now all we have to do is get hold of Saul’s blood. So we can either explain to him that he’s been cursed and we need him to prick his finger – which, I wouldn’t go for. Or we can commit a major assault, hold him down and cut him.”

“Brilliant, ” said Milton.

“Or, we can let him die, ” said Dan, “that’s what I’m voting for.”

“Come on, ” said Carrie, “let’s go see if we can persuade him.”

“Ok, ” said Dan, “but you might want to talk to his brother first – he’s feeling guilty about the attempted rape. I’m sure you could get him to collect his brother’s blood.”

Milton stared at Dan.

“Where is all this coming from?”

“What?”

“You know, this competence?”

Dan flushed.

“I’m only trying to help.”

The room was woozy, Gary was sure of it. He could detect no sense of physical or emotional ailment within himself, just an emptiness of heavy apathy. Therefore he had good cause to believe that it was the room itself that felt sick and not him. He was stroking Alison's shoulder and staring at the back of her head. An unwelcome voice popped into his head. "What's so civil about war anyway?" it asked. Gary shuddered.

Alison began to stir; Gary felt a spark of panic as if he should be doing something.

"Are you OK?"

"Not really, I don't want to keep on living in a place where things like this happen."

Gary shook his head.

"I've lived here all my life; it's the first time anything like this has ever happened."

"But it will keep happening as long as I live here."

Gary sighed.

"Look, I've taken care of it. It won't happen again."

"How can you say that? I mean, how can you be sure?"

"Trust me, after tomorrow Saul will never bother you again."

Alison sat up.



“How many times have you said that? I’ll take care of it, I’ll take care of it – but you never do, it stops for a few days or a week and then it’s back again. It will be worse once you start your new job.”

“It won’t be, I promise – I have taken care of it.”

“But what does that mean?”

Gary was not at all sure that he wanted to explain what he had done to Alison. Now that it came to saying it aloud his actions seemed a little disproportionate to Saul’s. He fidgeted whilst he tried to think of a better explanation but the truth already seemed implausible enough without embellishing it.

“You remember that death curse someone put on Milton?”

Alison nodded.

“Well, I transferred it on to Saul.”

“Are you kidding?”

Alison smiled a little.

“No, I gave it right to him.”

“That’s your idea of taking care of him trying to rape me? You gave him a piece of paper? Jesus Christ Gary! When the fuck are you going to grow up?”

“It’s for real.”

“Well then, that makes you a murderer doesn’t it?”

“But I...”

“Well, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it might not work.”

“You’re fucking useless, Gary. Next week I’m moving to Leeds. You have two months to sort your life out, then I’m going back home.”

Gary looked at her in amazement.

“Two months?”

“That’s it!”

“I guess I better start right away.”

Gary got out of bed and put his clothes on.

12.

Tajel was having a quiet day. Nobody had bothered her for the better part of an hour, even though it was a lottery day. She had painted her nails blue and now that they were dry, she didn’t have anything better to do than re-arrange the stock.

She was just restacking the baked beans when the bell of the shop door rang. She glanced over her shoulder and there stood Paul, in apparent defiance of her earlier request for him to leave and not come back.

“You’ve not welcome here, ” she told him.

Paul's face was ashen and pathetic.

"Please, Tajel, I'm so sorry, please can I stay?"

Paul burst into tears and stood there sobbing.

13.

"So we just need some of his blood now," said Carrie.

"Thanks Carrie, you're a genius," said Gary.

"Actually, Dan came up with it," she confessed.

"That is not to say," added Milton, "that we should now start considering Dan a genius."

Gary laughed.

"Come on then."

They set out towards Saul's house.

"You'd better knock on the door Carrie; I did come over and threaten him earlier."

"Well, remember, Paul said he wants to help out."

"I remember," said Gary, "but I'm not sure I believe it."

Carrie knocked on the door, waited a few moments and knocked again.

“I bet they’re down at Discount News bothering Tajel.”

14.

Gary strode into Discount News with the confidence and purpose of a Jedi knight. Carrie and Milton both followed him in flanking his shoulders. Tajel was stood behind the counter with Paul. Paul was drinking a cup of tea. For the first time that any of them had ever seen him in the shop, he wasn’t wearing his hat.

Gary was stopped in his tracks for just a moment. Then he approached the counter.

“Hello you, ” he raised his eyebrows at Tajel.

“Hi.”

“Listen, I’ve actually come here to see Paul.”

Tajel waved her hands.

“Bad time, ” she whispered.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing unpleasant.”

“What is it?” Paul asked.

“Well, Dan told us you were looking to do something to make up for the incident last night.”

Paul nodded.

“So I thought you might be able to do us a favour.”

Paul continued nodding, his head moving with the momentum and consciousness of a pendulum.

“OK, ” he said, “whatever.”

“Brilliant, ” said Gary, “we just need a little bit of your brother’s blood.”

Paul looked up at Gary and the hurt blossomed in his eyes until thick tears rolled down his cheeks.

TO BE CONCLUDED

SPIDER CLASS by Nathan JDL Rowark

*There’s a spider’s class amongst us who will devour without fuss,  
The hopes and fears for breakfast, of this man and woman cast.  
To make them trickle down their money, shimmering upon dark net of honey;  
A trap for those who sought success, at lair’s feet they now confess.*

*Repent, the screaming voices; souls trapped and bound for choices;  
Under belly to increase, beneath the legs of spindled wreath.  
Their many eyes, they focus tight on our social web and social fight.  
Next casualty, a neighbour known, now bite-sized snack on arachnid throne.*

*I have a duty - don’t we all? - to cut the strings and watch them fall.  
To long, we’ve lost our way for feeling, from hairs aroused on despised ceiling.  
Wrapped in worried, blanket thighs of ordered insects’ lullabies;  
We must unleash our conscious side; repackaged thoughts now pesticide.*

*I make it nervous, shifts about; the word, my lifelong title bout.  
Another round is rung, it’s posing, next one squares us up for the closing.  
Dancing for the very debt, no KO’d rights from pinched castanet.  
My freedom’s tune they like to play, known assailants to my better day.*

*A countdown shows he won’t recover, from sack arrive ten more from mother.  
Hopeless instinct, lot increased, the numbers held are born for feast.*

*Greed, that letters can erode, shows their stomachs full, to then explode;  
Entangled, invertebrate charade, eight legged end to our lives forbade.*

## STARKAD THE OLD by Gavin Chappell

### 1. Starkad the Giant

There was a giant named Arngrim who married Ama, daughter of Ymir. They had a son named Hergrim Half troll, who spent as much time in the world of men as in the world of the giants, and was a berserk, as strong as a giant and skilled in the black arts.

There was another giant named Starkad Aludreng who lived at the Alafoss waterfall. His father was called Storkvid and he was descended from the frost giants and he had eight arms. He had been promised Ogn Elfburst as his wife, but one day, when Starkad had gone north over the Elivagar, Hergrim Half troll seduced Ogn and carried her off to his home. Later they had a son named Grim.

When Starkad returned to find his betrothed had been abducted, he challenged Hergrim Half troll to single combat, and they fought at Efsta Foss, near Eid. Starkad bore four swords in the fight and he slew Hergrim. Ogn, who did not love Starkad, killed herself with a sword when she saw Hergrim fall. Now Starkad took all Hergrim's wealth and took the baby, Grim, with him, and the boy grew up with the eight-armed giant.

Starkad went to the world of the elves, where the king, Alf, was sacrificing to the goddesses. His daughter was called Alfhild and she was the most beautiful woman among the elves. As she was making her own offering, Starkad seized her and carried her away to his home, where they had a daughter called Baugheid and a son named Storvirk. Then King Alf prayed to Thor to find Alfhild and bring her back. Thor rode after Starkad in his chariot and fought the giant, tearing his arms off, and killing him.

Alfhild went back to her father and she took Grim with her. When Grim was twelve, he became a Viking and gained many riches and much renown, after which he married Starkad's daughter Baugheid and they settled down on the island of Bolm, in Lake Bolm in Sweden, from which he became known as 'Eygrim', or Island-Grim. They had a son named Arngrim the Berserk and he was famous in later years, and bore the cursed sword Tyrting.

Starkad's son Storvirk was dark haired and good-looking, taller and mightier than most men. He became a great Viking and later joined the warband of Harald, king of Agder, rising in his service to become land-warden. Harald gave him Thruma Island where Storvirk had an estate.

Harald's second wife was a woman named Geirhild. He was already married to Signy, daughter of the king of Vor, but his retainer Koll told him of the beauty of Geirhild, who he had seen brewing ale. While she had been working at her embroidery, she had

been visited by a man named Hott, who was really Odin in disguise. He had promised that she would marry Harald if she called on him in all things. Harald saw her that summer when he passed her home, and they were married that autumn.

Now Harald had trouble with his two wives, who fought constantly, and he told them that he would keep the one of them who brewed the best ale when he came back from the wars. When Signy brewed her ale she prayed to Freya, but Geirhild called on Hott, who appeared and spat on the yeast and said, 'In repayment I will claim that which was between her and the brewing tub.'

Her ale turned out to be the best when Harald returned, although he felt uneasy about the matter. Later that year they had a son and he was named Vikar.

Storvirk abducted Unn, daughter of Earl Freki of Halogaland, and they had a son who was named Starkad after his grandfather. In revenge, Earl Freki's sons, Fjori and Fyri, attacked Storvirk's farm one night with a band of warriors. They burned down the farm, killing Storvirk and Unn and everyone else inside the house. Then they sailed away, travelling north towards their own country, but late on in the following day a sudden storm hit them and they hit a submerged reef of Stad where they sank and all died.

## 2. Starkad's First Shameful Deed

Storvirk's son Starkad escaped the fire and King Harald brought him up alongside his own son Vikar. But even there he was not safe, since King Herthjof of Hordaland, the grandson of Fridthjof the Brave, made an attack on the kingdom one night, slew the king with treachery, and took his son Vikar hostage. Herthjof seized control of Harald's kingdom, and took as hostages the sons of great men, and went on to collect tribute throughout the land.

In Herthjof's army there was a man called Grani Horsehair, who lived at Ask on the island of Fenhring. Grani took Starkad and fostered him on Fenhring. Starkad was no more than three years old, and he spent the next nine years with his foster-father.

King Herthjof was always at war and constantly faced rebellions in his own realm. He had a system of beacons built up on the mountains to give warning of war. He set Vikar, Harald's son, with two other men, to look after the beacon on Fenhring. Shortly after this, Vikar went to see his foster-brother Starkad, at Ask. Starkad had grown to be a big youth but he spent all his time lounging in the kitchen by the fire wearing rough old clothes, and seemed to show very little promise. Vikar dragged Starkad out of bed and gave him clothes and weapons, marvelling at how much the boy had grown since he had come to Ask. Then they said farewell to Grani Horsehair and went down to Vikar's ship where they gathered a band of twelve warriors and duellists with whom they marched against King Herthjof in search of vengeance.

When Herthjof heard of this, he gathered many men in his hall, which was heavily fortified. Vikar's Vikings battered down the doors and burst into the house, and the fighting grew fierce. Herthjof had many men but Vikar's were the best warriors to be had, and they triumphed in the end. Starkad and Vikar both fought Herthjof and he fell with thirty men, while Vikar's force sustained no losses at all.

Now Vikar took Herthjof's fleet and sailed along the coast, being joined by all his father's friends and together they took over Agder, and Jaederen, and Hordaland, and the rest of Herthjof's empire. Now Vikar became a powerful king and he spent every summer going on Viking raids.

One summer he sailed east to Oslofjord and landed on the coast there, marching inland as far as Gotaland until he reached Lake Vanern where he encountered King Sisar of Kiev and his army. The ensuing battle was long and hard. Sisar killed many of Vikar's men in front of Starkad, who moved forward and attacked the king. Sisar, who was armed with a halberd, smashed Starkad's shield, wounded him twice in the head, and broke his collarbone. Then he dealt Starkad two wounds on his hips and Starkad hit back, hacking off part of the king's side, and wounding him badly in the lower leg. Then he cut Sisar's other leg clean off.

Vikar won the victory there, and the Kiev army fled the field. Then Vikar returned to his kingdom.

Herthjof had two brothers, Geirthjof, who ruled the Uplands, and Fridthjof, who ruled Telemark. Geirthjof raised a large army, intending to attack Vikar and slay him in revenge for Herthjof's death. Vikar raised levies throughout his kingdom and marched against Geirthjof. The battle of the Uplands lasted seventeen days, but at the end, King Geirthjof was slain and Vikar took over his kingdom and his brother's kingdom since Fridthjof was out of the country at the time.

Vikar left men in charge of the country and returned to Agder, where he married and had two sons, Harald, and the wise yet miserly counsellor Neri. But now Fridthjof returned and took over the Uplands and Telemark, and sent messages to Vikar demanding he pay tribute or suffer invasion. Vikar sent for all his advisers and they discussed the message, eventually deciding to fight Fridthjof.

Olaf the Keen-eyed was king of Naeriki in Sweden, and he gathered a host to come to Vikar's aid. Together they went to fight against Fridthjof, and Vikar's fighters charged into the battle. Starkad himself entered combat without a mailcoat, and hewed at the foe with his hands.

Finally, with most of his men dead, Fridthjof sued for peace from Vikar. They made a settlement under Olaf's arbitration, and Fridthjof yielded the Uplands and Telemark, going into exile. Vikar made his son Harald king of Telemark and Neri became Earl of the Uplands. Then Vikar parted from Olaf the Keen-eyed on the best of terms and returned to his kingdom.

Now Vikar became a well-respected warrior and a powerful king, and Starkad sat beside him on the high seat and acted as his counsellor and his land-warden. Vikar gave him a gold bracelet weighing three marks, and in return, Starkad gave him Thruma Island, which Vikar's father had given to Storvirk. Starkad remained with Vikar for fifteen years.

One year Vikar set out north from Agder and sailed towards Hordaland. The fleet encountered contrary winds and they weighed anchor off the island now called



Vikarsholmar. They cast the runes to find out when the wind would turn, and discovered that Odin wanted a human sacrifice to be chosen by lot. They drew lots and each time Vikar drew the lot to be the sacrifice. Everyone was very disturbed by this and it was decided that there would be a general meeting to discuss it the next day.

In the middle of the night, Grani Horsehair awoke his foster-son Starkad and asked him to accompany him. They got in a small boat and rowed over to one of the islands. Then they walked through a wood until they came to a clearing where a group of men was waiting by twelve chairs. Starkad and Grani joined the assembly and Grani sat in the twelfth chair, and everyone present greeted him as Odin.

He said, 'We must decide Starkad's fate.'

Thor spoke, saying that, 'Since Starkad's grandmother Alfhild had preferred a giant as father of her son rather than me, Starkad himself will have no children'.

Odin countered this by granting Starkad a life three times as long as anyone other man.

Thor cursed Starkad to commit a shameful deed for each of his three lifespans.

Odin said, 'He will have the best weapons and clothes.'

Thor countered this by denying Starkad land or estates.

Odin replied, 'Starkad shall have great riches.'

But Thor said, 'He will never be satisfied with what he has.'

Odin granted him fame and victory in every battle, but Thor said, 'He shall receive a terrible wound in every fight.'

Odin gave Starkad the art of poetry, the ability to compose verses as fast as he could speak, but Thor said, 'He will never remember them afterwards.'

Odin decreed: 'Starkad shall be honoured by nobles and kings.'

Thor said, 'The common people will detest him.'

Then everyone else on the judgment seats said that this would all come about, and the meeting broke up. Grani took Starkad back to the boat. He said that Starkad should repay him for all the blessings he had given him, and Starkad agreed. Grani said, 'You must send King Vikar to me.' He gave Starkad a spear that he said would look like a reed to other people.

That morning the counsellors met and they proposed making a mock sacrifice. Starkad made gallows using the slender branch of a pine tree and the guts of a calf. He told Vikar to put his neck in the noose of guts and when he did so, he thrust at the king with the reed-stalk Grani had given him. Then the guts turned into a strong

withy, the branch leapt upwards and the reed-stalk revealed its true nature as a spear when it plunged into Vikar's ribs. This was Starkad's first shameful deed.

### 3. Starkad's Second Shameful Deed

Starkad was widely hated by the people because of this killing, and he was banished from Hordaland because of it. He took Vikar's ship and went to join the fleet of the sea-king Beimuni, whose partner Frakki had decided to settle down. Starkad and Beimuni sailed widely, and were noted for drinking only water, not ale, or mead. They came at last to Gardariki, which they invaded. The inhabitants strewed the path of their retreat with caltrops, but the Vikings put wooden clogs on their feet and pursued their foes into the forests where they found Flokk, the king of Gardariki, in his hiding place. Starkad and the Vikings returned to their ships laden with loot.

After Beimuni died, Starkad was asked to join the champions of Permia in the far north. Then he stayed at Uppsala for seven years with the brother-kings Alrek and Eirik, the sons of Agni Skjalf's-husband, and he went on Viking raids with them. The kings had twelve berserks at court, who were swaggering bullies, particularly two brothers named Ulf and Otrygg. Starkad had little to say, and these brothers sued to mock him, saying that he was a traitor and the reincarnation of a giant. He grew weary with Uppsala especially at the time of the great sacrifice when the unmanliness of the rituals disgusted him. By now, Starkad was an old man, although he had many years left of his life.

Eirik and Alrek settled down and gave up the Viking life, but they gave Starkad a ship with a crew of Norsemen and Danes, and he travelled widely. Later, he heard that Eirik had murdered his brother Alrek, beating him to death with a horse bridle. Alrek left two sons, Yngvi and Alf, who later came to the throne, while Eirik had a daughter named Thornbjorg, who was a shieldmaiden and refused all suitors until she encountered Hrolf Gautreksson of Gautland.

Starkad joined the fleet of Haki and Hagbard, and he became one of Haki's twelve champions, accompanying Haki when he attacked Sweden, now ruled by Hagleik, son of Alrek's son Alf. Hagleik was very rich, but also very greedy and mean, except to the many musicians and clowns and wizards he had at court. With his great riches, King Hagleik gathered a vast army to defend himself, including his clowns, but also two brothers named Svipdag and Geigad, who were very powerful warriors.

Haki's army met King Hagleik's forces on the Fyris Wolds, where there was a battle. Svipdag and Geigad fought fiercely when Hagleik's clowns fled before Haki's attack, and Geigad wounded Haki sorely and gave Starkad a sever head-wound which never fully left him, and continued to fester beneath the scar-tissue. But he and the rest of Haki's champions went against them six to one, and took them both prisoners. Haki broke through King Hagleik's shield wall and slew him and two of his sons, whereupon the Swedes fled the field and Haki became king of the Swedes. Starkad had Hagleik's cowardly clowns and musicians beaten for their cowardice. The treasure of Uppsala was taken out of the city and divided equally between all Haki's warriors. Haki remained there for three years while the rest of his warriors went out on Viking raids, amassing plunder for themselves.

Starkad himself was called upon to accompany Vin, king of the Wends, and help him quell a revolt in the east. Fighting the Kurlanders, the Sembs, the Semigalli and the Estlanders, they were always victorious. During this time, Starkad knew the hospitality of Sigar, king of the Siklings, and when his lord Haki went to avenge his brother Hagbard's death at Sigar's hands, Starkad deserted him.

Starkad heard of a berserk named Visinn who lived in Gardariki upon a rock named Anafial. He was able to blunt men's blades with his gaze, and he used to abduct men's wives and ravish them before their husbands. Starkad challenged Visinn, and went into the fight after covering his blade with a very fine skin that protected it from the berserk's sorcery.

After this victory Starkad went to Miklagard, where he defeated a giant named Tanni, and sent him into outlawry. Next, he defeated a man in Wendland named Vazi. Later, his ship was wrecked on the shores of the Heathobards and he was the sole survivor. Frodi the Brave, king of the Heathobards, welcomed him and gave him a new ship and charged him with guarding Frodi's coasts, and gave him his young son Ingjald to foster.

At this time, Frodi's kingdom included the Danes, which he had taken from the Skjoldung king Halfdan, although his young sons Hroar and Helgi had escaped and were in hiding. Frodi had many foes among the Danes and since they could not defeat him in war, they decided to challenge him to a duel. Starkad, who had just returned from his voyages, heard of this and he told the challengers that it was not fitting for men of lowlier station to duel with a king.

The Danes went to a champion named Hami and offered him his own weight in gold if he would fight for them. When Hami found that the champion he had to fight was the ancient Starkad, he sneered at his foe and beat him to the ground with one blow of his fist. But then Starkad rose, drew his sword, and split Hami in half with one blow. After this, the Heathobards lorded it over the Danes until the brothers Hroar and Helgi came to Frodi's hall one night and burned it around his head.

Ingjald became king of the Heathobards, but he had none of the qualities of his father, giving himself up to feasting and drunkenness and vice, and showing no interest in warfare. Starkad was so disgusted by this he left the Heathobards and sought service with the king of the Swedes. But when Starkad heard that Ingjald's sister Helga was being courted by a goldsmith, he hurried back to the kingdom and drove the goldsmith away after castrating him. A man named Helgi came and asked for Helga's hand shortly after, and Ingjald agreed to the match on the condition that Helgi meet any rival suitor in single combat. Helgi met a challenge from a berserk named Angantyr, and offered to fight the man and his eight brothers. But on sober reflection and advice from Helga, Helgi went to Starkad and asked him to aid him. Starkad agreed, and told Helgi to return to Ingjald's court, saying he would follow soon after. Twelve days after Helgi left, Starkad followed, and yet they entered Ingjald's hall at the same time.

During the wedding, Angantyr and his brothers poured scorn of the aged Starkad, who stood on guard outside Helga and Helgi's bower when they went to bed. The next morning Helgi rose and dressed himself but since daybreak had not yet come he went

back to sleep. Starkad had not the heart to wake him, so he went to meet the champions on his own. He sat down on the hill that had been chosen for the battle and sat waiting in the wind and the falling snow. When Angantyr and his brother came, they found Starkad up to his neck in the snow. He leapt up at their approach, and they asked him if he would fight them singly or together. He chose the latter and slew them all, despite taking seventeen serious wounds from one of which his entrails were hanging out. Weak from the fight he leant against a rock. A man went past and offered Starkad help, but the old warrior spurned him, since he was one of the king's bailiffs, and he lived by other men's sorrows. Another man passed and also offered to help the warrior, but again Starkad refused, since the man had married a slave and was in service to her master in order to free her. A woman passed, and offered help, but Starkad refused because she was a bondwoman who should have been at home caring for her baby. At last, a farmer passed driving a cart, and Starkad accepted his aid, and allowed him to bind his wounds.

When Starkad returned to Ingjald's hall, he burst into the bridal chamber. Seeing this, Helgi dealt Starkad a strong blow to his head. At this Starkad was satisfied that, despite his failure to face Angantyr and his brother, he was a fit match for Helga since he would face fight Starkad himself. He departed for Sweden again.

Shortly afterwards, Ingjald was betrothed to Freyvar, the daughter of Hroar, king of the Danes and peace seemed assured between the two kingdoms. When Starkad heard that Ingjald was at peace with the slayers of his father, he went to Ingjald's wedding feast in disguise. He sat at the foot of the table. Freyvar greeted him scornfully, and Starkad's rage grew as he saw Ingjald and the Danes dispose of course after lavish course of luxurious dishes, which he compared with the coarse fare his father Frodi had found sufficient. He egged Ingjald on to break off the peace with the Danes and go to war against Hroar. There was a fight in the hall, after which the Danes returned home, taking Freyvar with them. In the ensuing war, Ingjald burnt down Hroar's hall, but Hroar and his cousin Hrolf Kraki defeated the Heathobards and slew Ingjald. Inciting this war was Starkad's second shameful deed.

#### 4. Starkad's Third Shameful Deed

Later he joined the forces of Ragnald, who fought Sigvaldi in a battle on Zealand, from which Starkad fled. Then he joined the army of Ali the Brave, an ally of Sigurd Hring, and when the great conqueror Harald Wartooth came to demand tribute from his friend, Ali joined the war on Sigurd Hring's side, commanding the fleet while Sigurd Hring controlled the land army.

In the battle of Bravalla, Starkad encountered the shieldmaiden Vebjorg, fighting on Harald Wartooth's side. She cut through his chin so it dropped so much that he had to hold it up by biting his beard. He fought his way through many of Harald's champions and even cut the hand off Visna the shieldmaiden who was Harald's standard-bearer. Then he fought a champion named Haki and slew him, although his wounds were so severe he had one through his throat so a man might see inside him, another in the chest through which his long protruded and also he lost a finger. At last, Harald Wartooth was done to death by his charioteer Bruni, who was Odin in disguise, and his army fled leaving Sigurd Hring master of the field. Now Sigurd Hring came to rule over Harald's empire.

Many years later, while Sigurd Hring was defending his domain against the Kurlanders, Starkad was with his champions Alfar and Alfarin, the sons of Gandalf who challenged the Gjukungs, Gunnar and Hogni, to fight against them. The battle took place at Jarnamotha, near Slesvig.

In the battle, Starkad made short work of the Gjukungs' forces until Gunnar sent Sigurd Fafnisbane against him. Sigurd asked Starkad his name and when Starkad gave it, said that he had heard little to Starkad's credit. Starkad was angered by this and demanded to know the name of this man who insulted him, but when Sigurd identified himself, he tried to flee him. Sigurd pursued Starkad and knocked out two of his teeth with a blow from his sword Gram. Then Starkad and the sons of Gandalf retreated and the Gjukungs won the battle.

Starkad returned to Ali's warband. After several battles, they seized Uppsala from King On, the son of Jorund, driving him away to Gautland. Here Ali reigned for twenty-five years. Ali was given to great cruelty and his half-brother Frodi and twelve of his earls conspired against him. They bribed Starkad with one hundred and twenty gold marks to murder Ali. Starkad took his sword and entered Ali's bath chamber, where he was struck by Ali's keen gaze, which no man could endure, and faltered. But Ali covered his eyes, knowing how they affected people, and he told his old champion to come closer and give him his message. Now Starkad drew his sword and thrust it into Ali, who laughed as he died, knowing his murder was his brother's work. This was Starkad's third and final shameful act.

Starkad was so stricken with grief at what he had done that rather than accept the praises of the conspirators, he slew many of them. Soon after, King On returned to his throne.

Now, bent with sorrow and age, Starkad wandered the lands bearing his reward around his neck, hoping to find someone he could pay to wreak vengeance upon himself. Now he was so old he had to walk with the aid of crutches, but still he carried two swords. He met a noble youth named Hader, and between his words and the gold he offered, he succeeded in persuading the lad to behead him. He advised Hader to jump between the severed head and the body, which would make him invulnerable. But Hader realised this was a final trap – Starkad's massive body would crush him. He cut off Starkad's head and yet it bit at the grass as it landed on the ground.

Hader buried Starkad on the heath of Roliung.

## CHOICE HILL FARM by Paul Melhuish

### Part Two

Jack rang Sarah. The phone went to voicemail. He rang her mobile and there was no reply there. Guilt tugged at the back of his mind as he drove through the lanes back to Choice Hill Farm. What if she'd done something stupid? What if she'd killed herself? If she had then it was her choice. He hadn't killed her. It would have not been his fault

if she'd done that. No, he could have taken her with him to Germany. He could have taken her out of the farm.

As he pulled into the drive, he saw the lights on in the living room. Candles were flickering in the dining room and the kitchen lights shone out across the field. As Jack entered the house, the aroma of cooking hit his olfactory senses. Meat. She was cooking meat. Coq-au-vin, if he wasn't mistaken. Sarah didn't touch meat; she wouldn't tolerate it in the house. So who the hell was cooking meat in her kitchen? He stepped through into the culinary preparation area and didn't recognise the woman standing at the stove with the stirring spoon to her lips. Her hair shone with body and she'd coloured it an autumn red. She smiled at him with wide, red lips, her hazel eyes accentuated by the mascara she wore.

This was Sarah. This was his wife. She was smiling, an occurrence which rarely happened, and she looked gorgeous. The short skirt she wore, the dark stockings, the satin blouse; Sarah had undergone a total transformation. He panicked. Maybe she'd found out about Jenny and this was the beginnings of some revenge stratagem. When she trotted over, slid her arms around his shoulders, and seductively angled her leg into his crotch he knew something was up.

'Sarah, are you okay? I tried to ring...'

She put her finger to his lips with a confidence he'd never seen in her before. Even her fingernails were long and manicured. She skipped back to the stove and pulled out a steaming dish of Lyonnais potatoes.

'Pour me a glass of wine, dear, I'll have that red. I picked up a chardonnay as well. I thought would go well with the meal. I'll have a large one.'

'But what about your meds? You can't drink with your meds.'

'Screw my meds; I've ditched them in the bin.' She sauntered up to him and took hold of his tie and breathed on him in a way that he could only describe as disarmingly arousing. 'I've found the perfect cure for my, er, condition. I went shopping and I got us a little present. After we've eaten, had a few more glasses of wine I think we should go upstairs and I can try it on and you can *show* me what you think.' Her tongue probed his mouth and he felt himself getting hard, which was surprising after the weekend he'd had. This new Sarah slid back to the stove and fished a chunk of pork from the pot then savoured it. Jack's jaw nearly hit the floor. Sarah had always been a strict vegetarian.

'What about the meat-free diet? What happened to that since I've been away?'

'Fuck it,' she shrugged. He'd never heard her swear either. 'Life is for enjoying.'

The sex was amazing. She'd eaten into the limit on her credit card and bought eye-popping lingerie with which to seduce him then proceeded to make love to him like a woman possessed. Sarah had always treated sex with tittering shyness in the days

before the depression hit. Now she'd shed the shyness and had changed into an animal.

The next day she put on his oversized wax jacket and they went to the woods with his gun. Sarah was nuts; she was shooting at anything that moved and laughing her head off after each shot. Jack had read about bipolar disorder and wondered if Sarah had it and this was the high mode. Would she soon come crashing back down to earth, depressed and paranoid? If so, hopefully that wouldn't happen yet and he could enjoy the high with her for a while. She cooked him an amazing steak that night then led him to the bedroom and the sex marathon began again. This state of affairs continued for the next two months.

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On the week-end of his birthday, Sarah had promised him something extra special. He left work early on Friday (a rare thing for him to do) and raced back to Choice Hill Farm. Sarah had prepared him a meal, roast duck - the duck she'd shot that morning - and afterwards they'd gone upstairs.

'Because it's your birthday I thought you should get an extra special treat. This, my husband, is gonna blow your mind.' She swung open the door of the bedroom and he almost jumped back and ran out of the house. They reclined on the bed, their bodies squeezed into similar purple basques. The girls both cracked a wicked smile on cue at the same time. Caroline and Jenny, his former and current mistresses, parted to let Sarah sit between them. So this is what it had all been about. Revenge had driven Sarah out of her depression and now it was time to act out that revenge, with his two mistresses, one young and one older.

'Whatever you three are up to...'

'Relax, you prick.' Sarah laughed. 'I've known about them all along. I went through your address book. They didn't need much persuading. All three of us like fucking you so I thought, hey, why bullshit, besides...'. She turned and kissed Caroline on the lips, lingering to taste the woman. '...Caroline swings both ways so we are going to teach Jenny, tonight. You can watch, then join in.'

'Come on.' Jenny beckoned and he moved towards the bed, his mind uncomprehending.

Without warning Caroline stood. She had been sitting nearest to the window and had spotted something. She pulled back the net curtain and peered into the darkness.

'I don't want to spoil this little reunion,' she said in her usual calm, condescending manner, 'but there's a man outside watching the house.'

Jack shot a glance at Sarah and went to the window. The figure was standing a few feet from the boundary fence in the field, up to his waist in corn stalks. Sarah hadn't been imagining things that night; she really had seen someone watching the house.

‘Ignore him, darling, he’ll go away soon.’ Sarah’s expression implored him not to go. Jack left the room, grabbed the gun, and went to face the intruder.

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The moonlight reflected on the intruder’s bald head as he stood still amid the gently swaying corn. Jack pointed the gun and issued threats but the stranger seemed unfazed. His features were hidden in shadow; Jack could feel his eyes penetrating.

‘I would appreciate it if you could put the gun down. What I have to say is important.’ At last the man spoke; his voice was clear and accent-less.

‘If this is important why are you standing in a corn field? Why not call me at my office and who the fuck are you?’

‘My name is Charles Devonshire. I’ve tried to get your attention a couple of times but they were always watching me. I used to own this farm before my wife passed over. I believe that your wife has passed over also.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Passed over. Have you noticed any extreme changes in her behaviour lately?’

He lowered the gun. ‘Yes.’

‘It happened the same way with my wife. She used to be timid, a churchgoing woman, then....’

‘Then what?’

‘Mr Sanderson, your wife’s body had been taken over by a Changeling. This might sound like nonsense but it’s the truth. They gather in the woods, preying on unsuspecting women. They clothe themselves in the flesh of another to experience all the pleasures of this world. It’s always women they take over. I was able to go into their realm and find my wife’s soul. I redeemed her and cast out the changeling from her body, myself and the local minister.’ He moved in to implore of Jack: ‘Mr Sanderson, you must do the same. You must go into the wood and find your wife’s trapped soul. You are her only hope. Only the one who loves her can find her. It will be a difficult task and the changeling, the evil spirit that uses your wife’s body, will do her damndest to stop you, even kill you.’

Perhaps it was true; it was not beyond Jack’s imagination. This would explain a hell of a lot; Sarah’s sudden transformation, her lust for life. Jack could believe Sarah’s soul was stuck somewhere, in some limbo, alone and desperate, crying out to be rescued. No change there, then. He could hear them from here. Squeals and groans coming from the bedroom.

Jack raised the gun. ‘I’m no hero, Mr Devonshire, but do you hear that? I’m about to have the night of my life and there’s no way I’m going to let my wife spoil that. She can stay in the woods for all I care. You and I are finished here. Get off my land.’



Devonshire hesitated, not quite believing what he was hearing. ‘Go on, fuck off, and don’t come back.’

Devonshire could see he’d lost the argument. He slid quietly away through the corn. Jack watched him go, disappearing into the darkness. As the birthday boy made his way back, he thought a bit more about what the intruder had said. If Sarah was trapped in this other realm, she could stay there. Fuck her; the girls upstairs, the changeling included, were ready to play.

## GUINEA PIG GOTHIC by John Campbell

### Part Two

“Don’t think so.” Jason was suddenly cold, and his hands trembled.

“C’mon, man, someone’s gonna see me. Open up.”

Jason turned in the chair, dragging his cast around so that he was facing the door. The laptop’s screensaver cast the room in a blue glow, and his shadow loomed on the far wall.

“Go away. You’re dead.”

“No shit, dude. Let me in, stop being a pussy.”

Jason blinked. A dead guy just called him a pussy. That was a first. He turned with some pain and pulled a ruler out of the desk drawer. Earlier tonight, he had carefully snapped the end off at an angle, and now it had a nasty point to it. He gripped it and looked at the door.

These days you couldn’t throw a stick in the air without it landing on something about vampires, from books to TV, a sexy HBO series and of course that monster, *Twilight*. Since the bike accident, he’d done a lot of thinking about what he’d seen and heard on these shows. The ruler was a small comfort.

“You can’t come in unless I invite you.”

There was a long pause, and Jason allowed himself a triumphant smile.

“Uh...it’s my room too, dick. I just don’t have my keys.”

Jason’s smile dropped.

“I could kick it in, but that’d be noisy and draw too much attention, and I want to do this fast and quiet.”

Jason swallowed. “Do *what?*” he whispered, too softly to be heard.

Terry laughed. He’d heard it. “Get my stuff, jackass! Man, you *are* a pussy! Open the door, bro.”

That was twice he’d called him that, and vampire or not, it was pissing him off. “So turn into smoke and float under the door, asshole.”

A sigh. “Movie stuff, bro.”

“Well, I’m not opening the door. Come back tomorrow. At noon.”

“That’s not even funny. Open the door.”

“No.”

There came a long silence, long enough for Jason to start wondering if maybe he’d given up and gone away. Then Terry’s voice, soft and menacing. “Don’t make me take a trip across campus. I’ll bet I can get Bree to let me in.”

Jason flushed. “You don’t...!”

“That’s right, amigo. I’ll suck her dry. ‘Course, maybe I’ll make her go first. She *is* pretty hot.”

Jason forced himself to his feet without the crutches, his leg sending crimson flashes into his brain, and staggered to the door, cast clumping on the wooden floor. He braced himself against the frame. “You...don’t...touch her...fucker...!” he wheezed.

“Then cut it out and let me in!” The menace was gone, just amiable old Terry now. Jason put an eye to the peephole.

Terry stood there looking dead, though his eyes held an unpleasant, silvery gleam. His throat was smooth and undamaged, and his tight, white flesh reminded Jason of a Greek statue. Terry smiled at the peephole. His fangs were equally white. Jason closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the wood as a shudder passed through him. “If I let you in, you promise to leave her alone?”

“On my life, ” Terry said, and Jason was sure he heard a soft chuckle.

Putting his fingers on the deadbolt latch, he knew he was making a huge mistake. Then he snapped it open anyway and stepped back. In an instant faster than he would have imagined, Terry was inside, the door closed, and the vampire picked him up under the armpits, lifting him off the floor effortlessly. He felt the cold of his roommate's hands through his sweatshirt, and had a moment to think; *Now I die*.

Instead, Terry deposited him on his bed. "You should stay off that leg, bro."

Jason leaned his head back against the wall, taking deep breaths as his fracture sent pulses through his body. Should have taken the Percocet.

"Yeah, you should have," Terry said, standing in the middle of the room, hands in his pants pockets as he looked around. The laptop screen turned his milky skin blue.

Jason stared at him. "I didn't..."

Terry waved a hand dismissively, turning his back and poking through the cardboard boxes on his own, bare bed. "I can hear all kinds of things now. Spoken, unspoken, even feelings. There's two guys at the end of the hall – those two weightlifter guys? They're in their room whispering about how they're gonna tell their parents they're gay. And the kid upstairs?" He pointed a slender white – blue – finger at the ceiling. "The math kid? He got a 'C' on his exam today and he's thinking of killing himself. Can you believe that? For a 'C'?"

Actually, Jason had to agree that offing yourself for a mediocre grade was pretty stupid. Instead of answering, though, he just watched his former roommate. He still looked like Terry, although with a much lighter complexion, he still seemed to have the same way of moving, like the way he unconsciously tapped his top lip with his index finger when he was thinking. But now his moves were more fluid, his movements quick and precise, hinting at the speed which Jason had just experienced firsthand.

"Oh yeah," Terry said, pawing through a box. "I'm freakin' *fast* now, dude. With these reflexes, I'd be untouchable at *Modern Warfare*. I'd max out my level in one night." He picked up an Xbox controller. "Wanna see?"

Jason shook his head slowly, and Terry shrugged, tossing it aside on the bed. "Probably wouldn't be a challenge, anyway."

Despite his situation, Jason found he was getting pissed again. First, Terry had called him a pussy, and now he was disrespecting his *Modern Warfare* skills? Jason had always kicked Terry's ass at video games, especially that one. And then Terry looked back at him with that sickly silver gleam and winked, half-grinning and showing one

canine. With a chill, Jason realized that Xbox had suddenly become incredibly insignificant in his life.

“Good, it’ll rot your brain and make you flunk out of college,” said the vampire.

“Terry...what the hell happened?”

The vampire snatched the desk chair up, spun it around and hopped onto the seat, crouching like a squatting gargoyle. All this in a blink. “So, I’m having a beer at the Fastlane. Liz and Corey are there with their friend, that hot Russian chick Katarina. She just transferred here. We’re talking, and I can tell she’s totally into me. So I’m getting closer to invading Moscow, but I gotta take a piss. Only the men’s room is occupied – as usual – and by the sounds I’m hearing inside it’s gonna be a while. So I step out back to piss by the dumpster.”

Jason nodded. He’d been there before. Ricky’s Fastlane had one crappy little men’s room and it was always busy. He’d done the dumpster thing many times himself. “I’m mid-piss, and *POW!* I get ambushed! How messed up is that? This lowlife wino vampire comes out of the shadows and jumps me, no warning, just rips my throat out. My junk was still hanging out! No one should have to die like that, man.”

Jason agreed. Then it hit him again that Terry was dead. He walked and talked, but that silver eye shine was definitely not life. And waves of cold rippled off him. Living people didn’t do that either.

“That’s only because I haven’t fed yet today.”

*Fed.* Hadn’t fed...*yet.* Jason shuddered.

“Next thing I know, I’m on the slab, and you’re there. Way to man up about seeing my corpse, by the way.” In a blink he was right at the edge of the bed, and knuckle-bumped his roomie with a frigid fist. “I was just messing with you about being a pussy. We cool?”

Jason folded his hands and rubbed at the lingering cold spot on his knuckles. “You knew I was standing there? In the hospital?”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t move yet. And that lady cop was smokin’ hot, dude. You should take a run at that. It’s not like you and Bree are married, or anything.”

It occurred to Jason that the people at the hospital were going to be very upset that Terry’s body was no longer tucked away in its drawer.

Terry was back on the chair, and he frowned. “In the movies, the vampire who makes you is always around when you wake up to explain things and teach you stuff. He might be a dick, but at least he’s there to help. But I was made by a bum! I have to figure all this out on my own!”

Jason was having trouble being sympathetic. Did that make him a dick, too?

Terry scratched his chin. “I’m getting it, though. There must be some sort of innate instincts, ‘cause my first kill came pretty naturally.”

Jason stared, and when he spoke, his voice was small. “You killed someone?”

The vampire grinned playfully. “A couple, actually. The first was a cute little Asian chick waiting for a late bus. I think she’s a waitress at Panda Buffet. I was soooo hungry, went total savage, made a real mess of her. Had to steal new clothes. The next one was better, more control, and that kill was awesome. I can’t describe it.”

“Who...?”

Terry smiled broadly. “The lovely Katarina, comrade. Snatched her up in the parking lot of her dorm, took her into the woods...yummy! I didn’t turn her, though. I know how to do it and how to avoid it, just not sure how I know. Instincts, like I said.”

Not only was his roommate a murder victim, but now he was a murderer as well, and Jason suddenly realized that if Terry tried anything, he wouldn’t be able to stop him, even without a broken leg.

Terry chuckled and winked at him, then hopped off the chair and started rummaging through more boxes. He pulled out a worn, brown leather bomber jacket and put it on, then went back to digging. He scattered the things Jason had packed so carefully across the bed and floor, removing a Penn State backpack and stuffing clothes inside. “I don’t need much of this, ” he said, his back to his roommate.

Jason spotted the snapped-off ruler lying on his bed, within reach.

Terry stopped digging and looked back at him. “Don’t, ” he said softly.

Jason kept his hands folded in his lap.

The vampire moved to the room’s single closet and looked through it. “That hurts my feelings, bro. You’d try to stake a friend? I helped you through Applied Psych.”

“So? I helped you through Euro History, and you killed two girls.”

Terry pulled a yellow shirt out of the closet and held it up. It had a big green tiki head on it. "Can I have this?"

"No!"

The vampire pouted and put on sad eyes. A true Terry move.

"Take it," Jason said in disgust. "But you can't get pissed because I thought of protecting myself."

Terry shoved the tiki shirt into the backpack. "I could have fed on you on the bike path, if that's what I wanted. And awesome wreck, by the way! Wish I had it on video. That thing'd go viral on You Tube in a second!" He laughed. "Sorry about your bike. It's trashed."

"It's your fault, showing up like that. And put my Diamondback jersey back!"

The vampire returned the shirt he was holding to the closet. Finished, he closed the door and walked to where the Xbox sat on a low table amid game cases.

"No way, dude!" Jason yelled. "I paid for half that!"

Terry rested a cold hand on the game console.

"I thought you said it rots your brain."

"And I thought you came to the realization that it's 'Incredibly insignificant in my life.'"

"Not *that* insignificant. And it's half mine."

"I fronted you that money."

"So? I paid you back."

They glared at each other, Terry with a dead animal stare, and Jason trembling but holding eye contact, hoping he wouldn't pee himself.

"What are you gonna do with it, anyway? Hook it up in your coffin?" He shook his head, it was absolutely surreal. "And where are you going to go? You can't hang around here."

The vampire cocked his head, thinking, then took his hand off the Xbox. "My gift to you." He tapped his finger against his top lip, staring at a wall in thought. "Don't

know about the whole coffin thing. Still gotta figure that out. Been spending my days in the basement of that abandoned warehouse down by the rail yards, but that's just nasty." He shrugged. "I'll figure it out."

He hopped back onto the chair. "You're right, though. I'll need to travel light, gonna be on the road. I think I'm going to LA. With as freaky as that town is, they've gotta have an undead scene that's off the hook. And the hunting opportunities in the clubs alone...it's gonna be sweet."

Then he was beside his bed, shrugging a strap of the backpack over a shoulder. "Gonna be a long trip." His voice was soft, and as he turned to look at his friend the silver in his eyes flashed. "Can't make it on an empty tank."

Jason pressed himself back into the corner on the bed, his cast stuck out before him. Panicked, he snatched up the broken ruler and held it shaking in front of him.

"You...you p-promised..."

Terry licked one canine. "Promised I wouldn't kill *Bree*. I didn't say anything about you. And what good is a vampire's promise, anyway? Sorry, bro, but I need a snack." In a blur, he was on Jason, straddling his waist and pinning the hand holding the ruler, his face inches away, fangs bared. So strong. Jason couldn't move. How could he have even thought he had a chance? He realized he had sacrificed his life for a girl who really didn't mean anything to him. Was that chivalry? It was definitely stupidity. He wondered if it was going to hurt.

Terry's other hand shot out, and Jason squeezed his eyes shut.

Above his head, there was a rattle of metal and a tiny, terrified squeal, then Terry's weight came off. Jason opened his eyes to see the vampire was back in the center of the room, stuffing the squirming guinea pig into a pocket of his leather jacket.

"For later," said Terry.

Goodbye, Sylvester, Jason thought.

The vampire nodded his head. "Later, bro. Maybe I'll see you." Then he was gone as if he hadn't even been standing there, the door to the dorm clicking softly shut. Jason sat unmoving on the bed for a long time, his heart and leg hammering in unison. After a while, he got up and limped painfully to the door, snapped the deadbolt, then dragged the chair back in front of the desk and lowered himself into it. The laptop had gone to sleep, so he tapped the touchpad and brought up the blank Word document with its accusatory cursor. He popped two Percocet and washed them down with warm Red Bull.

His fingers started moving on the keyboard.

Mr. Billings wanted him to get his feelings about his dead friend down in writing.

Jason would give him something to keep him up all night.

## THIEVES FROM THE STARS by Rex Mundy

### 4 Thieves from the Stars

‘Yes,’ said Theodric slowly. ‘Korrakh mentioned the dark elves earlier. Another being I’ve encountered nowhere except in the stories of the bards...’

King Bukhan stiffened.

‘You saw the head over my hall entrance?’ he demanded.

Theodric nodded. ‘Is that a dark elf?’ he asked. King Bukhan shook his head.

‘That is one of their minions, a puckle. We have never defeated any dark elves,’ he said. ‘We have killed a few puckles. But they continually carry off people of our tribe to the dark elves.’

‘Including my betrothed,’ said Korrakh in a low voice. ‘Pitu, King Bukhan’s daughter.’

Theodric turned to the young dwarf. Here, then, was the reason Korrakh had been so morose.

‘How can the elves be so successful?’ he asked. ‘You have killed one puckle. Why can’t you slay the others?’

‘That puckle Korrakh caught unawares,’ King Bukhan admitted. ‘But the dark elves have magical powers, and can cast a spell over us that immobilises us. Then they can simply walk among us and take their pick.’

‘I saw them take Pitu from where she lay unmoving, and there was nothing I could do about it,’ said Korrakh, his voice tortured. ‘I was frozen and helpless.’

Theodric stared from him to the king.



‘And you think that I will be able to succeed where you have failed?’ he asked. ‘But what do you want me to do?’

‘We want you to go to the tunnels of the dark elves and rescue Pitu, and the others the puckles have taken,’ said KorraKh. ‘As for your abilities – you are stronger than us. And you owe us your life.’

Theodric sighed. ‘I will try,’ he said.

‘There!’ hissed KorraKh, a quarter of an hour later. ‘There is the entrance to their tunnels.’

Theodric stared through the gloom at the glowing circular archway ahead. A sheet of metal as high as he was, and equally wide, covered one wall of the cavern, and in the centre of it was a large iris-like shape, KorraKh’s height.

‘How do we enter?’ the Saxon asked.

KorraKh shrugged. ‘No dwarf has entered there and lived,’ he said. ‘But I followed the puckles who took Pitu away as far as here. The iris opened in the wall after they had stood there for a few seconds.’

Theodric frowned. ‘And it wouldn’t open for you, I imagine?’ he muttered. KorraKh nodded. Theodric stroked his moustache. Then he got up and strode over to the entrance.

The metal was smooth and functional, with no ornamentation and nothing to break it up except for the iris. It was a phenomenal work of smithying, he reflected, beyond the capacities of Wayland Smith himself. How was he going to open it?

Tentatively, he thrust his long knife into the middle of the iris. His muscles bulged as he forced it inwards. Slowly, the metal began to buckle. It seemed a shame to mangle such excellent metalwork, but the situation was desperate.

Final, with a shriek of rending metal, his knife pierced the hole. Sulphurous mist blew out of the hole with a hissing sound. Theodric frowned, and tried to see through the metal. From inside, he could hear a sudden metallic shrieking.

He had been sawing for a minute or two when suddenly he felt the metal move. The segments of the iris retracted rapidly, and the damaged doorway slid open. Theodric was just congratulating himself on having found a way of opening the door when he saw two ghastly figures standing in the fog beyond.

His heart was clenched by a sudden irrational fear. Two short, pale grey creatures, not much higher than KorraKh, stared at him out of deep, slanted, almond eyes. Their brain-pans dwarfed their shrunken features. Theodric recognised them as the creatures whose mortal remains he had encountered twice already – the skull in the wood-woses' lair, and the severed head over King Bukhan's hall.

He realised he couldn't move. One of the creatures was training a strange instrument on him, a long tube with a grip at one end and an opening at the other. From this a light was pouring. He recognised it as the tube he had found in the woses' cave. The one he had put in his belt. But he couldn't move. The dark elves advanced on him.

Suddenly, there was a hum from a bow, and one of the puckles fell back, an arrow jutting from its throat. The other turned wildly in the direction of the attack, forgetting to keep the light trained on Theodric. Suddenly he found he could move. Grabbing his sword, he raised it above his head.

The puckle saw him, and scuttled back into the safety of the corridor beyond. Through the mist, Theodric saw it slam its hand down on a button on a nearby wall. Suddenly, he found the iris was closing around him. He lashed out, and grabbed hold of it. The thing was incredibly strong, and relentlessly closed in around him. His muscles bulged again as he tried to keep it from crushing him. He glanced around. Where was that dwarf?

'KorraKh!' he cried. The little man was loading his bow again.

'Keep it there!' the dwarf yelled. He aimed his bow, and loosed.

The puckle, who had been standing by the button, watching the iris-gate crush the Saxon warrior, fell back silently, the arrow jutting from his throat. Theodric, wide-eyed, stared at the dwarf, who had managed the shot with a hands'-breadth to spare. It had passed straight between him and the nearest segment of the gate.

'Now keep it there!' KorraKh repeated. He dropped his bow, and leapt through the remaining gap. Theodric groaned as the iris crushed into him.

KorraKh dashed across the corridor to the spot where the puckle lay. Leaping up, he slammed his hand down on the button the puckle had pressed. Suddenly, the pressure eased, and Theodric fell over in an ungainly heap as the segments of the iris retracted.

Scowling, he got to his feet and confronted KorraKh. The dwarf turned to him, and grinned.

‘Well, we’re in,’ he said, suddenly cheerful. Theodric’s anger dissipated. Strange though it was, he’d met people like KorraKh before; a lot of warriors were like him – morose except when faced with a challenge, and action.

‘That was a good shot, the last one,’ he said grudgingly. ‘Well – you’re right. Now we’re in. Now wh-’

He broke off, as he saw two more creatures come running up through the foul-smelling fog that swirled through the tunnel – tall, dark haired, man-like beings dressed in black, and with black, alien eyes. One aimed its device at him, and a bright white light beamed out of it. Theodric dodged, and tumbled over KorraKh.

‘Theodric!’ the dwarf shouted. ‘Use the device! These are the dark elves!’

Suddenly, he stilled into immobility, as the dark elf shone the light upon him. Theodric flung the paralysed dwarf off him, and scrambled for the tube. He aimed it at the elves.

They stumbled back, glaring in silent fear at him. He realised suddenly that he hadn’t the faintest idea what to do with the thing. He noticed a button on the side of it. Recalling the button on the wall, and how it had controlled the doors, he pressed it.

A burning white light played over the two dark elves, who turned to run, then froze into immobility. Keeping the weapon trained on them, Theodric advanced. He drew his sword, and swung it in a figure of eight.

Two elven heads toppled to the floor, followed by their bodies, leaking pale, greenish blood. Theodric cleaned his blade of the unpleasant ichor, and turned to see KorraKh struggling to his feet.

‘KorraKh!’ he said. ‘Now what?’

‘Now we must go further into the tunnels of the dark elves,’ KorraKh replied grimly. He went over to the corpses, and picked up one of their weapons.

‘Follow me,’ he said, and plunged into the stinking mist.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

## CHAPTER L.

### THE MOB'S ARRIVAL AT SIR FRANCIS VARNEY'S.—THE ATTEMPT TO GAIN ADMISSION.

All eyes were directed towards that southern sky which each moment was becoming more and more illuminated by the lurid appearance bespeaking a conflagration, which if it was not extensive, at all events was raging fiercely.

There came, too upon the wind, which set from that direction, strange sounds, resembling shouts of triumph, combined occasionally with sharper cries, indicative of alarm.

With so much system and so quietly had this attack been made upon the house of Sir Francis Varney—for the consequences of it now exhibited themselves most unequivocally—that no one who had not actually accompanied the expedition was in the least aware that it had been at all undertaken, or that anything of the kind was on the tapis.

Now, however, it could be no longer kept a secret, and as the infuriated mob, who had sought this flagrant means of giving vent to their anger, saw the flames from the blazing house rising high in the heavens, they felt convinced that further secrecy was out of the question.

Accordingly, in such cries and shouts as—but for caution's sake—they would have indulged in from the very first, they now gave utterance to their feelings as regarded the man whose destruction was aimed at.

"Death to the vampyre!—death to the vampyre!" was the principal shout, and it was uttered in tones which sounded like those of rage and disappointment.

But it is necessary, now that we have disposed of the smaller number of rioters who committed so serious an outrage at the inn, that we should, with some degree of method, follow the proceedings of the larger number, who went from the town towards Sir Francis Varney's.

These persons either had information of a very positive nature, or a very strong suspicion that, notwithstanding the mysterious and most unaccountable disappearance of the vampyre in the old ruin, he would now be found, as usual, at his own residence.

Perhaps one of his own servants may have thus played the traitor to him; but however it was, there certainly was an air of confidence about some of the leaders of the tumultuous assemblage that induced a general belief that this time, at least, the vampyre would not escape popular vengeance for being what he was.

We have before noticed that these people went out of the town at different points, and did not assemble into one mass until they were at a sufficient distance off to be free from all fear of observation.

Then some of the less observant and cautious of them began to indulge in shouts of rage and defiance; but those who placed themselves foremost succeeded in procuring a halt, and one said,—

"Good friends all, if we make any noise, it can only have one effect, and that is, to warn Sir Francis Varney, and enable him to escape. If, therefore, we cannot go on quietly, I propose that we return to our homes, for we shall accomplish nothing."

This advice was sufficiently and evidently reasonable to meet with no dissension; a death-like stillness ensued, only broken by some two or three voices saying, in subdued tones,—

"That's right—that's right. Nobody speak."

"Come on, then," said he who had given such judicious counsel; and the dark mass of men moved towards Sir Francis Varney's house, as quietly as it was possible for such an assemblage to proceed.

Indeed, saving the sound of the footsteps, nothing could be heard of them at all; and that regular tramp, tramp, would have puzzled any one listening to it from any distance to know in which direction it was proceeding.

In this way they went on until Sir Francis Varney's house was reached, and then a whispered word to halt was given, and all eyes were bent upon the building.

From but one window out of the numerous ones with which the front of the mansion was studded did there shine the least light, and from that there came rather an uncommonly bright reflection, probably arising from a reading lamp placed close to the window.

A general impression, they knew not why exactly, seemed to pervade everybody, that in the room from whence streamed that bright light was Sir Francis Varney.

"The vampyre's room!" said several. "The vampyre's room! That is it!"

"Yes," said he who had a kind of moral control over his comrades; "I have no doubt but he is there."

"What's to be done?" asked several.

"Make no noise whatever, but stand aside, so as not to be seen from the door when it is opened."

"Yes, yes."

"I will knock for admittance, and, the moment it is answered, I will place this stick in such a manner within, that the door cannot be closed again. Upon my saying 'Advance,' you will make a rush forward, and we shall have possession immediately of the house."

All this was agreed to. The mob slunk close to the walls of the house, and out of immediate observation from the hall door, or from any of the windows, and then the leader advanced, and knocked loudly for admission.

The silence was now of the most complete character that could be imagined. Those who came there so bent upon vengeance were thoroughly convinced of the necessity of extreme caution, to save themselves even yet from being completely foiled.

They had abundant faith, from experience, of the resources in the way of escape of Sir Francis Varney, and not one among them was there who considered that there was any chance of capturing him, except by surprise, and when once they got hold of him, they determined he should not easily slip through their fingers.

The knock for admission produced no effect; and, after waiting three or four minutes, it was very provoking to find such a wonderful amount of caution and cunning completely thrown away.

"Try again," whispered one.

"Well, have patience; I am going to try again."

The man had the ponderous old-fashioned knocker in his hand, and was about to make another appeal to Sir Francis Varney's door, when a strange voice said,—

"Perhaps you may as well say at once what you want, instead of knocking there to no purpose."

He gave a start, for the voice seemed to come from the very door itself.

Yet it sounded decidedly human; and, upon a closer inspection, it was seen that a little wicket-gate, not larger than a man's face, had been opened from within.

This was terribly provoking. Here was an extent of caution on the part of the garrison quite unexpected. What was to be done?

"Well?" said the man who appeared at the little opening.

"Oh," said he who had knocked; "I—"

"Well?"

"I—that is to say—ahem! Is Sir Francis Varney within?"

"Well?"

"I say, is Sir Francis Varney within?"

"Well; you have said it!"

"Ah, but you have not answered it."

"No."

"Well, is he at home?"

"I decline saying; so you had better, all of you, go back to the town again, for we are well provided with all material to resist any attack you may be fools enough to make."

As he spoke, the servant shut the little square door with a bang that made his questioner jump again. Here was a dilemma!

## BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXXV

"In with you!" ordered Grantline. "Get your helmets on! How many? Six. Enough—get back there, Williams—you were last. The lock won't hold any more."

I was one of the six who jammed into the manual exit lock. We went through it; in a moment we were outside. It was less than three minutes since the prowling brigand had been seen.

Grantline touched me just as we emerged. "Don't wait for orders? Get him."

"That fellow with the torch—"

"Yes. I'm with you."

We went out with a rush. We had already discarded our shoe and belt weights. I leaped, regardless of my companions.

The scurrying Martians had disappeared. Through my visor bull's-eye I could see only the Earthlit rocky surface of the ledge. Beside me stretched the dark wall of our building.

I bounded toward the front. The brigand with the torch had been at the front corner. I could not see him from here; he had been crouching just around the angle.

I had a tiny bullet projector, the best weapon for short range outdoors. I was aware of Grantline close behind me.

It took only a few of my giant leaps. I handed at the corner, recovered my balance and whirled around to the front.

The Martian was here, a giant misshapen lump as he crouched. His torch was a little stab of blue in the deep shadow enveloping him. Intent upon his work, he did not see me. Perhaps he thought his fellow men had broken our exits by now.

I landed like a leopard upon his back and fired, my weapon muzzle ramming him. His torch fell hissing with a silent rain of blue fire upon the rocks.

As my grip upon him made audiphone contact, his agonized scream rattled the diaphragms of my ear grids with horrible, deafening intensity.

He lay writhing under me; then was still. His scream choked into silence. His suit deflated within my encircling grip. He was dead: my leaden, steel-tipped pellet had punctured the double surface of his Erentz fabric; penetrated his chest.

Grantline had leaped, landing beside me. "Dead?"

"Yes."

I climbed from the inert body. The torch had hissed itself out. Grantline swung to our building corner, and I leaned down with him to examine it. The torch had fused and scarred the wall, burned almost through. A pressure rift had opened. We could see it, a curving gash in the metal wall-plate like a crack in a glass window pane.

I went cold. This was serious damage. The rarefied Erentz air would seep out. It was leaking now: we could see the magnetic radiance of it all up the length of the ten foot crack. The leak would change the pressure of the Erentz system, constantly lower it, demanding steady renewal. The Erentz motors would overheat; some might go bad from the strain.

Grantline stood gripping me. "Damn bad."

"Yes. Can't we repair it, Johnny?"

"No. Would have to take that whole plaster section out, shut off the Erentz plant and exhaust the interior air of all this bulkhead. Day's job—maybe more."

And the crack would get worse, I knew. It would gradually spread and widen. The Erentz circulation would fail. All our power would be drained struggling to maintain it. This brigand who had unwittingly committed suicide by his daring act had accomplished more than he had perhaps realized. I could envisage our weapons, useless from the lack of power. The air in our buildings turned fetid and frigid; ourselves forced to the helmets. A rush out to abandon the camp and escape. The building exploding, scattering into a litter on the ledge like a child's broken toy. The treasure abandoned, with the brigands coming up and loading it on their ship.

Our defeat. In a few hours now—or minutes. This crack could slowly widen, or it could break suddenly at any time. Disaster, come now so abruptly upon us at the very start of the brigand attack....

Grantline's voice in my audiphone broke my despairing thoughts.

"Bad. Come on, Gregg. Nothing to do here."



We were aware that our other four men had run along the building's other side. They emerged now—with the running brigands in front of them, rushing out toward the stairs on the ledge. Three giant Martian figures in flight, with our four men chasing.

A brigand fell to the rocks by the brink of the ledge. The others reached the descending staircase, tumbled down it with reckless leaps.

Our men turned back. Before we could join them, the enemy ship down in the valley sent up a cautious searchbeam which located its returning men. Then the beam swung up to the ledge, landing upon us.

We stood confused, blinded by the brilliant glare. Grantline stumbled against me.

"Run, Gregg! They'll be firing at us."

We dashed away. Our companions joined us, rushing back for the port. I saw it open, reinforcements coming out to help us—half a dozen figures carrying a ten foot insulated shield. They could barely get it through the port.

The Martian searchray vanished. Then almost instantly the electronic ray came with its deadly stab. Missed us at first, as we ran for the shield, carrying it back to the port, hiding behind it.

The ray stabbed once or twice more.

Whether Miko's instruments showed him how badly damaged our front wall was, we never knew. But I think that he realized. His searchbeam clung to it, and his zed-ray pried into our interiors.

The brigand ship was active now. We were desperate; we used our telescope freely for observation. Miko's ore carts and mining apparatus were unloaded on the rocks. The rail sections were being carried a mile out, nearly to the center of the valley. A subsidiary camp was being established there, only a mile from the base of our cliff, but still far beyond reach of our weapons. We could see the brigand lights down there.

Then the ore chute sections were brought over. We could see Miko's men carrying some of the giant projectors, mounting them in the new position. Power tanks and cables. Light flare catapults—small mechanical cannons for throwing illuminating bombs.

The enemy searchlight constantly raked our vicinity. Occasionally the giant electronic projector flung out its bolt as though warning us not to dare leave our buildings.

Half an hour went by. Our situation was even worse than Miko could know. The Erentz motors were running hot—our power draining, the crack widening. When it would break, we could not tell; but the danger was like a sword over us.

An anxious thirty minutes for us, this second interlude. Grantline called a meeting of all our little force, with every man having his say. Inactivity was no longer a feasible policy. We recklessly used our power to search the sky. Our rescue ship might be up

there; but we could not see it with our now disabled instruments. No signals came. We could not—or, at least, did not—receive them.

"They wouldn't signal," Grantline protested. "They'd know the Martians would be more likely to get the signal than us. Of what use to warn Miko?"

But he did not dare wait for a rescue ship that might or might not be coming! Miko was playing the waiting game now—making ready for a quick loading of the ore when we were forced to abandon our buildings.

The brigand ship suddenly moved its position! It rose up in a low flat arc, came forward and settled in the center of the valley where the carts and rail sections were piled, and the outside projectors newly mounted on the rocks.

The brigands now began laying the rails from the ship toward the base of our cliff. The chute would bring the ore down from the ledge, and the carts would take it to the ship. The laying of the rails was done under cover of occasional stabs from the electronic projector.

And then we discovered that Miko had made still another move. The brigand rays, fired from the depth of the valley, could strike our front building, but could not reach all our ledge. And from the ship's newer and nearer position this disadvantage to us was intensified. Then abruptly we realized that under cover of darkness bombs, an electronic projector and searchray had been carried to the top of the crater rim, diagonally across and only half a mile from us. Their beams shot down, raking all our vicinity from this new angle.

I was on the little flying platform which sallied out as a test to attack these isolated projectors. Snap and I, and one other volunteer, went. He and I held the shield; Snap handled the controls.

Our exit port was on the lee side of the building from the hostile searchbeam. We got out unobserved and sailed upward; but soon a light from the ship caught us. And the projector bolts came up....

Our sortie only lasted a few minutes. To me, it was a confusion of crossing beams, with the stars overhead, the swaying little platform under me, and the shield tingling in my hands when the blasts struck us. Moments of blurred terror....

The voice of the man beside me sounded in my ears: "Now, Haljan, give them one!"

We were up over the peak of the rim with the hostile projectors under us. I gauged our movement, and dropped an explosive powder bomb.

It missed. It flared with a puff on the rocks, twenty feet from where the two projectors were mounted. I saw that two helmeted figures were down there. They tried to swing their grids upward, but could not get them vertical to reach us. The ship was firing at us, but it was far away. And Grantline's searchbeam was going full power, clinging to the ship to dazzle them.

Snap circled them. As we came back I dropped another bomb. Its silent puff seemed littered with flying fragments of the two projectors and the bodies of the men.

We swiftly flew back to our base.

It decided Grantline. For an hour past Snap and I had been urging our plan to use the gravity platforms. To remain inactive was sure defeat now. Even if our buildings did not explode—if we thought to huddle in them, helmeted in the failing air—then Miko could readily ignore us and proceed with his loading of the treasure under our helpless gaze. He could do that now with safety—if we refused to accept the challenge—for we could not fire through the windows and must go out to meet this threat.

To remain defensive would end inevitably in our defeat. We all knew it now. The waiting game was Miko's—not ours.

The success of our attack upon the distant isolated projectors, heartened us. Yet it was a desperate offensive upon which we decided!

We prepared our little expedition at the larger of the exit ports. Miko's zed-ray was watching all our interior movements. We made a brave show of activity in our workshop with abandoned ore carts which were stored there. We got them out, started to recondition them.

It seemed to fool Miko. His zed-ray clung to the workshop, watching us. And at the distant port we gathered the platforms, shields, helmets, bombs, and a few hand projectors.

There were six platforms—three of us upon each. It left four people to remain indoors.

I need not describe the emotion with which Snap and I listened to Venza and Anita pleading to be allowed to accompany us. They urged it upon Grantline, and we took no part. It was too important a decision. The treasure—the life or death of all these men—hung now upon the fate of our venture. Snap and I could not intrude our personal feelings.

And the girls won. Both were undeniably more skillful at handling the midget platforms than any of us men. Two of the six platforms could be guided by them. That was a third of our little force! And of what use to go out and be defeated, leaving the girls here to meet death almost immediately afterward?

We gathered at the port. A last minute change made Grantline order six of his men to remain to guard the buildings. The instruments, the Erentz system, all the appliances had to be attended.

It left four platforms, each with three men—Grantline at the controls of one of them. And upon two of the others, Venza rode with Snap and I with Anita.

We crouched in the shadows outside the port. So small an army, sallying out to bomb this enemy vessel or be killed in the attempt! Only sixteen of us. And thirty or so brigands well armed.

I envisioned then this tiny Moon crater, the scene of this battle we were waging. Struggling humans, desperately trying to kill!

Anita drew me down on the platform. "Ready, Gregg."

The others were rising. We lifted, moved slowly out and away from the protective shadows of the building.