

Schlock! webzine

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

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

To read previous editions, please go to the Archive.

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

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

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

## This Edition

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



*This week's cover illustration is from House of Dust currently in production by [Goodnight Films](#).*

[Film News](#) - news of a horror film in production (HOUSE OF DUST).

[End of the Line](#) by Todd Nelsen - Charles H. "The Strangler" Ackerman was thundering down Hell's highways at high speeds in a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air with bucket seats and chromed trim. With the Devil himself. Previously published by [Associated Content](#). HORROR

Super Duper CONTINUES NEXT WEEK... [Award-winning](#) author [James Rhodes](#) is on holiday.

[Babbage Must Die - Part Twelve](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Mutiny on the *Mars*...? SCIENCE FICTION

[The Dark Place: Part Nine](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Martin dreams again... DARK FANTASY

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Epilogue](#) by Rex Mundy - Arthur discovers the awful truth... SCIENCE FANTASY

**Schlock! Classic Serial:** [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 12\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - At a corner of the cabin superstructure some fifty feet from our windows the figure of Miko appeared. A radiance barrage hung about him like a shimmering mantle. His voice sounded: "Gregg Haljan, do you yield?" SPACE OPERA

[Spiral Castle - Part One](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Eloise and her friends meet a very strange Welsh girl. *Eighth in the [Going Underground](#) series*. URBAN FANTASY

**Schlock! Classic Serial:** [Carmilla - Part Ten](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - Bereaved... GOTHIC HORROR

## Film News

Los Angeles, CA -- August 1, 2011 – As part of their recently announced financing and production deal, Principle Photography began Monday July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 on the feature film “House of Dust” it was announced today by Todd Slater, Slater Brothers Entertainment and A.D. Calvo, Goodnight Films. The film is produced by Slater Brothers Entertainment and Goodnight Films in conjunction with Budderfly Entertainment. Also announced today is the principle cast for “House of Dust.”

“House of Dust” will be filmed on location in Connecticut at The University of Connecticut and other locations within Connecticut. “House of Dust” is a thriller genre film which has attracted an incredible cast of some of today’s brightest young stars, including: **Steven Grahym** (“The First Ride of Wyatt Earp”) **Stephen Spinella** (“Angels In America”) **Holland Roden** (star of MTV’s hit show “Teen Wolf”) **Inbar Levi** (MTV’s highly anticipated new series “Underemployed”) **Nicole Travolta** (“The Middle”) **Joy Lauren** (“Desperate Housewives”) **Eddie Hassell** (“The Kids Are All Right”) **John Lee Ames** (“Days Of Darkness”) and **Alesandra Assante** (“Looking For An Echo”.)

“House of Dust” will be produced and directed by A.D. Calvo (“The Other Side of the Tracks,” “The Melancholy Fantastic.”) Argentine-born, Calvo worked with Slater and Budderfly Entertainment on “The Other Side of the Tracks.” The film received numerous awards and went on to receive international distribution with FOX Studios and is currently playing on Showtime Networks. Michael Goodin and Monolith Pictures will co-produce.

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## End of the Line

The first time I heard Berlioz, I was riding in a classic, burgundy 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air with bucket seats and chromed trim and was on my way to Hell. It was the final and the fifth movement of the composition and, from what I had been told, often the most celebrated. My hands gripped tight to the polished wood of the wheel, growing more white-knuckled with every mile that passed, the anxiety increasing steadily with the wheeling of the tires upon the asphalt. My passenger sat idly at my side and drummed his fingers upon the fabric of his trousers.

“Ah... this movement is his finest,” he said, arching his back further into his leather seat. “It is here, Charles, the artist finds himself at the Witches’ Sabbath. The funeral he attends is his own. This is all a drug induced dream, of course, but Berlioz was quite gifted in the ways of imagination. Have you ever tried opium?”

“No,” I replied, not particularly enjoying the reference to witches and funerals and the discourse on classical music I was receiving. A slight bead of perspiration had begun to angle its way from the hairline of my forehead and toward the eyebrow of my left eye socket. It wasn’t difficult to steer the automobile between the mid line of the road and the white of the other side. That part was easy. You simply stayed between the lines, steered clear of either extreme, avoided oncoming traffic and any

obstacle in your path, and placed your right foot on the accelerator and gunned it. The hard part was knowing when to stop, when to ease up on the gas. Too much drink here; a little junk there; an unexpected rendezvous with a fifty dollar hooker on a street corner. And then, of course, there was always the instance with a stray cat in the backyard with hanger wire while the babysitter was too occupied with an experimental finger up her teenage crotch to hear the morbid curiosities of an eight year old at work and all the tortured hissing. With a little intervention on her part then, perhaps, my morbid fascination with death would have been nipped in the bud and tucked away like a bad dream. That intervention never came. My parents never knew about it or didn't take the time to care. The hooker's eyes had bulged the way the cat's had when the wire had grown taunt around her neck. I was twenty-four or twenty-five then, although I can't rightly remember now. She had been my fifth or six, I think, but I never bothered counting. I had since learned that piano wire was preferable to the stiffness of the steel found in hangers or the coarseness of rope. Its spring steel can be twisted tight around the neck with little to no effort. It doesn't take much. But with enough pressure, and the will for it, piano wire can serve as a guillotine of sorts. It is surprising what you discover in the act. I could have let up, removed my weight from her chest and walked out of that shoddy, motel room, but that would have been like putting on the breaks. Taking the foot off the accelerator. The hard part for me had always been knowing when to quit, knowing when to ease up off the pedal.

"More the pity," my passenger continued. "A man hasn't lived until he has tried opium. I hear it is an extraordinary experience. At one time, opium was considered to be of immense value, only equal to that of gold. Can you believe that? To prefer something that has no intrinsic value whatsoever... beyond its physiological and pain numbing effects... to gold? I find this fascinating, don't you?"

"Anything is possible, I guess," I replied. His voice was becoming more and more monotonous, like the Sunday sermon of a preacher or a lesson one might learn in school, although I had never attended much of either. He had been going on like this for hours, days maybe, if time even existed here. He had appeared to me as a refined gentleman in his mid to late forties. Against his well-tanned skin, he had adorned a gentleman's vest, frock overcoat, and black leather gloves. Between himself and my seat at the wheel, a walking stick, fashioned of hickory and with a polished metal grip, sat ceremoniously to his left side. His hair was short and greased back with some sort of pomade, and above his upper lip, he sported a handlebar, Italian-type mustache. His posture was poignant, as fit a man of his stature and status, but was loose in demeanor. I could tell he was quick to anger, but his general temperament was easy and graceful--at least, it had been with me. He had earned himself many names in the wide world of Christendom. To some, he was the Light-Bearer, the Morning Star. To others, the less poetic, the Beast, Lucifer, Satan. For whatever reason, he was curious about me. I felt I was receiving some sort of special treatment. My answers had been short, however. I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of becoming a spokesman for my own damned human condition. He could go to hell, as far as I was concerned, not that it would change much for him.

"Fascinating..." he said.

It was the death of the hooker that had damned me. In more ways than one. Of this, I was certain. She hadn't screamed or struggled too terribly much. In fact, she didn't seem all that surprised when I had set to strangling her. I imagine a life of her sort could expect little else. Perhaps the solution I offered was preferable to the circumstances she had at hand. She had probably known something like this would

come along, and it was just a matter of time. There is no telling what she had been up to before me, but I doubt it was up to much good. She certainly hadn't been volunteering her time at soup kitchens. No, it was my own lack of control, my own arbitrary lack of self-introspection and restraint, that did me in. It was the way I mutilated her after. You can't be forgiven for something like this. It is too intentional, far too lacking in remorse. If I would have only walked away, not spent the time with the body, experimenting endlessly upon it again and again with the wire, the passerby in the halls of the motel would have never recognized me, years later, and testified on her behalf. Funny how things work out. I got the chair for the murder of a fifty dollar whore. Not my third or fourth victim, the unsuspecting housewife, who I confronted in her kitchen with a pair of Ginsu knives and sliced up the way one might a carrot or potato. That had been magic. Too quick... but magic, nevertheless. Or the eighth or ninth, tenth maybe, the young teacher, who I cornered on the school grounds following a late parent/teacher conference, and proceeded to strangle with a tetherball rope after she had broken free from me in her car. Lord, did she kick and struggle. Must have had something to do with dealing with somebody else's kids five days a week. No, it was the death of a hooker that sent 2,450 electrifying volts into my body. The illustrious state of Kentucky hadn't known about the others. If they would have, I imagine it wouldn't have made a bit of difference. They would have fried my ass to the seat just the same. Although there are a shit ton of ways to go about it, you can only kill a person but once. I was lucky. My soul escaped my body before the second, 20 second interval. I hear it isn't always so easy. Despite common misconceptions of the humanity of the whole thing, I hear some opt for three or four sessions. Ain't that a bitch? Not only is your soul already bound for Hell--you wouldn't be in the hot seat if you weren't guilty--you get to feel your blood boil on the way out.

And it *will* boil, if you are around long enough to know about it.

"...Charles, I must say that you have been most agreeable to this point. It is different for every soul, tailored to the individual's needs, but if you don't mind the metaphor, few are able to maintain the composure necessary to keep their hands on the wheel. Most will only come to me kicking and screaming. You do know where you are headed, right? I mean... your destination is not exactly... pleasant..."

"I know where this ride ends," I interrupted vehemently and applied more pressure to the acceleration.

"I like you, Charles," he said. "We both have our hands dipped in the same clay. We were cast from the same fire, so to speak. I don't do this for just anyone, I'll have you know. I just felt a master craftsman of your sort deserved something more intimate than I generally offer my clients. I must admit I am an admirer of your work. I have followed your life with the utmost curiosity. Do you like the automobile? I thought you might. You saw a picture of it in a magazine publication once. I don't know if you remember, but you were much younger then. A youngster blossoming into his teens. I thought of offering my services to you at the time--for a small payment, of course--but knew you would get along without me just fine. This child has spark! I said to myself. This child is headed places! You do me credit, Charles. You always have. It is a pleasure to be your escort and guide."

They had been right about me. This ol' Beelzebub was crazy as a loon. Judging by the company I now kept, I was a homicidal maniac, after all. Despite society's better intentions, the chair hadn't changed this fact. They may have discharged me from the system, but they were incapable of removing the evil inside the man. The evil and I were inseparable. The transition to it had been seamless.

There was no hope for redemption. This would follow its natural course, as it always had, until it had me by the throat and took it to down to a level I could understand. I looked to the right, at my self-proclaimed benefactor and guide, and something clicked in me then. Call it enlightenment. Call it a revelation. Call it what you will, but the vision of my babysitter hung by the rafters of a porch on a still, moonlit night suddenly grafted itself upon my mind. I had put her to sleep with a bottle of my mother's Thorazine blended into a strawberry shake. I drug her up to the rafters with a carefully constructed pulley of my own making. Nobody had suspected a thing. The memory of it did something to me.

Suddenly, I found myself awake and aware and possessing the curiosity of an eight year old child again.

Perhaps my passenger and I, despite his outdated fashion and fascination for opium and Hector Berlioz, were around for a reason, I thought. The world had grown too soft. It had forgotten how to tumble. It was our duty to remind it of what it could have been. I glanced to my right, again, and a thin smile pierced my lips. He had yet to show his true colors, but I knew they would be brighter and more wicked and diabolical than anything I could yet imagine. The fifth movement of Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony* was coming to a close. The Dance of Wrath and the fugue of the Sabbath Round had reached their climatic finale. My anxiety eased up a bit. I was where I belonged. It was where I had always been...

Charles H. "The Strangler" Ackerman was thundering down Hell's highways at high speeds in a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air with bucket seats and chromed trim.

With the Devil himself.

And I wasn't about to ease up on this damnation for anyone.

*Previously published by [Associated Content](#)*

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## Babbage Must Die

### Chapter Twelve

The sea breeze strummed the rigging and the sails billowed fatly. All around them, the waters of the Bay of Biscay stretched towards the horizon. Bristling with cannon, His Majesty's Frigate *Mars* cut through the waves at the head of the convoy. Behind, keeping its distance, sailed a larger vessel, which Brian knew was the one that carried the pay and supplies for the soldiers in Spain. In the middle distance were the two other ships of the convoy, more frigates like the *Mars*, bringing up the rear.

Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. First Lieutenant Piper was studying them with his telescope.

'I don't like the look of that sky,' Brian heard Piper murmur as the chickens clucked around their feed in the hencoop.

Brian picked up the bucket of pigswill, made his way down the steps from the quarterdeck, and crossed the deck in the direction of the pigpen. As he did so, an able seaman wearing a striped jersey and a blue coat passed him.

‘Boone wants to see you in the crow’s nest.’

Brian halted and stared at the sailor, an American by his accent, as he hurried down the companionway and vanished below. Had the man been talking to him? Well, there was nobody else here. See Boone, eh? In the crow’s nest! With trepidation, Brian looked up at the mast that loomed above him. He squinted in the sunlight, seeing the crow’s nest blackly silhouetted against the blue.

Brian had half a mind to ignore Boone’s peremptory command. Who did he think he was? Brian had work to do. In fact, nothing and no one was going to stop him from feeding the pigs. And not just because it didn’t involve climbing the rigging. He had work to do. Boone could rot up there. For the moment, anyway.

The pigs grunted with delight when they saw him, and he spoke to them affectionately as he poured the swill into their trough. Oinking in delight, they thrust their snouts into the trough and Brian told them about Boone’s demand.

‘Wants me to join him in the crow’s nest, he does,’ he told them, and they squealed in reply. ‘Why can’t he bloody well come down and talk to me? It’s the end of my watch at eight bells.’ But he knew that Boone would have something important to tell him. For a moment, he regretted joining this conspiracy.

The breeze played with his hair as he made his way towards the ratlines that led up the mainmast. He hadn’t had a haircut since travelling back in time, and after a week or two at sea, his hair was getting quite long. Soon he’d have a pigtail like all these jolly jack tars.

Like a series of rope ladders, the ratlines stretched up from the leeboard gunwale fore of the quarterdeck, past the futtock shrouds and up to the yard beneath the main topgallant... Brian halted in his tracks, appalled by this sudden stream of gibberish. When the hell had he started thinking like a sailor? The jargon had crept up and knocked him over the head, like a marine with a belaying pin.

He looked about him surreptitiously. He wasn’t supposed to be doing this. If McGee or Stevens saw him, they’d be bound to ask questions, and the answers could be difficult. Taking a deep breath, he reached up, gripped the hard, slippy ropes of the ratlines, and hauled himself upwards.

The breeze seemed to pick up when he had got about fifteen feet above the deck, and soon the ropes were swaying tautly back and forth. Brian clung on for dear life and inched his way from rope to rope. The ratlines had been polished smooth by the bare hands and feet of hundreds of crewmen, most of them with a far better idea of what they were doing than he had. The breeze seemed to be turning into a gale. Brian could see the choppy waters grow wilder, sending spray splashing against the sides of the frigate and drenching the deck. The ship itself pitched and rolled from swell to swell, making Brian’s progress even harder. He gripped hold and tried to stop looking down.



Up above, seemingly miles off, he could see the crow's nest. Was Boone even up there? Or was all this some kind of practical joke? Surely not. Brian had an understanding with the Americans aboard. It had taken them a while to warm to him, even longer to trust him, despite knowing that he had been Adams' mate.

Brian hauled himself grimly from rope to rope and the wind moaned and sighed through the rigging. Adams had become a kind of martyr for the impressed Yanks. No happier with their lot than Brian, and with perhaps even more reason, since they had been forced to serve their enemies, the Americans were close to mutiny. Brian was pretty keen on the idea himself, even though he knew what would happen if they couldn't pull it off. As he continued his grim ascent, he gave the nearby yardarm a queasy glance.

He didn't really care about local politics, he just wanted to get off this ship and back ashore, in England preferably, but anywhere where the floor didn't go up and down all the time would suit him. England would be best, though. He didn't much fancy his chances of finding Ada but at least he'd be able to make sure he was near the cellar when the wormhole reopened. If she was still alive, Ada would probably bump into him there, next April. If she managed to get there. Who knew what she'd got herself into by now.

He was freezing cold, and the wind howled around him. His fingers were like ice, and his bare feet were sore from the ropes as well as frozen to the bone. To his relief, he saw that the crow's nest was now directly above him. A figure in a blue coat stood gazing worriedly at the storm clouds building on the horizon.

'Not looking good out there, is it?' said Brian, hauling himself up to join the man.

Boone turned to greet him, his heavy-set, heavy-browed face dark. Suddenly Brian staggered and grabbed the mast to prop himself up. The crow's nest seemed to be swinging back and forth in the wind as if it was about to fall. He'd got used to the constant motion of the ship after a while, and he no longer suffered seasickness, but he hadn't been up in the crow's nest before.

'Pull yourself together, Wellsy,' Boone snapped. 'I want to talk to you about our plan.'

'Worked out what to do about the marines yet?' Brian asked. This was their main problem when it came to mutinying; the contingent of musket-toting soldiers fanatically loyal to the captain, who had no connections whatsoever with any of the hands. Both Boone and Brian had put out discreet feelers among the crew and established that the tide of feelings was turning against Captain Martin, a stern, unyielding figure whose hatred for impressed sailors made him deeply unpopular. Support for him was by no means strong, although Brian had seen that Keane was unswervingly loyal.

'All we need if we're to deal with the marines,' Boone said, 'is weapons. There are more of us than them. They have muskets, aye, but the muskets are kept in the armoury on the lower deck.'

‘You think we could break into the armoury?’ Brian asked.

‘Why not?’ Boone demanded.

‘There’s a marine on sentry duty, Boone,’ Brian said. ‘The guard changes every watch. How are we going to deal with that little problem?’

‘We rush them when they’re changing the guard, when their attention’s distracted,’ Boone said ferociously. ‘Then we go straight to the captain’s cabin and take him hostage.’

Brian nodded thoughtfully. The crow’s nest shifted again and he grabbed the rail in fright. The deck lurched far below him.

‘It might just work,’ he muttered. ‘But those marines are going to be alert. Okay, so we take the captain hostage. What then?’

‘Anyone not willing to join us, we put adrift in a jolly boat, with meat and biscuits and grog to last a week,’ Boone said. ‘While we sail for Baltimore.’

Brian was impressed by this humane solution. In Boone’s place, he’d be tempted to make Captain Martin walk the plank...

‘Remember, you promised to drop me off in England,’ he said.

Boone looked into the teeth of the gathering storm.

‘That might not be possible, Wellsy,’ he replied, shouting now above the howl of the gale. The crow’s nest was swaying back and forth. Brian gripped Boone by the arm.

‘You gave me your word, Boone,’ he bellowed. ‘You’d better drop me off in England. I’m not going anywhere near Baltimore!’

‘Wellsy, be reasonable!’ Boone shouted. ‘We won’t be able to make it through the blockade. Every frigate and ship of the line will be looking out for the *Mars* as soon as word gets out. She won’t get near England.’

Brian folded his arms and shook his head. The crow’s nest lurched again and he shot out a hand to grab onto the mast.

‘I’m not going to America,’ he shouted defiantly. ‘You’re going to have to promise to drop me off, or I won’t cooperate.’

The colour drained from Boone’s face. ‘Wellsy,’ he replied with a fake laugh. ‘You know we need you to talk to the English. This mutiny won’t work without you.’

Brian gave a thin-lipped smile.

‘So do what I say,’ he said. ‘Drop me off somewhere in the British Isles.’

Boone's face cleared. 'Alright, Wellsy,' he said. 'We'll put you ashore in Ireland. How's that sound?'

Brian wanted to argue. Getting back to Cheshire from Ireland would not be easy. He'd need money, apart from anything. He felt like he ought to negotiate more, but he wanted to get down the ratlines, for all they were thrumming wildly in the gale, and back to the safety of the deck. Preferably the lower deck. It was the end of his watch soon, anyway.

'Done,' said Brian, shivering with cold. He shook Boone's hand and climbed gingerly out of the crow's nest.

The climb back down to the deck was a nightmare. The gale plucked the rigging with invisible fingers of ice while spray surged over the gunwale and drenched the deck. Brian was terrified to find himself flung back and forth like a leaf in the wind as he descended, and he gripped the ropes frantically to avoid being flung off. It took an effort of will to move from one position to another. Hanging there was hell, moving was even worse, and he was convinced each time he went down a rung that the wind would pluck him from the ropes and send him plunging into the surging waters.

At last, his bare feet touched the deck. He let go of the ropes, turned – and saw Keane staring at him from the lea of the quarterdeck.

'What were you doing up there?' he demanded. Down here, the wind was not as fierce, and although spray lashed over the rail and the deck was sopping, Keane did not have to raise his voice. 'We've got baling to do and you're shirking your work! I'll tell McGee about this.'

He grabbed Brian by his collar and dragged him protesting below decks.

The boatswain's mate was organising the baling of the hold when Keane dragged Brian before him.

'Git balin', you pair of loizy bastards!' McGee roared.

'I'm reporting Wellsy,' Keane replied. 'Shirking his work! I found him coming down from aloft.'

McGee put down the bucket he was holding and turned to face Brian.

'What's all dis about?' he demanded. 'Ye're not a topman, ye're a woister! Who telled ye to go alaft?'

Brian was flummoxed. He couldn't tell the truth, or the whole plot would fall apart; he'd never see England again, or his own time – they'd probably string him up, besides. Obviously he couldn't say a word about the mutiny.

'Someone said I was wanted up in the crow's nest,' he said, stalling for time.

‘Ye?’ said McGee. ‘What would anyone want wid da loikes of ye up aloft? Who’s up dere now, one of dose Americans, is it?’

‘Been thick as thieves with the colonial scum, this ’un,’ Keane said viciously, shaking Brian by the scruff of his neck. ‘Ever since the flogging.’ Keane himself had been a changed man since that day; grimmer, if that was possible. And his hatred of “colonials” had grown.

McGee stepped up close to Brian, who flinched back from his foul breath.

‘Wan’ a taste of da cat yerself, d’ye?’ he barked. ‘What was ye doin’ ta’kin’ to dat American? Conspoirin’ is it, ye mutinous dog?’

Brian panicked. ‘No, no!’ he said. ‘No, it was just someone’s idea of a joke!’ He laughed desperately. ‘Ha ha! Imagine how pissed off I was when I got up to the crow’s nest and Boone asked me why I was there! We did chuckle about it, when I explained!’

McGee’s eyes narrowed. His unshaven jowls quivered. ‘Who was it telled ye to go aloft?’

‘What’s all this about, McGee?’

McGee turned and Brian saw Lieutenant Piper standing in the companionway, his telescope under his arm.

‘Dis lad’s been up aloft, sorr,’ McGee began. ‘Up to da crow’s nest. Oi...’

‘I think we established this before we sailed, McGee,’ said Piper, his big, soulful eyes cold with menace. They flickered over to take in Brian. ‘This man is a waister.’

‘To be sure, sorr,’ McGee began. ‘But...’

‘So why are you sending him up aloft?’ Piper demanded. ‘Particularly under these weather conditions. The storm is building, McGee.’ As he spoke, the ship lurched as it went over another swelling wave. The lanterns swung back and forth, sending shadows dancing across the companionway.

‘But sorr,’ McGee said, ‘twasn’t moi orders! Oi was askin’ him meself woi he wen’ up dere!’

Piper’s expression changed. Brian watched in terror as the first lieutenant turned to face him. This man had helped him in the past. He seemed to be a fair, high-minded man, if distant. But somehow Brian didn’t think he’d appreciate the truth.

‘Why, then, did you go aloft, Wells?’ Piper asked quietly. ‘Answer the boatswain’s mate!’

‘I told McGee,’ Brian quavered. ‘Someone told me to go up but when I got there the man said he didn’t know why I’d been sent. Think it was a practical joke, sir! Ha ha!’

Piper's eyes narrowed. 'I saw you ascend the ratlines, Wells,' he said, and Brian felt cold sweat break out on his temple. 'I watched from the quarterdeck, curious, since I know you are a waister. You were up there a long time. Too long for the brief conversation that you describe. I watched you in my spyglass. You were talking animatedly.'

'What else did you discuss with Able Seaman Boone?'

To Brian's immense relief, the storm hit at that precise moment.

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## The Dark Place

### Chapter 9

Martin closed the front door and made his way into the lounge. He sat down in one of the armchairs and found himself once more examining his feelings. He wondered why Isobel had wanted to go home and not spend more time with him. He was feeling lonely, sad and apprehensive about the future. Martin thought about this afternoon's walk in the country park. The weather had been OK when they started to walk through the park and had gotten worse the further into the park they went. It did seem strange that as soon as they left the park the wind and snow had seemed to become less severe but he couldn't accept Isobel's idea that something was trying to keep them in the park.

Spook wandered into the lounge and sat in front of Martin. The cat watched Martin as though it was expecting him to say or do something.

'So what do you want?' Martin asked Spook. The cat responded by walking across the floor and jumping onto the arm of the chair. Martin smiled and began to rub Spook's head. 'Don't tell me you're missing her as well,' he said.

Spook began to purr then jumped into Martin's lap where he curled up contentedly. Martin continued to rub Spook's head as he thought about the previous night's events. His head still ached although the lump had gone down considerably and only a red line remained above his eye.

'How could I have seen somebody in the room?' thought Martin. 'I've never had hallucinations before and I only had a few glasses of wine so it couldn't have been that.'

Suddenly the telephone rang startling him. Martin slowly stood up and eased Spook onto the chair then made his way into the hall to answer the phone.

'Hello,' he said as he pressed the telephone to his ear.

'Hi Martin,' said Isobel. 'I just wanted to let you know that I made it home and everything was OK.'

‘That’s good,’ Martin replied. ‘Is everything OK with the house?’

‘Yes it seems fine,’ said Isobel, ‘but it’s really cold and the heating doesn’t seem to be having much effect.’

‘It’s nice and warm here,’ said Martin, instantly regretting it. There was a silence on the phone before Isobel replied.

‘I’m sorry Martin, I didn’t mean to appear ungrateful or hurt your feelings. After last night and the weather in the park this afternoon, I just wanted to get home and relax in my own space.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Martin. ‘I can understand you wanting your own space after all that happened the last couple of days. When am I going to see you again?’ he asked, voicing the question he most wanted answering.

‘That’s up to you,’ replied Isobel. ‘When would you like to see me again?’

‘What about tomorrow night?’ Martin quickly replied.

Isobel laughed, then said, ‘OK, why don’t you come over here and I’ll cook you something to eat?’

‘I’ll come over about 7.30 then, if that’s alright,’ said Martin.

Isobel replaced the receiver after she had said goodbye to Martin and walked into the lounge. The house felt cold even though the heating was on, and she had lit the fire. Isobel decided to go and have a shower as she thought this might warm her up. It seemed even colder upstairs and Isobel shivered as she walked into her bedroom.

‘Maybe I should have stayed over at Martin’s house,’ she thought to herself as she took off her clothes and made her way into the en suite bathroom.

The hot water from the shower warmed Isobel as it ran over her body. She quickly washed and dried herself before slipping into her pyjamas and her dressing gown and wrapped the belt around her waist. Isobel returned to the lounge and sat in front of the fire. She switched on the TV but couldn’t settle to watch the current affairs programmes, and the latest crop of cookery challenges or shows with people willing to air their most intimate problems left her cold. Switching off the TV, Isobel went into the kitchen and poured a glass of wine for herself.

Isobel looked in the fridge but there were only the remains of a loaf and some cheese and grapes on the shelves. She made herself some cheese on toast before returning to the lounge. She looked through her small CD collection but couldn’t find anything she wanted to listen to, so she switched on the radio instead. The local commercial radio stations seemed to be full of radio presenters who all sounded the same. They used the same phrases to describe whatever piece of music they played and they all seemed intent on presenting an amorphous, characterless programme.

'I wonder if they're actually in the studio or if they've recorded this programme and there's nobody there except the machines?' Isobel thought to herself. 'You could take any one of them and put them on any of the different radio stations and they'd all sound the same. There must be something about their voices when they recruit these people, they must have radio friendly voices, whatever that means.'

Isobel smiled to herself as she listened to the bland voice telling her about the fantastic show she could look forward to if she tuned at ten o'clock that evening. She used the remote control to scan the waveband until she came across a station she thought she could listen to without feeling patronised.

As Isobel listened to the songs on the radio, she thought about Martin and the way she felt. She knew that her heartbeat faster whenever she saw him and that she thought about him almost constantly.

'You've only known him a week,' her conscience pointed out.

'I know it's only been a week,' she reasoned 'but I love him.'

Finally admitting to herself how she felt about Martin made Isobel feel better. She had been trying to avoid the realisation that she was falling in love with Martin by hiding behind her fear of being hurt again. Having accepted how she felt and realising that she wanted Martin in her life made everything simpler. Isobel hugged herself and smiled as she thought about the future.

After Martin had spoken to Isobel, he had made himself a sandwich and returned to the lounge. Spook was still lying curled on the chair where Martin had left him when he had answered the telephone. Martin sat on the settee and ate his sandwich while thinking about Isobel, and how over the past week she had come to mean so much to him. He knew they had spoken briefly about their feelings for each other and how each of them didn't want to be hurt again but deep inside he knew he was in love with Isobel. The rational side of him argued that it had only been a week, so how could he know he loved Isobel? Martin knew he wanted Isobel with him all the time and that his life wouldn't be complete without her.

'I'll have to try and tell her how I feel about her when I see her tomorrow,' Martin decided. Once he had made his decision, he felt better. He knew that now he had accepted his feelings for Isobel he wouldn't be hiding behind his fear of commitment and of being hurt again.

Jess and Steve arrived home mid-afternoon and after paying the taxi-driver, they hurried up the path and into the house.

'I'm going to go upstairs and get changed,' said Jess. 'Why don't you put the kettle on?'

'OK,' said Steve as he made his way into the kitchen.

Jess went upstairs taking the overnight case with her. In the bedroom, she emptied the case and put the washing into the laundry basket. She decided she felt like a shower

so quickly took off her clothes, went into the en suite bathroom and turned on the shower. Jess stepped into the shower cubicle and the hot water cascading over her body made clouds of steam in the bathroom. Jess turned her face towards the water and allowed it to cover her face and head before shampooing her hair and washing her face and body. Stepping out of the cubicle Jess took one of the large bath towels from the radiator and towelled herself dry. As she walked back into the bedroom, Jess caught sight of herself in the mirrored wardrobe. She stopped and examined her body.

‘Not looking too bad,’ she thought to herself, as she turned round and looked over her shoulder at her reflection.

Jess took her bathrobe and slipped it over her shoulders before wrapping a towel round her wet hair and going downstairs. Steve had made a cup of tea for Jess and opened a beer for himself.

‘Didn’t you have enough last night?’ Jess said as she walked into the kitchen.

‘It’s Sunday afternoon. I’m relaxing in my own time in my own house so I think if I feel like having a beer I should be able to make that decision for myself,’ said Steve defensively.

‘I’m sorry, Ste,’ said Jess. ‘I just don’t want you drinking all the time.’

‘I don’t drink all the time,’ Steve replied. ‘I just felt like having a couple of beers on a Sunday before we get back on the treadmill and rejoin the ranks of the great unwashed tomorrow.’

Jess laughed and hugged Steve. ‘You have such a bright outlook on life don’t you?’ she said, holding him close.

‘It’s my sunny disposition and boundless belief in life’s good fortune and pleasures that makes me so attractive,’ said Steve, laughing along with her.

They took their drinks and made their way into the lounge. Steve had already lit the fire and the room was pleasantly warm. Sitting side by side on the settee Jess rested her head against Steve’s shoulder.

‘What did you think about last night?’ she asked. Steve thought for a minute before he answered.

‘I don’t really know what to think,’ he said. ‘I think Isobel is a lovely girl and they seem well suited but all that stuff about dreams and things going bump in the night is beyond me.’

‘I think Martin has really fallen for Isobel, but he’s scared of admitting it to himself after what happened with Jane,’ said Jess thoughtfully.

‘You could be right,’ Steve replied. ‘He said to me he’d never felt the way he does for Isobel about anyone else before and that if he was in love then it was a great feeling.’



‘Well, that’s a first,’ said Jess lifting her head from Steve’s shoulder and sitting up. ‘You don’t normally get two men speaking openly to each other about their feelings for a woman and not being embarrassed about it. Are you sure Martin said he thought he was in love with Isobel?’

Steve looked uncomfortable as he said, ‘I was joking with him and I just said to him *I think you’re falling for Miss Stevens* and he laughed and said maybe he was.’

Jess stood up and walked towards the door. ‘I’m going to take a leaf out of your book and have a glass of wine,’ she said at the doorway. ‘Do you want anything while I’m in the kitchen?’

Steve finished the last mouthful of beer in the bottle and said, ‘I’ll have another beer, thanks.’

Jess took the empty bottle and went into the kitchen. She poured a glass of wine and took a cold beer out of the fridge then returned to the lounge.

‘Thanks, babe,’ said Steve taking the bottle from Jess.

‘Cheers,’ said Jess as she sat next to Steve and lifted her glass.

‘Cheers,’ said Steve touching his beer bottle against the glass.

Martin dropped the small steak into the hot pan and it sizzled pleasantly as the meat sealed. He had already put some salad on a plate, which he dressed with oil and balsamic vinegar. As the steak cooked, Martin took a bottle red wine from the wine rack, opened it, and filled a large wine glass with the dark red wine. He took the steak from the pan, put it on the plate with the salad, and sat at the kitchen table to eat his meal.

The steak and the salad were lovely, as was the wine, but inside Martin was feeling lonely and isolated. He finished his meal and put the dishes into the dishwasher before he took his glass of wine and went into the lounge. Spook was still asleep in the chair and Martin marvelled at the cat’s capacity for sleep.

‘I suppose they’re nocturnal, so that’s why they sleep all the time,’ he thought to himself as he sat down. Martin switched on the TV but was soon bored with the programmes so turned the TV set off and turned on the CD player. Martin sipped his wine and considered what he was going to do now. He had thought Isobel would have spent the day, and secretly he had hoped the night, with him but that hadn’t happened.

Martin tried to avoid thinking about last night but faced with his solitary evening ahead his mind inevitably began to go over what had happened, as much as he tried not to think about it. There were so many coincidences between what he had dreamt, and what Isobel said she had experienced in her dreams, that they had to be linked.

They had both seen a dark figure with red eyes in their dreams and both of them had seen a dark figure standing close to them when they were awake, even if it had subsequently disappeared. There was also the fact that somehow, somewhere he had

acquired scratches all over his back and shoulders. Rational thought said you couldn't be injured in a dream so how had he managed to sustain his cuts and scratches?

He had decided his cut knees, following his previous nightmare, were a result of kneeling on the pavement next to the injured young girl at the scene of the traffic accident. But what if they were the result of falling to his knees in his nightmare though? If he accepted, he could be injured in his dreams then it made sense he must have a physical presence in the strange monochrome world he had apparently visited twice? A record on the CD caught Martin's attention and he listened to the lyrics and smiled to himself.

'That sums up what's happened the last couple of days,' he thought, 'I wish I knew exactly what's going on and what it all means.'

Martin finished his wine and decided he'd better give Steve and Jess a call. He dialled the number and after a couple of rings, Steve answered.

'Hello,' he said sleepily.

'Hi Steve,' said Martin. 'Did I wake you up or something? You sound half asleep.'

'Alright, mate,' said Steve. 'We had a bit of a late night last night round at a haunted house so we've been catching up on a bit of sleep this afternoon.'

Martin laughed as he answered. 'Sorry about last night, Steve, but I didn't plan it you know.'

'I know,' said Steve, 'and I'm only joking with you about last night. How are you? Any more threatening emails or visits from your red eyed boogie man?'

'No, not since last night,' Martin replied, 'but we did have a bit of a strange thing happen when we went for a walk this afternoon.'

Martin described what had happened when he and Isobel had walked into the country park that afternoon.

'And you think the weather was trying to keep you in the park or something?' said Steve a note of disbelief in his voice.

'I don't know,' Martin replied, 'but it was weird, you know, the way the snow and the wind suddenly seemed to lessen as soon as we came out of the park. If you'd been in the middle of that storm I think you would have been worried as well.'

'Look mate,' said Steve, 'I've been friends with you for a long time and you've never mentioned anything like this before. Are you sure you're all right, you know, nothing's worrying you or anything?'

Martin realised that Steve was suggesting he was having some kind of crisis and perhaps his mental health was in question.

'I'm fine, Steve,' he said. 'I'm as much in the dark about this as you and Jess.'

'All this started when you met Isobel, didn't it?' said Steve. 'Do you think it might be connected in some way?'

Martin was quiet for a few seconds. 'Maybe you're right,' he said. 'Look, I just wanted to make sure you and Jess were OK, so I'll ring off and leave you to catch up on your sleep.'

'There's no such thing as ghosts, Martin,' said Steve.

'Yeah, you're right,' Martin replied. 'I'll give you a ring some time this week. Maybe we can get together one night?'

'OK,' Steve replied, 'but next time you come here.'

'I'll give you a bell during the week then,' said Martin. 'Goodnight mate.'

'Night mate,' said Steve and hung up the phone.

'Was that Martin?' Jess asked as she sat up from where she had been lying on the settee.

'Yeah, it was,' Steve replied.

'Is he OK?' said Jess, a note of concern in her voice.

'He's fine,' Steve replied. 'He just wanted to see if we were OK.'

'So what was all that about the weather then?' said Jess. Steve told Jess what Martin had told him about the weather that afternoon. 'That does sound a bit odd, don't you think?' said Jess when Steve had finished. 'I mean Martin's a doctor; he's not likely to imagine things like that, is he?'

'I don't know,' said Steve, 'but all this weird stuff started happening just after he met Isobel, didn't it?'

'You're not suggesting she's responsible, are you?' asked Jess. 'She's been having similar nightmares as well, hasn't she?'

'Exactly!' said Steve. 'All very convenient, don't you think?'

'Well, I don't think she's got anything to do with what's been happening. She was as frightened as I was last night and she was really upset about what happened to Martin when he banged his head.'

'Maybe you're right,' said Steve, 'but I can't help thinking all this is connected to her somehow.'

Martin had topped up his wine after he finished speaking to Steve.

‘I suppose I should be thinking about getting an early night,’ he thought to himself. ‘I’ve got to be back in work tomorrow even if I don’t feel like going.’

Martin had a sudden thought. He went to the hall and returned to the lounge carrying the telephone book. He opened the book and under Churches and Other Places of Worship, he found the number for St Mary’s Church in West Derby village. Martin dialled the number and after a few seconds, it began to ring. Martin waited but no one answered. He was just about to hang up when there was a click and a rich sonorous voice said.

‘This is the Reverend Dr Michael Carey. I’m sorry but I’m not here to take your call. If you’d like to leave a message after the tone, I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. Thank you.’

Martin waited for the tone and then left his name and number and asked the Reverend to give him a call when he could. He pressed the end call button and wondered if he’d done the right thing.

At just after eleven Isobel decided it was time she went to bed. She wasn’t particularly looking forward to going to work the next day, especially if the weather was bad.

‘Things could be worse though,’ she thought. ‘I could be going to a job I hate with no prospects and little to look forward to, instead of working for myself and enjoying my job.’

Isobel considered leaving the heating on as the house still hadn’t really warmed up, but decided it was a waste. She turned off the lights downstairs and made her way up to her bedroom where she switched on the lights and walked into the en suite bathroom. As she turned towards the mirror, Isobel felt her heart jump as she thought she saw something black dart towards the corner of the mirror. Isobel quickly realised that if she had seen something in the mirror it must be a reflection so turned to look behind her back, but there was nothing there.

‘Now I’m seeing things,’ she thought ruefully as she cleaned her face and then brushed her teeth before switching off the light and going back into her bedroom. As she walked towards her bed, a dark formless shadow seemed to flow from the mirror until a black figure stood motionless in the darkness of the bathroom watching Isobel as she took off her dressing gown and climbed into bed.

Martin was still sitting in front of the fire at 11.30. He was tired but his mind was working overtime, worrying if he’d done the right thing in telephoning the church.

‘I probably wouldn’t have thought about that if Steve hadn’t mentioned it,’ he mused to himself. ‘At least I’ll be able to tell Isobel I’ve tried to do something about the things that have been happening.’

A sudden yawn took Martin by surprise and he decided it was time for bed. He switched off the lights, lifted Spook off the armchair, and took him into the kitchen where he curled up contentedly after Martin had put him down on one of the kitchen

chairs.

Martin walked tiredly upstairs and into his bedroom. He walked over to the window and looked out at the snow-covered garden below him. The wind had picked up and the bare branches of the trees moved and twisted like fingers reaching for something they would never be able to grasp. The moon came out from behind the clouds and illuminated the scene with a cold pale light, which the snow seemed to reflect. As Martin looked out of the window the security light came on dispelling the moon's pale light with the harsh glare of its halogen bulb. Spook was slowly picking his way through the snow as he made his way across the garden and his movement had been picked up by the sensor on the light.

'I wonder where he's going,' Martin thought to himself as he watched the cat disappear into the shrubbery. A few seconds later, the light was extinguished and the pale moonlight once more held sway in the garden.

Martin closed the blinds, walked over to his bed, and switched on the bedside light. He rubbed his face and the dark stubble on his chin felt rough against his palm. Martin went into the en suite, switched on the light and regarded his face in the mirror. He had dark circles under his eyes and he needed a shave.

'God, I look terrible,' he thought as he ran his fingers through his hair. 'Too many late nights and too much booze. I'll need to get back to some healthy eating, the gym and some early nights,' he promised himself.

Martin walked back into the bedroom switching the en suite light off as he left the room.

'I'll get a shave in the morning,' he said to himself as he pulled off his jumper and jeans and left them on the end of the bed. As he climbed into bed and lay back, Martin felt completely worn out. 'Some few days' rest this has turned out to be,' he thought tiredly.

He switched off the bedside light, pulled the quilt up over his shoulders and relaxed back into the comfortable pillows. Within minutes, he was asleep and breathing deeply. Martin did not notice the plummeting temperature in his bedroom.

Martin groaned as once more he opened his eyes to impenetrable darkness and the familiar feeling of vertigo caused by the disorientation of not having a fixed reference point in the blackness. Martin quickly crouched down and pushed his hands towards where he hoped the ground would be. As his palms met the rough road beneath his feet, the feelings of vertigo lessened. Slowly the light grew and without hesitation, Martin turned to his right and began to run along the centre of the road. In the distance, he could see what he now knew was the figure of a small child. He hoped he could reach the child before the wall of darkness, which he knew, would be following his progress caught up with him. As Martin drew closer to the figure in the road, he risked a look over his shoulder but strangely, the wall of darkness was not there. He quickened his pace and soon he could clearly see the figure of a little girl in a pink coat standing in the centre of the road. As he approached her, the young girl turned towards him and Martin recognised her as the girl from the road traffic accident.

‘Have you come to take me home?’ the girl asked, as Martin came to a breathless halt in front of her.

‘I don’t know,’ he gasped in reply. ‘Where are we?’

‘This is her place and she’ll be here soon,’ said the girl.

‘Who will be here?’ said Martin. ‘Who is she and what does she want?’

‘She doesn’t want you, she wants Isobel,’ replied the girl. Martin knelt on the ground in front of her. The side of her head was a bloody mess but she didn’t seem to even notice.

‘Where are we?’ asked Martin. ‘Who is she and what does she want with Isobel?’

The girl lifted her head and looked at Martin with corpse-like eyes that were a complete milky grey, without any iris or pupil.

‘This is her place and I don’t want to be here. She talks to me and tells me horrible things.’ The girl looked over Martin’s shoulder into the distance. ‘She’s coming,’ she said. Martin stood up and looked back along the road. In the distance, he could see a wall of darkness that was approaching him at a frightening speed.

He turned back towards the girl. ‘Who is she?’ he asked desperately. ‘What can I do to stop her?’ The girl lifted her head towards Martin and her eyes turned jet black as a sickly smile spread across her young features.

‘You can do nothing to stop me,’ said a voice which seemed to come from the girl but echoed through Martin’s head with a sound like thunder and caused him to put his hands over his ears. The girl suddenly seemed to be as tall as Martin. She reached for his throat with black, talon like fingers as her eyes turned blood red. She grasped Martin’s throat as the approaching darkness enveloped them. Martin kicked and struggled but it was useless and he felt his consciousness slipping away as the immensely strong black fingers squeezed his throat.

Martin woke up lying on the floor next to his bed. His throat was on fire and as he tried to swallow it felt like someone was dragging barbed wire across the inside of his throat. He struggled to his knees and once he had gained, his feet stumbled into the bathroom. His face was red and blotchy and his neck was swollen and bright red except for where a set of finger marks were clearly etched into his skin. The white marks the fingers had left were long and nearly circled his neck from front to back.

He coughed and the pain in his throat was immense. Martin quickly made his way downstairs and took some ice out of the freezer, which he wrapped in towel and held against his throat. He slipped a piece of ice into his mouth and the cold water as the cube melted went some way to easing the fire in his throat. Martin went into the lounge and sat down. It was 2.30 in the morning and he wondered just what the hell was going on.

‘Whatever was in that dream nearly killed me that time,’ he thought.

Suddenly it felt as though his heart had missed a beat when he remembered what the girl had said. ‘*She doesn’t want you. She wants Isobel.*’

Martin rushed to the hall and dialled Isobel’s phone number. After what seemed like an eternity, Isobel answered the phone.

‘Hello,’ she said sleepily. ‘This better be good, waking me up at this time of the morning.’

‘Isobel,’ Martin rasped the pain in his throat excruciating.

‘Martin! Is that you?’ Isobel replied. ‘What’s wrong with your voice?’

‘I just wanted to make sure you were OK,’ Martin whispered. ‘I’ve just had another nightmare, only this one was much worse.’

‘What happened to you?’ asked Isobel her voice full of concern. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I can’t talk properly,’ whispered Martin. ‘Whatever has been attacking me in my dreams tried to choke me.’

‘Oh my God,’ said Isobel. ‘I’m coming over there.’

‘No,’ said Martin with as much force as he could manage. ‘I’ll come to you, I need to tell you something, and I don’t want you driving over here.’

Martin persuaded Isobel he would be OK driving to her house and ten minutes later, he eased his car off the snow-covered driveway and slowly drove to Isobel’s house.

Isobel was watching from her window and as soon as she saw Martin’s car approaching along the dimly lit road she opened the gates, allowing him to drive up to the house. She waited until he was outside and then opened the front door and rushed out to his car. As Martin got out of the car, Isobel threw her arms around him.

‘Martin, what happened to you?’ she asked as she held him close.

‘Let’s go inside,’ Martin whispered.

Once they were inside the house, Isobel led Martin into the lounge where she had lit the fire. Martin sat down gratefully and massaged his throat with his hand. The swelling had started to lessen and at least he could swallow without feeling as though he was trying to swallow razor blades. Isobel knelt on the floor in front of Martin and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

‘I’ll get you something to drink,’ said Isobel wiping tears from her face. A few minutes later, she returned from the kitchen with a cup of warm water into which she had mixed some honey. Martin let the mixture slide down his throat and the honey immediately eased the rawness. Slowly Martin told Isobel how he had reasoned that if

he could be physically hurt in his dreams then he must be able to interact with whatever, or whoever was also there.

‘As soon as I realised I was there again, I did my best to get to the girl in the road before the darkness caught up with me again. I managed to get to her and speak to her this time,’ he said. ‘She told me that whatever it is that’s there in that place with her isn’t after me, it wants you.’

‘Why would it want me?’ asked Isobel fearfully.

‘I don’t know,’ said Martin. ‘The next minute the girl was as tall as me and she had turned into something with blood red eyes that was trying to strangle me. I think I blacked out and the next thing I remember is waking up on the floor in my bedroom, feeling as though my throat was on fire.’

Isobel was sitting on the settee next to Martin. She looked scared and Martin put his arm around her to comfort her.

‘I was so worried about you I couldn’t wait until morning to make sure you were OK,’ said Martin.

Isobel leant her head against Martin’s shoulder. ‘What’s happening Martin?’ she said ‘I’m so scared by all this.’

Martin told Isobel about phoning the church and leaving his number on the answer phone.

‘I thought I was being a bit melodramatic when I phoned,’ said Martin, ‘but now I’m not so sure.’

‘Do you think they’ll be able to help?’ Isobel asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Martin answered, ‘but at the moment we haven’t got a clue what’s happening, so any information they can give us can only help, can’t it?’

Martin and Isobel spent the rest of the night sitting on the settee. Both of them were exhausted but neither of them had any desire to sleep. As daylight slowly began to creep through the blinds, they both began to feel better. It was as though the daylight had a power to banish all their fears.

‘I’d better telephone the hospital and let them know I won’t be in today,’ Martin said quietly. His neck was still red but the swelling had gone down considerably. He still sounded as though he had a chronic throat infection but at least he could swallow without too much pain now.

‘You’re not going to tell them what happened, are you?’ asked Isobel.

‘No, I’ll tell them I’ve picked up some kind of throat infection,’ said Martin.

Five minutes later Martin hung up the phone after talking to Paul Mason. Paul had been concerned about how Martin sounded and had made Martin promise to see a



doctor if his throat got any worse.

‘I am a doctor,’ Martin had said.

‘I know you are,’ Paul replied, ‘but a second opinion never hurt, did it? Let’s have none of this physician heal thyself nonsense, OK?’

‘OK, Paul. You win,’ Martin had conceded. ‘If it gets any worse I’ll go and see a doctor.’

‘Good,’ said Paul. ‘Make sure you give me a ring tomorrow or the day after and let me know how you are.’

‘I will do. Thanks, Paul,’ said Martin before hanging up the telephone

Isobel had made another honey and warm water drink for Martin. The drink did seem to help his throat recover from the abuse it had suffered the previous night. Martin still sounded as though he had a terrible case of tonsillitis but he felt a lot better. Isobel had telephoned the shop and told Karen she would be in later that morning but had not told her anything else.

‘I’m going to have to go home and feed Spook,’ said Martin as they sat in the kitchen. ‘He’ll be wondering what’s going on with no one there to feed him.’

‘OK,’ said Isobel ‘I’ll come with you.’

Isobel went upstairs to her bedroom and quickly got ready. Ten minutes later they were in Martin’s car leaving her drive way. The electric gates closed behind them and they proceeded along Central Drive and out of Sandfield Park. The short drive to Martin’s house was slow but uneventful. The main roads were mostly clear of snow but Hayman’s Green still had quite a deep covering of snow. Martin slowly drove the length of the road and inched his car onto the driveway outside his house. As he opened the front door, Martin could hear Spook meowing in the kitchen.

‘He must be starving,’ said Isobel as she followed Martin into the house.

Martin opened the kitchen door and Spook darted out between his legs and across the hallway. Martin and Isobel walked into the kitchen and few seconds later Spook followed.

‘Hello, Spook,’ said Isobel as she bent down to stroke the cat. Spook ignored her and followed Martin towards the cupboard where his food was kept. Martin emptied a packet of food into the dish and Spook began noisily eating the food.

‘He was more interested in food than you,’ said Martin smiling.

‘I think you’re right,’ said Isobel laughing. ‘How does your throat feel now?’ she asked.

‘It feels a lot better,’ said Martin gingerly feeling his throat. ‘If I don’t speak too

loudly and avoid clearing my throat, it's not that painful.'

Isobel examined the outside of Martin's throat. 'The marks seem to have faded quite a lot,' she said, 'but I think there's some bruising starting to come out now.'

'That's all I need,' said Martin. 'Having to examine children with a throat that looks as though I've only just escaped from the gallows.'

'You could always wear a scarf,' suggested Isobel, a note of humour in her voice.

At the shop, Karen was wondering just what was wrong with Isobel. She hoped that her friend was all right and that nothing had happened. Isobel had seemed vague and distant on the telephone when she'd called just after nine this morning to say she'd be late. Karen herself had arrived at the shop just before nine and had been surprised that there was no sign of Isobel. She'd let herself into the shop and opened up at 9.30 but it had been very quiet with only one customer all morning. Tom had telephoned her at just after ten to make sure she had made it to work OK, but apart from that, the shop had been quiet.

Karen and Tom had spent a lovely weekend together; they'd talked a lot on Saturday night after they'd been looking at the stories about Kallaste. Karen had told Tom how she felt about the way things had been going for them the last few months and Tom had promised to try to try and pull himself out of what ever it was that was making him feel down all the time. They had shared a bottle of wine and gone to bed early that night. Karen smiled to herself as she thought about how good that night had been. They had finally gone to sleep after two in the morning; both of them had been exhausted but happy.

Sunday had been another pleasant day for them. They had talked and even though the weather had not really improved, they went for a walk. The snow had been crisp under their feet and had not yet begun to turn to ice so walking was still relatively easy. They had ambled through the streets of Croxteth watching the children playing in the snow and enjoying each other's company. Eventually they had approached the gates at the edge of the country park close to Muirhead Avenue. As they passed between the gate pillars and entered the park the wind had seemed to grow colder and the sky had begun to darken.

'The wind is really blowing across the fields here, isn't it?' Tom had said as he turned his face towards Karen to shield his mouth from the wind.

'You're right,' she replied. 'Come on, let's get back home where it's warm.' Karen and Tom turned back towards the gate and the wind pushed strongly at their backs as if it was hurrying them away from the park.

At just after 12.00, Karen looked up from the brasswork she was polishing as she heard the door open. Isobel was coming into the shop. She looked pale and drawn and Karen wondered what was troubling her. She had seemed so happy last week. Karen hoped nothing had gone wrong between Isobel and Martin.

'Hi, Isobel,' Karen said cheerfully. 'Did you have a nice weekend?'

‘Yes, it was great,’ replied Isobel. ‘A bit strange at times, but yes it was nice.’

Karen was struck by how much darker the shadowy circles that had appeared under Isobel’s eyes on Saturday morning had become and how tired she looked.

‘Would you like a drink?’ she asked.

‘I’d love a cup of tea,’ Isobel answered tiredly. Karen busied herself filling the kettle and getting the cups as Isobel took off her coat and hung it up. Karen put teabags into the cups and filled them with boiling water. Once the tea was made, she handed a cup to Isobel.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked Isobel as they sipped their tea.

‘I don’t know, to be honest,’ Isobel replied. ‘You remember how I had that nightmare on Friday night? Well, it seems as though Martin has been having similar dreams.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Karen. ‘Is he having nightmares or is he having nightmares about the same thing as you?’

‘That’s the weird thing,’ said Isobel. ‘We’ve been having similar dreams and we only found out on Saturday night.’

Isobel told Karen about the strange events on Saturday night and the conversations the four of them had about what was happening.

‘But how can Martin have been hurt in his dream?’ Karen asked. ‘You can’t be hurt by your dreams, can you? They’re in your head.’

‘I know,’ said Isobel running her fingers through her dark hair. ‘That’s what I keep telling myself, but the scratches on Martin’s back are nothing compared to what happened last night.’

Karen looked stunned when Isobel finished telling her about the telephone call from Martin and his explanation about what had happened.

‘Do you think he did it to himself?’ asked Karen.

‘He would have needed hands twice the size of his and I don’t think anyone could inflict that much pain on themselves,’ said Isobel, ‘but the thought did cross my mind. There’s another thing,’ she continued. ‘We went out for a walk yesterday afternoon and started to walk through the country park when the weather turned horrible. I felt as though something was trying to keep us in the park in the middle of all that snow and wind.’

Karen looked at Isobel oddly then asked her what time she had been walking in the country park with Martin.

‘That’s odd,’ said Karen when Isobel told her when they had been in the park. ‘Tom

and I were out for a walk and we were going to walk in the country park at around the same time. We walked past the gateposts at the Muirhead Avenue entrance but turned back after a few yards because the wind was howling and blowing snow at us. We thought it was just because of the open fields but the funny thing was it seemed to stop as soon as we got back outside the park.'

Isobel sat down and put her face in her hands. 'I wish I knew what was happening,' she said through her fingers. 'What have I done and why did whatever Martin saw in his dreams say it was after me?'

Isobel's breath caught in her throat as she stifled a sob. Karen quickly put her cup down and wrapped her arms around Isobel's shoulders as Isobel started to shake and began to cry.

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## Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CONSULTATION.—THE DUEL AND ITS RESULTS.

Independent of this interview which Flora had had with the much dreaded Sir Francis Varney, the circumstances in which she and all who were dear to her, happened at that moment to be placed, certainly required an amount of consideration, which could not be too soon bestowed.

By a combination of disagreeables, everything that could possibly occur to disturb the peace of the family seemed to have taken place at once; like Macbeth's, their troubles had truly come in battalions, and now that the serenity of their domestic position was destroyed, minor evils and annoyances which that very serenity had enabled them to hold at arm's-length became gigantic, and added much to their distress.

The small income, which, when all was happiness, health and peace, was made to constitute a comfortable household, was now totally inadequate to do so—the power to economise and to make the most of a little, had flown along with that contentedness of spirit which the harmony of circumstances alone could produce.

It was not to be supposed that poor Mrs. Bannerworth could now, as she had formerly done, when her mind was free from anxiety, attend to those domestic matters which make up the comforts of a family—distracted at the situation of her daughter, and bewildered by the rapid succession of troublesome events which so short a period of time had given birth to, she fell into an inert state of mind as different as anything could possibly be, from her former active existence.

It has likewise been seen how the very domestics fled from Bannerworth Hall in dismay, rather than remain beneath the same roof with a family believed to be subject to the visitations of so awful a being as a vampyre.

Among the class who occupy positions of servitude, certainly there might have been found some, who, with feelings and understandings above such considerations, would have clung sympathetically to that family in distress, which they had known under a happier aspect; but it had not been the good fortune of the Bannerworths to have such

as these about them; hence selfishness had its way, and they were deserted. It was not likely, then, that strangers would willingly accept service in a family so situated, without some powerful impulse in the shape of a higher pecuniary consideration, as was completely out of the power of the Bannerworths to offer.

Thus was it, then, that most cruelly, at the very time that they had most need of assistance and of sympathy, this unfortunate family almost became isolated from their kind; and, apart from every other consideration, it would have been almost impossible for them to continue inhabitants of the Hall, with anything like comfort, or advantage.

And then, although the disappearance of Charles Holland no longer awakened those feelings of indignation at his supposed perfidy which were first produced by that event; still, view it in which way they might, it was a severe blow of fate, and after it, they one and all found themselves still less able to contend against the sea of troubles that surrounded them.

The reader, too, will not have failed to remark that there was about the whole of the family that pride of independence which induced them to shrink from living upon extraneous aid; and hence, although they felt and felt truly, that when Admiral Bell, in his frank manner, offered them pecuniary assistance, that it was no idle compliment, yet with a sensitiveness such as they might well be expected to feel, they held back, and asked each other what prospect there was of emerging from such a state of things, and if it were justifiable to commence a life of dependence, the end of which was not evident or tangible.

Notwithstanding, too, the noble confidence of Flora in her lover, and notwithstanding that confidence had been echoed by her brothers, there would at times obtrude into the minds of the latter, a feeling of the possibility, that after all they might be mistaken; and Charles Holland might, from some sudden impulse, fancying his future happiness was all at stake, have withdrawn himself from the Hall, and really written the letters attributed to him.

We say this only obtruded itself occasionally, for all their real feelings and aspirations were the other way, although Mr. Marchdale, they could perceive, had his doubts, and they could not but confess that he was more likely to view the matter calmly and dispassionately than they.

In fact, the very hesitation with which he spoke upon the subject, convinced them of his doubt; for they attributed that hesitation to a fear of giving them pain, or of wounding the prejudices of Admiral Bell, with whom he had already had words so nearly approaching to a quarrel.

Henry's visit to Mr. Chillingworth was not likely to be productive of any results beyond those of a conjectural character. All that that gentleman could do was to express a willingness to be directed by them in any way, rather than suggest any course of conduct himself upon circumstances which he could not be expected to judge of as they who were on the spot, and had witnessed their actual occurrence.

And now we will suppose that the reader is enabled with us to look into one of the principal rooms of Bannerworth Hall. It is evening, and some candles are shedding a

sickly light on the ample proportions of the once handsome apartment. At solemn consultation the whole of the family are assembled. As well as the admiral, Mr. Chillingworth, and Marchdale, Jack Pringle, too, walked in, by the sufferance of his master, as if he considered he had a perfect right to do so.

The occasion of the meeting had been a communication which Flora had made concerning her most singular and deeply interesting interview with the vampyre. The details of this interview had produced a deep effect upon the whole of the family. Flora was there, and she looked better, calmer, and more collected than she had done for some days past.

No doubt the interview she had had with Varney in the summer-house in the garden had dispelled a host of imaginary terrors with which she had surrounded him, although it had confirmed her fully that he and he only was the dreadful being who had caused her so much misery.

That interview had tended to show her that about him there was yet something human, and that there was not a danger of her being hunted down from place to place by so horrible an existence.

Such a feeling as this was, of course, a source of deep consolation; and with a firmer voice, and more of her old spirit of cheerfulness about her than she had lately exhibited, she again detailed the particulars of the interview to all who had assembled, concluding by saying,—

"And this has given me hope of happier days. If it be a delusion, it is a happy one; and now that but a frightful veil of mystery still hangs over the fate of Charles Holland, I how gladly would I bid adieu to this place, and all that has made it terrible. I could almost pity Sir Francis Varney, rather than condemn him."

"That may be true," said Henry, "to a certain extent, sister; but we never can forget the amount of misery he has brought upon us. It is no slight thing to be forced from our old and much-loved home, even if such proceeding does succeed in freeing us from his persecutions."

"But, my young friend," said Marchdale, "you must recollect, that through life it is continually the lot of humanity to be endeavouring to fly from great evils to those which do not present themselves to the mind in so bad an aspect. It is something, surely, to alleviate affliction, if we cannot entirely remove it."

"That is true," said Mr. Chillingworth, "to a considerable extent, but then it takes too much for granted to please me."

"How so, sir?"

"Why, certainly, to remove from Bannerworth Hall is a much less evil than to remain at Bannerworth Hall, and be haunted by a vampyre; but then that proposition takes for granted that vampyre business, which I will never grant. I repeat, again and again, it is contrary to all experience, to philosophy, and to all the laws of ordinary nature."

"Facts are stubborn things," said Marchdale.

"Apparently," remarked Mr. Chillingworth.

"Well, sir; and here we have the fact of a vampyre."

"The presumed fact. One swallow don't make a summer, Mr. Marchdale."

"This is waste of time," said Henry—"of course, the amount of evidence that will suffice to bring conviction to one man's mind will fail in doing so to another. The question is, what are we to do?"

All eyes were turned upon Flora, as if this question was more particularly addressed to her, and it behoved her, above all others, to answer it. She did so; and in a firm, clear voice, she said,—

"I will discover the fate of Charles Holland, and then leave the Hall."

"The fate of Charles Holland!" said Marchdale. "Why, really, unless that young gentleman chooses to be communicative himself upon so interesting a subject, we may be a long while discovering his fate. I know that it is not a romantic view to take of the question, to suppose simply that he wrote the three letters found upon his dressing-table, and then decamped; but to my mind, it savours most wonderfully of matter-of-fact. I now speak more freely than I have otherwise done, for I am now upon the eve of my departure. I have no wish to remain here, and breed dissension in any family, or to run a tilt against anybody's prejudices." Here he looked at Admiral Bell. "I leave this house to-night."

"You're a d——d lubberly thief," said the admiral; "the sooner you leave it the better. Why, you bad-looking son of a gun, what do you mean? I thought we'd had enough of that."

"I fully expected this abuse," said Marchdale.

"Did you expect that?" said the admiral, as he snatched up an inkstand, and threw at Marchdale, hitting him a hard knock on the chin, and bespattering its contents on his breast. "Now I'll give you satisfaction, you lubber. D—me, if you ain't a second Jones, and enough to sink the ship. Shiver my timbers if I sha'n't say something strong presently."

"I really," said Henry, "must protest, Admiral Bell, against this conduct."

"Protest and be d——d."

"Mr. Marchdale may be right, sir, or he may be wrong, it's a matter of opinion."

"Oh, never mind," said Marchdale; "I look upon this old nautical ruffian as something between a fool and a madman. If he were a younger man I should chastise him upon the spot; but as it is I live in hopes yet of getting him into some comfortable lunatic

asylum."

"Me into an asylum!" shouted the admiral. "Jack, did you hear that?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Farewell all of you," said Marchdale; "my best wishes be with this family. I cannot remain under this roof to be so insulted."

"A good riddance," cried the admiral. "I'd rather sail round the world with a shipload of vampyres than with such a humbugging son of a gun as you are. D——e, you're worse than a lawyer."

"Nay, nay," cried they, "Mr. Marchdale, stay."

"Stay, stay," cried George, and Mrs. Bannerworth, likewise, said stay; but at the moment Flora stepped forward, and in a clear voice she said,—

"No, let him go, he doubts Charles Holland; let all go who doubt Charles Holland. Mr. Marchdale, Heaven forgive you this injustice you are doing. We may never meet again. Farewell, sir!"

These words were spoken in so decided a tone, that no one contradicted them. Marchdale cast a strange kind of look round upon the family circle, and in another instant he was gone.

"Huzza!" shouted Jack Pringle; "that's one good job."

Henry looked rather resentful, which the admiral could not but observe, and so, less with the devil-may-care manner in which he usually spoke, the old man addressed him.

"Hark ye, Mr. Henry Bannerworth, you ain't best pleased with me, and in that case I don't know that I shall stay to trouble you any longer, as for your friend who has left you, sooner or later you'll find him out—I tell you there's no good in that fellow. Do you think I've been cruising about for a matter of sixty years, and don't know an honest man when I see him. But never mind, I'm going on a voyage of discovery for my nephew, and you can do as you like."

"Heaven only knows, Admiral Bell," said Henry, "who is right and who is wrong. I do much regret that you have quarrelled with Mr. Marchdale; but what is done can't be undone."

"Do not leave us," said Flora; "let me beg of you, Admiral Bell, not to leave us; for my sake remain here, for to you I can speak freely and with confidence, of Charles, when probably I can do so to no one else. You knew him well and have a confidence in him, which no one else can aspire to. I pray you, therefore, to stay with us."

"Only on one condition," said the admiral.



"Name it—name it!"

"You think of letting the Hall?"

"Yes, yes."

"Let me have it, then, and let me pay a few years in advance. If you don't, I'm d——d if I stay another night in the place. You must give me immediate possession, too, and stay here as my guests until you suit yourselves elsewhere. Those are my terms and conditions. Say yes, and all's right; say no, and I'm off like a round shot from a carronade. D——me, that's the thing, Jack, isn't it?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

There was a silence of some few moments after this extraordinary offer had been made, and then they spoke, saying,—

"Admiral Bell, your generous offer, and the feelings which dictated it, are by far too transparent for us to affect not to understand them. Your actions, Admiral—"

"Oh, bother my actions! what are they to you? Come, now, I consider myself master of the house, d—n you! I invite you all to dinner, or supper, or to whatever meal comes next. Mrs. Bannerworth, will you oblige me, as I'm an old fool in family affairs, by buying what's wanted for me and my guests? There's the money, ma'am. Come along, Jack, we'll take a look over our new house. What do you think of it?"

"Wants some sheathing, sir, here and there."

"Very like; but, however, it will do well enough for us; we're in port, you know. Come along."

"Ay, ay, sir."

And off went the admiral and Jack, after leaving a twenty pound note in Mrs. Bannerworth's lap.

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## The Pendragon Inheritance

### Epilogue

‘We shall be leaving today,’ Morgaine told Arthur.

He looked up in bewilderment from his desk. When her arrival had been announced, he had been filled with excitement. Ever since last night, when they had slept together, he had been in a dreamy, joyous mood. Morgaine was a far more experienced woman than Lisanor, and Arthur had learnt more than he had dreamed of that night. He had spent the day in a state of bliss, even though he had woken to find no sign of her.

‘I thought you came to talk to me... about last night,’ he mumbled.

Morgaine looked haughtily down at him.

‘What may have occurred between us is of no account,’ she said. ‘I am a

married woman, as well you know – married to a man who is your enemy. News has reached me that my husband has taken refuge in his lands in Orkney. He wants me to go to him.’

Arthur rose, covered in confusion.

‘Of course you must go to your husband,’ he said. ‘You have my leave to go. But I thought...’ He’d known she was married, of course. He’d known that things between them couldn’t last. But this was so sudden, coming straight after the consummation of their... their love? It didn’t look that way. Disappointment rushed through him.

‘Very well, I will provide you with an armed escort to accompany you to Orkney,’ he added. ‘And I promise you that my men will force the heathen from your lands...’

‘May I leave now?’ she asked coldly, breaking through his assurances.

Arthur broke off.

‘Of course,’ he said, bewildered. ‘But I may at least see you off.’

‘Your majesty, you have many duties to attend to,’ Morgaine replied stiffly. ‘You need not trouble yourself further with the fate of a few refugees.’ Without waiting for a reply, she swept from the room.

Arthur sat back down and stared unseeingly at the papers on his desk. Really, women were incomprehensible! What had he done wrong? Well, he knew what he’d done wrong; he’d seduced a married woman. Except! Except, if anyone had done the seducing, it was Morgaine. And yet, having had her way with him, here she was, going straight back to her husband. Well, that was a vote of no confidence and no mistake.

He tried to concentrate on his work, but it was hard. He kept thinking about Morgaine. About that night together.

The distant whirring of rotor blades broke into his thoughts. He went to the window. First one chopper, then three helicopter gunships, rose from the south of the town. Banking, they turned and flew north.

That night, Arthur lay in his large bed, feeling lonely. It took him hours to drop off, and when he did, his dreams were troubled.

He stood atop a high mountain peak and looked out across the entire country. From here, he could see London and the built-up south, the mountains and moors, the forests and islands of the North. In the air flew many birds. The forests below were alive with movement. Arthur stared up at the flying specks in the sky above and suddenly he saw that they were not birds, they were too big for birds. But they were not aircraft. To his amazement he saw that they were creatures like lions, but winged, and with the heads of eagles. He knew them from his study of heraldry. Griffins.

Still the forests teemed with life, but Arthur saw that what moved among the trees was scaled, reptilian. They began to slither out into the open, a wriggling, cold, soulless mat of snakes, each tasting the air with their tongues, each staring up at his distant figure with cold, remorseless eyes.

Then the griffins flew down into the conurbations in the south of the island. They set upon the people, who ran from their houses, pursued by the things swooping down, only to find snakes wrapping themselves round their legs. Arthur saw houses on fire. The griffins flew over the burning towns like enemy aircraft, the snakes poured into every space like a deadly river of silver. Arthur’s whole kingdom was burning and under attack from monsters.

He saw that he wore the sword he had taken from the stone. It hung from his belt in a jewelled scabbard. Arthur drew it, and leapt down from the mountaintop and

flung himself at the monsters that plagued his country.

He awoke to find the sun streaming in through a gap in the curtains of his royal bedchamber. The dream had left him feeling fresh and relaxed, strangely, though odd forebodings lurked in the back of his mind. He sprang from the bed and flung his robe on.

After a quick shower and a hurried breakfast, he brushed away an importunate servant and left the house by the back way.

The streets of Caerleon were quiet as he rode through them on a motorbike. No one was about this early in the morning apart from an army patrol passing in a jeep. The men aboard watched Arthur suspiciously as he passed. It was obvious that they had no conception that this was their king. Arthur felt as if an intolerable weight had lifted from his back, a weight he had been carrying so long he'd forgotten it was there.

The sun was bright, the air cool, the trees and bushes were full of singing birds. A footpath led Arthur beyond the town and into the woods and fields beyond. Feeling carefree, Arthur kept riding.

A couple of hours later and he was cycling along a lane that led through a wood. He had no idea where he was, but everything was tranquil and it was cool in the shadows of the trees. He heard a rushing of water up ahead and he came out of the trees to find himself on the bank of a rushing stream, which the road crossed on an old humpbacked bridge. He got off his bike, sat down on the grass beside the stream, dipped his hand into the rushing water and splashed it across his brow.

Arthur sat there, deep in thought, gazing into the stream. Life had been frenetic and confusing recently, with highs and lows. How he had become king still bemused him. How could drawing the sword from the stone, miraculous as it had been, make him eligible for running the country? And yet it, had, and he had risen to the challenge quite well, he thought. But the heathen problem still had to be solved. And the country as a whole was hardly settled. Yet here he was, shirking his responsibilities

Suddenly the tranquillity was broken. A roar of motors broke the hush. Arthur swung round to see a motorbike turn the corner of the lane and roar towards him. He watched in trepidation as its rider approached. Not one of his men, this figure in goggles and flying helmet, its long trenchcoat streaming in the wind. The bike's sides were spray-painted with slogans and a black flag fluttered from the back. He tried to swallow and realised his mouth was dry. He was alone, far from his men, and this... this must be a road warrior.

The bike seemed to be having problems. It juddered and rumbled to a halt at the edge of the bridge.

'Not going to get further in this old thing,' said the biker, speaking in a broad Yorkshire accent. His head turned and he seemed to see Arthur for the first time. 'Hullo. Who's this?'

Arthur had risen and was crouching beside his own bike, ready to make a break for it.

'I'm no one of any importance,' he told the man who was now climbing off his bike.

'Well, I'm Pellinore,' the man replied. 'I rule these roads. Have you seen three men on motorbikes pass this way? Would be wearing black leathers with red designs painted on them.'

Arthur shook his head. 'No one's been this way as long as I've been here. It's been very quiet,' he added pointedly.

‘Give me the bike,’ Pellinore told him.

Arthur frowned. Did this man know who he was talking to? He thought. Then Pellinore produced a gun from a holster on his side.

Arthur shrugged. He was unarmed, and had no chance of protecting himself. ‘Take it, then,’ he said. ‘But don’t think this makes you the better man.’

Pellinore seized Arthur’s motorbike and mounted it. ‘Meet me here anytime,’ he said, ‘and we’ll see who is the better man.’ With that, the road-warrior roared off down the road on Arthur’s bike. It would be a long walk back to Caerleon, and people would be wondering what had happened to their king. He started walking back the way he had come.

Deep in thought, he made his way along a footpath at the side of a wood. As he did so, he saw a boy a year or two younger than him coming towards him.

‘What are you looking so glum about?’ the boy asked, grinning at him with unpleasant familiarity.

Arthur found himself on the defensive. ‘I’ve got a lot on my mind,’ he told the boy. ‘Getting home, for one. Do you know me?’ he added.

‘I know who you are,’ the boy replied, ‘and who your father was. Your father was King Uther and your mother was Queen Igraine.’

Arthur stared in incredulity at the boy. ‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded. He was Uther’s son? It made a strange kind of sense, if it was true. But how could it be true? And how could this brat know his father’s identity?

‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded. ‘Do you know what you’re saying? Who are you to know who my father was? You’re just a little kid!’

‘I know it better than you or any man alive,’ the boy said.

Arthur shook his head. ‘Rubbish!’ he said angrily, and pushed past the boy.

He met no one else until he was in the suburbs of Caerleon again. It was early afternoon. As he entered the town, he saw an elderly man of about eighty walking along the pavement towards him.

‘What’s up with you, then?’ the old man asked.

Arthur raised his brows. ‘Well, a lot is preying on my mind,’ he said. ‘Apart from anything, some little lad younger than me claims to know who my father was. And if it’s true... But what could he know...?’

‘The boy you met was right,’ said the elderly man. ‘He would have told you more if you had let him. You have done something that is abhorrent to man and God. You have slept with your own sister and she is now pregnant with a boy who will grow up to destroy you and your country.’

Arthur stared at the old man in confusion and horror.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, ‘to tell me this?’

‘I,’ said the old man, ‘am Merlin. And it was I who spoke to you before, in the wood.’

Arthur felt like his entire world was crashing down about his ears. He stared at Merlin in horror.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN **THE PENDRAGON LEGACY**

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## Brigands of the Moon

XII

I was taken wholly by surprise. There was an instant when I stood numbed, fumbling

for a weapon at my belt, undecided whether to run or stand my ground. Miko was no more than twenty feet from me. He checked his forward rush. The light from an overhead tube was on him: I saw in his hand the cylinder projector of his paralyzing ray.

I plucked my heat cylinder from my belt, and fired without taking aim. My tiny heat beam flashed. I must have grazed Miko's hand. His roar of anger and pain rang out over the turmoil. He dropped his weapon; then stooped to pick it up. But Moa forestalled him. She leaped and seized it.

"Careful! Fool, you promised not to harm him!"

A confusion of swift action. Rankin had turned and darted away. I saw George Prince stumbling half in front of the struggling Miko and Moa. And I heard footsteps beside me. A hand gripped me, jerked at me.

Over the turmoil, Prince's voice sounded: "Gregg Haljan!"

I recall that I had the impression that Prince was frightened; he had half fallen in front of Miko. And there was Miko's voice: "Let go of me!"

It was Balch gripping me. "Gregg! This way—run! Get out of here! He'll kill you with that ray!"

Miko's ray flashed, but George Prince had knocked his arm. I did not dare fire again. Prince was in the way. Balch, who was unarmed, shoved me violently back.

"Gregg! The chart room!"

I turned and ran, with Balch after me. Prince had fallen or been felled by Miko. A flash followed me from Miko's weapon, but again it missed. He did not pursue me. Instead he ran the other way, through the portside door of the library.

Balch and I found ourselves in the library. Shouting, frightened passengers were everywhere. The place was in wild confusion, the whole ship ringing now with shouts.

"To the chart room, Gregg!"

I called to the passengers, "Go back to your rooms!"

I followed Balch. We ran through the archway to the deck. In the starlight I saw figures scurrying aft, but none were near us. The deck forward was dim with heavy shadows. The oval windows and door of the chart room were blue-yellow from the tube lights inside. No one seemed on the deck there. And then as we approached, I saw further forward in the bow, the trap door to the cage standing open. Johnson had been released.

From one of the chart room windows a heat ray sizzled. It barely missed us. Balch

shouted, "Carter—don't!"

The Captain called, "Oh you, Balch—and Haljan—"

He came out on the deck as we rushed up. His left arm was dangling limp.

"God—this—" He got no further. From the turret overhead a tiny search beam came down and disclosed us. Blackstone was supposed to be on duty up there, with a course master at the controls. But, glancing up, I saw, illumined by the turret lights, the figure of Ob Hahn in his purple-white robe, and Johnson, the purser. And on the turret balcony, two fallen men—Blackstone and the course master.

Johnson was training the spotlight on us. And Hahn fired a Martian ray. It struck Balch beside me. He dropped.

Carter was shouting, "Inside—Gregg! Get inside!"

I stopped to raise up Balch. Another beam came down. A heat ray this time. It caught the fallen Balch full on the chest, piercing him through. The smell of his burning flesh rose to sicken me. He was dead. I dropped his body. Carter shoved me into the chart room.

In the small, steel-lined room, Carter and I slid the door closed. We were alone here. The thing had come so quickly it had taken Captain Carter, like us all, wholly unawares. We had anticipated spying eavesdroppers, but not this open brigandage. No more than a minute or two had passed since Miko's siren in his stateroom had given the signal for attack. Carter had been in the chart room. Blackstone was in the turret. At the outbreak of confusion, Carter dashed out to see Hahn releasing Johnson from the cage. From the forward chart room window now I could see where Hahn with a torch had broken the cage seal. The torch lay on the deck. There had been an exchange of shots; Carter's arm was paralyzed; Johnson and Hahn had escaped.

Carter was as confused as I. There had simultaneously been an encounter up in the turret. Blackstone and the course master were killed. The lookout had been shot from his post in the forward observatory. The body dangled now, twisted half in and half out the window.

We could see several of Miko's men—erstwhile members of our crew and steward corps—scurrying from the turret along the upper bridge toward the dark and silent radio room. Snap was up there. But was he? The radio room glowed suddenly with dim light, but there was no evidence of a fight there. The fighting seemed mostly below the deck, down in the hull corridors. A blended horror of sounds came up to us. Screams, shouts and the hissing and snapping of ray weapons. Our crew—such of them as were loyal—were making a stand below. But it was brief. Within a minute it died away. The passengers, amidships in the superstructure, were still shouting. Then above them Miko's roar sounded.

"Be quiet! Go in your rooms—you will not be harmed."

The brigands in these few minutes were in control of the ship. All but this little chart

room, where, with most of the ship's weapons, Carter and I were entrenched.

"God, Gregg, that this should come upon us!"

Carter was fumbling with the chart room weapons. "Here, Gregg. Help me. What have you got? Heat ray? That's all I had ready."

It struck me then as I helped him make the connections that Carter in this crisis was at best an inefficient commander. His red face had gone splotchy purple; his hands were trembling. Skilled as Captain of a peaceful liner, he was at a loss now. But I could not blame him. It is easy to say we might have taken warning, done this or that, and come triumphant through the attack. But only the fool looks backward and says, "I would have done better."

I tried to summon my wits. The ship was lost to us unless Carter and I could do something. Our futile weapons! They were all here—four or five heat ray hand projectors that could send a pencil ray a hundred feet or so. I shot one diagonally up at the turret where Johnson was leering down at our rear window, but he saw my gesture and dropped back out of sight. The heat beam flashed harmlessly up and struck the turret room. Then across the turret window came a sheen of radiance—an electrobarrage. And behind it, Hahn's suave, evil face appeared. He shouted down:

"We have orders to spare you, Gregg Haljan—or you would have been killed long ago!"

My answering shot hit his barrage with a shower of sparks, behind which he stood unmoved.

Carter handed me another weapon. "Gregg, try this."

I leveled the old explosive projector; Carter crouched beside me. But before I could press the trigger, from somewhere down the starlit deck an electro beam hit me. The little rifle exploded, broke its breech. I sank back to the floor, tingling from the shock of the hostile current. My hands were blackened from the exploded powder.

Carter seized me. "No use. Hurt?"

"No."

The stars through the dome windows were swinging. A long swing—the shadows and patterns on the starlit deck were all shifting. The Planetara was turning. The heavens revolved in a great round sweep of movement, then settled as we took our new course.

Hahn at the turret controls had swung us. The Earth and the Sun showed over our bow quarter. The sunlight mingled red-yellow with the brilliant starlight. Hahn's signals were sounding; I heard them answered from the mechanism rooms down below. Brigands there—in full control. The gravity plates were being set to the new positions: We were on our new course. Headed a point or two off the Earthline. Not headed for the Moon? I wondered.

Carter and I were planning nothing. What was there to plan? We were under observation. A Martian paralyzing ray—or an electronic beam, far more deadly than our own puny weapons—would have struck us the instant we tried to leave the chart room.

My thoughts were interrupted by a shout from down the deck. At a corner of the cabin superstructure some fifty feet from our windows the figure of Miko appeared. A radiance barrage hung about him like a shimmering mantle. His voice sounded: "Gregg Haljan, do you yield?"

Carter leaped up from where he and I were crouching. Against all reason of safety he leaned from the low window, waving his hamlike fist.

"Yield? No! I am in command here, you pirate! Brigand—murderer!"

I dragged him back sharply. "For God's sake—"

He was spluttering; and over it Miko's sardonic laugh sounded. "Shall we argue about it?"

I stood up. "What do you want to say, Miko?"

Behind him the tall, thin figure of his sister showed. She was plucking at him. He turned violently. "I won't harm him! Gregg Haljan—is this a truce? You will not shoot?" He was shielding Moa.

"No," I called. "For a moment, no. A truce. What is it you want to say?"

I could hear the babble of passengers who were herded in the cabin with brigands guarding them. George Prince, bare-headed, but shrouded in his cloak, showed in a patch of light behind Moa. He looked my way and then retreated.

Miko called, "You must yield. We want you, Haljan."

"No doubt," I jeered.

"Alive. It is easy to kill you."

I could not doubt that. Carter and I were little more than rats in a trap. But Miko wanted to take me alive: that was not so simple. He added persuasively:

"We want you to navigate us. Will you?"

"No."

"Will you help us, Captain Carter? Tell your cub, this Haljan, to yield."

Carter roared, "Get back from there. There is no truce!"



I shoved aside his leveled projector. "Wait a minute, Miko. Navigate where?"

"That is our business. When you come out here, I will give you the course."

I realized that all this parley was a ruse of Miko's to take me alive. He had made a gesture. Hahn, watching him from the turret window, doubtless flashed a signal down to the hull corridors. The magnetizer control under the chart room was altered, our artificial gravity cut off. I felt the sudden lightness: I gripped the window casement and clung. Carter was startled into incautious movement. It flung him out into the room, his arms and legs flailing.

And across the chart room, in the opposite window, I felt rather than saw the shape of something. A figure, almost invisible but not quite, was trying to climb in! I flung the empty rifle I was holding. It hit something solid in the window. In a flare of sparks a blackhooded figure materialized. A man climbing in! His weapon spat. There was a tiny electronic flash, deadly silent. The intruder had shot at Carter: struck him. Carter gave one queer scream. He had floated to the floor; his convulsive movement when he was hit hurled him to the ceiling. His body struck; twitched; bounced back and sank inert on the floor grid almost at my feet.

I clung to the casement. Across the room of the weightless room the hooded intruder was also clinging. His hood fell back. It was Johnson.

"Killed him, the bully! Now for you, Mr. Third Officer Haljan!"

But he did not dare fire at me. Miko had forbidden it. I saw him reach under his robe, doubtless for a low-powered paralyzing ray. But he never got it out. I had no weapon within reach. I leaned into the room, still holding the casement, and doubled my legs under me. I kicked out from the window.

The force catapulted me across the space across the room like a volplane. I struck the purser. We gripped. Our locked, struggling bodies bounced out into the room. We struck the floor, surged up like balloons to the ceiling, struck it with a flailing arm or leg and floated back.

Grotesque, abnormal combat! Like fighting in weightless water. Johnson clutched his weapon, but I twisted his wrist, held his arm outstretched so that he could not aim it. I was aware of Miko's voice shouting on the deck outside.

Johnson's left hand was gouging at my face, his fingers digging at my eyes. We lunged down.

I twisted his wrists. He dropped the weapon and it sank away, I tried to reach it but could not.... Then I had him by the throat. I was stronger than he, and more agile. I tried choking him, I had his thick bull neck within my fingers. He kicked, scrambled, tore and gouged at me. Tried to shout, but it ended in a gurgle. And then, as he felt his breath stopped, his hands came up in an effort to tear mine loose.

We sank again to the floor. We were momentarily upright. I felt my feet touch. I bent my knees. We sank further. And then I kicked violently upward. Our locked bodies

shot to the ceiling. Johnson's head was above me. It struck the steel roof of the chart room. A violent blow. I felt him go suddenly limp. I cast him off and, doubling my body, I kicked at the ceiling. It sent me diagonally downward to the window, where I clung.

And I saw Miko standing on the deck with a weapon leveled at me!

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## Spiral Castle

1

The shop was calm and tranquil. Light, soothing music played softly in the background, mingling with the pastel shades of the walls and furnishings to create a relaxing atmosphere. Terracotta Moon Goddesses and Green Men adorned the walls and a subtle blend of sandalwood incense and patchouli oil hung in the air.

Hamish stood near the door, scowling.

‘Just look at them,’ he said to Nick, indicating Eloise and Osborne, both poring over the tatty collection of occult paperbacks.

Nick wiped his nose and grinned amiably.

‘They seem happy enough,’ he replied. He put his hands in his coat pockets and glanced around the shop. A larger collection of New Age tat he hadn’t seen since he’d last been to Quiggins, back in Liverpool; books, Buddhas and incense burners; ritual swords and magick wands; Hare Krishna joss-sticks and henna tattoo kits; Alchemy jewellery, stash boxes, guides to growing cannabis... growing cannabis? He picked up the booklet and nudged Hamish.

‘Hey, look at this,’ he said.

‘Och, what now?’ demanded the skinhead testily. He frowned at Nick’s offering. ‘“Growing Cannabis”? They cannie sell that!’

‘It says it’s legal for them to sell it, just as long as you don’t do what it says,’ said Nick, after glancing at the inside cover. He grinned derisively. ‘Fucked in the head.’ He flicked through the booklet, absent-mindedly sucking on a dreadlock. ‘It says here that George Washington grew weed! Hey, Hamish, why don’t we get some hemp seeds and set up as dealers? Yeah, Hamish? What d’you reckon? We’d make a mint!’

‘We’ve got a job to do,’ Hamish replied grimly. ‘When these two have found what they’re after.’

Nick shrugged. He glanced around, yawning. Eloise and Osborne were still leafing through the books. Supposedly, they were looking for more information on Caer Pedryfan, the town they had finally reached after their eventful journey.

He noticed the girl behind the counter. A small, dark haired Welsh girl, she was eyeing the Goth and the biker curiously. He nudged Hamish again.

‘What now?’ said the Scot.

‘I like her,’ Nick replied in an undertone. ‘Taff girl behind the counter.’

Hamish followed her gaze. ‘How d’you know she’s Welsh?’ he said.

‘We’re in fuckin’ Wales, aren’t we?’ Nick replied. ‘Besides, you can tell just by looking at her.’

The girl had returned to flicking through the latest copy of *Pagan Dawn*. She was about nineteen or twenty, her face pale and unearthly, wearing hippie clothes, with hair wraps in her long dark hair. Eloise had told Hamish that the Welsh were as Celtic

as the Scots, but this girl looked subhuman to his mind. He couldn't see what Nick saw in her. Well, no - there was something about her. Something earthy, unwholesome, but oozing sexuality...

'Aye, mebbe Ah wouldn't mind a bit of that masel', he said.

The bell over the door jangled and Nick and Hamish moved aside to let three more youths enter the shop. The place was getting crowded.

Not that these newcomers looked much like your average hippies, Hamish noted. Tall and well-built, the three youths shaved their hair as close as he did, while their suits made them look like nightclub bouncers - or members of some weird cult. They marched towards the counter as if they owned the place, pushing Eloise and Osborne aside.

'What the...' the biker said angrily, turning to glare at the three skinheads. But they ignored him and squared up to the girl behind the counter.

'Where is it?' the largest of the skinheads barked. 'We know it was you what took it.' He had a Cockney accent.

The girl looked up from her magazine.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said, her voice soft but scornful. She rose. 'If you want to buy something, then do so. If not, get out of my shop and run back to your fucking Führer.'

'The Sword!' snarled the skinhead, leaning over the counter and seizing her by the throat. 'The sword you stole from Caer Nudd!'

'Oi!' Hamish barked, forcing his way forward. The three skinheads turned to face him. 'Leave her alone, bawbag!'

The other skinheads faced him.

'Stay outa this, bruvver,' said one of them. 'You don't know what's going on 'ere.' The leader nodded, then turned back to the girl.

'Fuck off,' snarled Hamish. He made to grab at the leader of the skinheads, but the two henchmen seized his arms.

'Get your hands off him!' shouted Osborne, rushing forward.

'Where's the Sword?' demanded the skinhead leader, ignoring the fight brewing behind him. The girl scowled and said nothing.

He raised a fist to hit her, but before he could move any further she slipped free of his grip, grabbed his wrist and sent him spinning into a rack of magazines.

The others stared at the girl.

'Shit!' Hamish exclaimed admiringly.

Then the skinhead leader erupted from the broken stand and threw himself at them.

Nick rolled out of the way, dragging Eloise behind a set of shelves. As the others scuffled in the centre of the shop, the two non-combatants cowered in the corner.

'That girl can fight,' said Eloise breathlessly, as one of the skinheads crashed into the wall nearby.

'Some kinda martial artist,' Nick suggested. He reached out absently to grab the book on hemp-growing and shoved it in his pocket.

'Put that back,' said Eloise sternly, as Osborne and the skinhead leader went rolling past.

Nick shrugged. 'No one will miss it,' he said sulkily, but he did as she had said.

'Where did ye learn ta fight?' Hamish gasped, as the girl spun away from a prone skinhead.

'Why should I tell you?' she asked defiantly. 'Who are you, anyway?'

Before Hamish could answer, one of the skinheads attacked the girl. Hamish

pushed her out of the way and slammed a fist into the youth's rapidly advancing face. The skinhead sank into a pile of second-hand occult paperbacks.

Osborne and the other skinhead were struggling near the door. Hamish was about to fling himself into the fray when he heard the distant sound of sirens.

'Shit, it's the scoobies,' he said, his face white. 'Osborne - get moving!'

Eloise bobbed up from behind a rack.

'We can't stay here,' she said worriedly. 'They're after us already.'

Osborne had been distracted by the approach of the police. The skinhead seized his chance and rushed out of the door.

'They're in the street outside,' said Osborne, as the door slammed behind him.

'Three squad cars.' The skinhead was running towards them.

'Hey, you lot,' said the girl. 'Out the back.'

'You don't need to run away,' said Eloise. 'Look, we're sorry about the mess, but your insurance will cover it, won't it? None of this was your fault...'

'The Pigs will just seize the chance,' she replied enigmatically. 'I've got to get to the vicarage, fast. Come on!'

She opened up the counter and hurried towards the back door. Hamish and Osborne exchanged glances.

'We can't stay here,' said the biker.

'Hurry up, Nick!' Eloise called, as the others headed for the back.

'In a second,' the little crustie insisted, glancing round the littered floor for the booklet he had dropped.

The door led out into a small backyard. The girl heaved open the gate and they piled out into the alleyway beyond.

'This way!' the girl urged and they followed at a run down the washing-festooned alley.

'Wait a minute!' Eloise exclaimed. 'Where's Nick?' They turned round. There was no sign of the lad.

'What's the fuckwit doing?' barked Hamish.

'We'll have to go back for him,' Eloise said plaintively.

'I'm not going back,' said the girl.

'Ah'm no' gaun back, either,' said Hamish. 'The polis have got too much on me.'

'Well, I'm going. We'll meet at the National Milk Bar, on Stryd Uchaf,' said the girl. She seized Hamish by the arm and they disappeared down the alleyway.

Eloise turned to Osborne.

'Oh, what's he doing?' she demanded.

'We'd better be cautious,' Osborne said. 'This way.' He led her down a side passage and they came out into the street a couple of hundred yards down from the shop.

Osborne froze. Eloise peered round his broad back.

'Oh no!' she whispered.

Two police cars, a Black Maria and an ambulance were parked outside the shop. Ambulance men were taking two of the skinheads out on stretchers. The third skinhead was talking animatedly with three policemen. As the travellers watched, more police emerged from the shop, dragging a struggling figure. It was Nick. Eloise watched in horror as they bundled him into the back of the Black Maria.

'That's one of them,' said the surviving skinhead loudly. 'But the rest got away.'

'Start looking for them,' ordered the sergeant. 'These are dangerous criminals. Patrol the town. They can't have got far.'

Osborne seized Eloise and dragged her back up towards the alleyway.

‘Where are we gaun?’ Hamish panted as the girl led him through a crazy network of alleyways and backstreets. ‘What’s yer name, anyway?’

‘I’m Siân,’ the girl replied. ‘We’re going to meet up with your friends on Stryd Uchaf and then go and see Reverend Menyw.’

‘Och, right,’ said Hamish. ‘That means fuck-awe to me, lass.’

Siân halted suddenly. She looked at him with troubled eyes.

‘That’s if I can trust you,’ she said. ‘Maybe I should go on alone.’

‘Trust me?’ said Hamish. ‘Why, what’s the matter with me?’

‘How do I know you’re who I think you are?’ Siân demanded. ‘You’re a skinhead, like those other guys. Not what I’d been expecting at all.’

‘Och, Ah mebbe a skinhead,’ Hamish replied, ‘but Ah don’t go round beating up defenceless women.’ He looked puzzled. ‘But who were you expecting? And who were those guys? What did they have against you?’

She looked at him searchingly, hardly listening.

‘I’ve got a more important question,’ she said. ‘Do you have the Spear?’

The policemen bundled Nick up the steps of the police station near the centre of town and hustled him down towards the custody suite.

‘Get your hands off me!’ he said, trying to hide his fear. ‘I want a lawyer. I want a phone call!’

‘You wanna shut your fat mouth, boy,’ said the sergeant.

They reached a cell door. One of the constables unlocked it and they flung Nick into the room beyond.

As the door slammed behind him, Nick picked himself up and looked around him. Walls bare except for graffiti, there was one mattress under the barred window, a blocked toilet and precious little else. Grudgingly, he went to sit on the mattress. He hated police cells.

Sighing, he took out the leaflet on growing cannabis. They’d been in such a hurry to bang him up, they hadn’t even taken his belongings - which was unusual. It gave him an idea. He put the leaflet back and rummaged in another pocket. He produced his home-made anti-mugging device and shook his head. That wasn’t what he wanted - it wasn’t working anymore, anyway. He rooted around some more, then grinned. There it was! He pulled out his lock pick and headed over to the door.

But before he’d had a chance to try his skill on the lock, the door swung open. He thrust the lock pick in his pocket and smiled nonchalantly at the police inspector who faced him.

‘John Smith,’ said the inspector, a few minutes later.

The interview room was bare and stark and empty except for the inspector, who had introduced himself as McCavity; his sergeant, DS Dover; the table and chairs and a tape machine, currently switched off.

‘Who, me?’ said Nick. ‘Nah, I’m, er, Nick Robinson, mate.’

‘You fit the description of the notorious criminal named John Smith,’ said DS Dover. ‘Furthermore, you were caught at the scene of an affray.’

‘You can’t do me without any proof,’ said Nick, who knew his rights. ‘Can you? I didn’t do anything. I was just there, like. You’ve got nothing on me.’

‘We’ve got plenty on you, son,’ said Inspector McCavity, tapping a bulging file. ‘You and your associates. Your activities at Bryniau Ceudod are well documented, as

are your sordid adventures in Westchester. But your merry little game ends here, Mr. Smith-or-Robinson.'

Nick's heart sank. 'Alright, alright,' he mumbled. 'So you've got me. What now?'

'We have enough evidence on you to send you to a young offenders' institution for so long you'll be transferred to an adult prison halfway through your sentence...' the inspector began.

'Ah, fuckin' hell!' Nick exploded. 'That's fuckin' harsh. I haven't even done that much, like. Not that you know about.'

'But we're prepared to overlook all this,' said DS Dover. Nick looked up hopefully.

'If you do something for us,' added the inspector. 'Put your thieving talents to some good use, for once.'

'But we also have a foreign gentlemen waiting outside, who wants to ask you a question or two,' said DS Dover. He turned and unlocked the door of the interview room.

'Someone who has been equally inconvenienced by you and your friends,' said the inspector grimly. He turned to the tall, lean, tanned man who had just entered the cell. 'Isn't that correct, Herr Kohl?'

'That is correct,' said the man, his voice having just the hint of a German accent. He advanced on Nick.

'Tell me, boy,' he added, 'where is the Spear?'

Eloise and Osborne came out at the top of Stryd Uchaf, the main shopping street of Caer Pedryfan, to be rewarded by a panoramic view of the area.

Below them, the street led down the hill, flanked by winding lines of slate-roofed houses. In the distance rose the mountains of Snowdonia, mist-shrouded and grim, their flanks swathed in pine forest, the twin peaks of Mynydd Bannawg dominating the lesser hills. Between the mountains and the town spread the waters of Llyn Anwn. A small medieval castle was visible on an island in the lake.

'Where are we supposed to be meeting them?' asked Eloise.

'The National Milk Bar,' said Osborne, glancing furtively at passing shoppers.

'Is that it, down by the town square?' asked Eloise. She was about to hurry down the street, when Osborne hissed

'Wait!' He pulled her back into the alley. A police car had just appeared at a nearby junction. 'We want to go carefully,' Osborne added, after the car disappeared up a side road. 'They'll be looking for us, right?'

'Well, the quicker we meet up with the others, the quicker we can work out what we're going to do about Nick,' said Eloise firmly. 'Poor Nick...'

'Quickly, then,' said Osborne. They hurried down the hill.

The milk bar was almost empty, except for a gang of youths slouched in one corner. Eloise sat at a table, while Osborne bought a couple of milkshakes.

He sat down on the other side, glancing nervously out of the window.

'How out of date is this place?' Eloise whispered.

'What, Wales?' asked Osborne. He laughed. 'I know - milk bars. It's like the sixties all over again. I wonder if you can get synthemesc.' He sipped his milkshake cautiously.

'I wish we'd arranged to meet somewhere less central,' said Eloise. 'Maybe that girl reckons this is the last place the police will think of, but...'

'The Pigs aren't that stupid,' Osborne agreed. 'We can't stay here long.'

‘What about Nick, though?’ asked Eloise worriedly. ‘What’s happening to him?’

‘Where’s Hamish, that’s what I want to... Ah!’ Osborne broke off, as the Scot burst through the door with the girl from the New Age shop at his heels.

‘Something’s gaun on here!’ Hamish declared dramatically, spotting them and flinging himself down at the table with no other preliminary. ‘Och, this is Siân,’ he added, as the girl sat down beside Eloise.

She looked at them one by one, then said in her soft voice:

‘I knew you were coming. This oik doesn’t trust me. But one of you has got to tell me. Where is the Spear?’

‘I’m not telling you,’ Nick wheezed as DS Dover sank his fist into his stomach again. He collapsed to the floor.

‘Let my men at him,’ said the German. ‘I have taught them all the finer arts of interrogation.’

‘Two of your men are receiving medical attention,’ said the inspector, ‘thanks to this lad and his friends.’

Nick lay gasping through the pain. He was close to telling the Pigs everything. But he had to laugh. Those skinheads were in hospital? Hamish and Osborne had been in worse fights than that and they’d never needed the hizzie.

‘Where’s the Spear, lad?’ shouted DS Dover.

‘Hey, hey, hey, what’s this?’ a Welsh voice demanded from the door. Nick glanced up painfully to see one of the local policemen in the entrance. Kohl, Inspector McCavity and Sergeant Dover glanced at him.

‘Nothing for you to worry about,’ said the inspector wearily. ‘Go and make us some tea. We’re here with the chief inspector’s permission.’

Nick frowned. Something odd was going on here; something more sinister than everyday police brutality.

‘Who’s that you got there, then?’ asked the constable. ‘Oh, it’s one of those hippie travellers, is it? We know how to treat them. Take him round the back and set the dogs on him, that’s it.’ He spat in Nick’s direction. ‘I’ll call the boys. Do it proper, like.’

The inspector and the sergeant exchanged glances.

‘None of the usual techniques are working, sir,’ murmured the sergeant.

‘True, DS Dover,’ the inspector replied.

‘Ah, you London boys don’t know anything,’ said the local constable. ‘Set the dogs on him and rip his fuckin’ balls off, filthy scrounger. He’ll talk.’

Nick groaned. He was no hero. These Pigs meant it. They were well fascists, the Welsh police.

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## Carmilla

X

Bereaved

It was about ten months since we had last seen him: but that time had sufficed to make an alteration of years in his appearance. He had grown thinner; something of gloom and anxiety had taken the place of that cordial serenity which used to

characterize his features. His dark blue eyes, always penetrating, now gleamed with a sterner light from under his shaggy grey eyebrows. It was not such a change as grief alone usually induces, and angrier passions seemed to have had their share in bringing it about.

We had not long resumed our drive, when the General began to talk, with his usual soldierly directness, of the bereavement, as he termed it, which he had sustained in the death of his beloved niece and ward; and he then broke out in a tone of intense bitterness and fury, inveighing against the "hellish arts" to which she had fallen a victim, and expressing, with more exasperation than piety, his wonder that Heaven should tolerate so monstrous an indulgence of the lusts and malignity of hell.

My father, who saw at once that something very extraordinary had befallen, asked him, if not too painful to him, to detail the circumstances which he thought justified the strong terms in which he expressed himself.

"I should tell you all with pleasure," said the General, "but you would not believe me."

"Why should I not?" he asked.

"Because," he answered testily, "you believe in nothing but what consists with your own prejudices and illusions. I remember when I was like you, but I have learned better."

"Try me," said my father; "I am not such a dogmatist as you suppose."

Besides which, I very well know that you generally require proof for what you believe, and am, therefore, very strongly predisposed to respect your conclusions."

"You are right in supposing that I have not been led lightly into a belief in the marvelous--for what I have experienced is marvelous--and I have been forced by extraordinary evidence to credit that which ran counter, diametrically, to all my theories. I have been made the dupe of a preternatural conspiracy."

Notwithstanding his professions of confidence in the General's penetration, I saw my father, at this point, glance at the General, with, as I thought, a marked suspicion of his sanity.

The General did not see it, luckily. He was looking gloomily and curiously into the glades and vistas of the woods that were opening before us.

"You are going to the Ruins of Karnstein?" he said. "Yes, it is a lucky coincidence; do you know I was going to ask you to bring me there to inspect them. I have a special object in exploring. There is a ruined chapel, ain't there, with a great many tombs of that extinct family?"

"So there are--highly interesting," said my father. "I hope you are thinking of claiming the title and estates?"



My father said this gaily, but the General did not recollect the laugh, or even the smile, which courtesy exacts for a friend's joke; on the contrary, he looked grave and even fierce, ruminating on a matter that stirred his anger and horror.

"Something very different," he said, gruffly. "I mean to unearth some of those fine people. I hope, by God's blessing, to accomplish a pious sacrilege here, which will relieve our earth of certain monsters, and enable honest people to sleep in their beds without being assailed by murderers. I have strange things to tell you, my dear friend, such as I myself would have scouted as incredible a few months since."

My father looked at him again, but this time not with a glance of suspicion--with an eye, rather, of keen intelligence and alarm.

"The house of Karnstein," he said, "has been long extinct: a hundred years at least. My dear wife was maternally descended from the Karnsteins. But the name and title have long ceased to exist. The castle is a ruin; the very village is deserted; it is fifty years since the smoke of a chimney was seen there; not a roof left."

"Quite true. I have heard a great deal about that since I last saw you; a great deal that will astonish you. But I had better relate everything in the order in which it occurred," said the General. "You saw my dear ward--my child, I may call her. No creature could have been more beautiful, and only three months ago none more blooming."

"Yes, poor thing! when I saw her last she certainly was quite lovely," said my father. "I was grieved and shocked more than I can tell you, my dear friend; I knew what a blow it was to you."

He took the General's hand, and they exchanged a kind pressure. Tears gathered in the old soldier's eyes. He did not seek to conceal them. He said:

"We have been very old friends; I knew you would feel for me, childless as I am. She had become an object of very near interest to me, and repaid my care by an affection that cheered my home and made my life happy. That is all gone. The years that remain to me on earth may not be very long; but by God's mercy I hope to accomplish a service to mankind before I die, and to subserve the vengeance of Heaven upon the fiends who have murdered my poor child in the spring of her hopes and beauty!"

"You said, just now, that you intended relating everything as it occurred," said my father. "Pray do; I assure you that it is not mere curiosity that prompts me."

By this time we had reached the point at which the Drun stall road, by which the General had come, diverges from the road which we were traveling to Karnstein.

"How far is it to the ruins?" inquired the General, looking anxiously forward.

"About half a league," answered my father. "Pray let us hear the story you were so good as to promise."

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