

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!

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

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

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

This Edition

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



This week's cover illustration is Red Death by [Paul Mellino](#).

[Film News](#) - news of two horror films in production (HOUSE OF DUST and RADIO Z). Plus: [opportunities](#) for extras and production assistants in the near future.

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

[Super Duper: Part Fourteen](#) by [award-winning](#) author [James Rhodes](#) - Corrine stops at a service station...

[Babbage Must Die - Part Eleven](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Ada meets Lord Byron...

[The Dark Place: Part Eight](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Martin finds himself in total darkness...

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Chapter Ten](#) by Rex Mundy - Arthur is torn between Guinevere and Morgaine...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 11\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - The scream of hand sirens rang over the ship. His signal! I heard it answered from some distant point. And then a shot: a commotion in the lower corridors....The attack upon the Planetara had begun!

[The Hollow Hills - Part Three](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Eloise gazes into the abyss. *Seventh in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part Nine](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - The Doctor...

Film News

College students exploring an abandoned mental asylum accidentally shatter canisters holding the remains of former mental patients; inhaling the dusty ash filling the air, they're soon possessed by the souls once held within them. One is a convicted serial killer from 1950.

**CALVO/SLATER FILM SLATE KICKS INTO HIGH GEAR
WITH THRILLER “HOUSE OF DUST”
PRINCIPLE PHOTOGRAPHY BEGINS JULY 25th
FILM TO BE PRODUCED BY SLATER BROTHERS
ENTERTAINMENT & GOODNIGHT FILMS IN
CONJUNCTION
WITH BUDDERFLY ENTERTAINMENT**

Los Angeles, CA -- July 25, 2011 – As part of their recently announced financing and production deal, Principle Photography began Monday July 25th, 2011 on the feature film “House of Dust” it was announced 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 Cast



Inbar Levi



Alesandra Assante



Holland Roden



John Lee Ames



Steven Spinella



Nicole Travolta



Eddie Hassell



Steven Grayhm



Joy Lauren

“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 Grahyam** (“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.

Slater Brothers Entertainment and Goodnight Films have partnered with Budderfly Entertainment to finance and produce a slate of thriller genre films. Todd Slater stated “We are really excited to be starting production on ‘House of Dust’ with such a great young & sexy cast. Having A.D. direct this film will be sure to thrill audiences and is the first of many in this genre we plan to produce.”

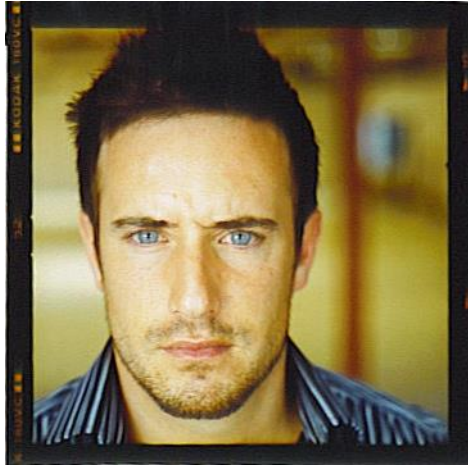
A.D. Calvo added “House of Dust is exactly the kind of psychological thriller I would’ve fallen in love with as a teenager. I’m lucky to have found partners who can help ensure we don’t just make a film, but we make a great film. ‘Dust’ is all about the characters, the actors. We have a tremendously talented cast for this.”

Calvo and Slater plan to move into their next film in early 2012 as part of their intended slate.

ABOUT SLATER BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT

Grant, Todd and Wade Slater share over fifty years in the sport, art, and entertainment industries. The brothers formed Slater Brothers Entertainment (SBE) so that they could combine their strengths and establish a multidimensional entertainment and media company capable of producing and financing major sporting, art and film events. The company places a special emphasis on working with governmental, non-profit and charitable organizations.

The Brothers annual Film Festival in Hamilton, New York has established itself as one of the premier Summer Events in the Northeast United States and has attracted film enthusiasts from Los Angeles, California to Moscow, Russia. To date, SBE has successfully helped a number of directors and producers lock in worldwide distribution for their films. By working directly with the film makers, SBE has been able to open many doors in Hollywood and has made it possible for several independent films to receive theatrical, DVD and international release.



Todd Slater started his entertainment career over fifteen years ago, working for Paramount Pictures and quickly became the head of distribution, marketing and studio relations at Philip Anschutz Film shingle two years later. Slater has been highlighted in The Hollywood Reporter's annual "The Next Generation" Issue - dedicated to the top executives under 35 years of age in Hollywood, and has secured worldwide distribution for many films including Ray, Danny Deckchair, Swimming Upstream, Everybody Wants To Be Italian, Sahara, The Hustle, The Haunting Of Amelia, Chicago Overcoat and Together Again For The First Time.

Before landing at Paramount, Slater made his mark in the world of finance and politics having worked for Paine Webber in the Private Wealth Division as well as the Investment Banking division of Meridian Capital. Before moving to the west coast and taking part in the financial industry, Slater lived and worked in Washington DC and worked for United States Congressman Peter Blute as well as United States Congressman Sherwood Boehlert. During his time spent between consulting on Media deals and producing films, Slater also launched his own shingle, Slater Brother's Entertainment with his two brothers. The Brothers launched their branded entertainment company, Slater Brothers Entertainment (SBE), as a follow-up to several sports and entertainment events they co-produced in the United States and Europe.

Connecticut production company, **Goodnight Films**, was founded in 2005 by writer/director/producer A.D. Calvo. The company has produced numerous award-winning shorts, short-subject documentaries and narrative features. Its documentary series on celebrity shock sculptor Daniel Edwards received worldwide media attention and over one million viewings on YouTube.

Goodnight Film's first feature, *The Other Side of the Tracks*, a romantic thriller starring Chad Lindberg (*I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*), Brendan Fehr (*BONES*), and Tania Raymonde (*LOST*) aired on Showtime Networks and was released domestically under the name, *The Haunting of Amelia*. The film was released internationally by Fox Studio Television. A major announcement is imminent regarding the release and distribution of the company's sophomore feature, a dark romantic fantasy called *The Melancholy Fantastic*.

Budderfly Entertainment is a Connecticut based equity investment company that has co-produced two other films with Calvo and Slater including THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS, as well as THE MELANCHOLY FANTASTIC. HOUSE OF DUST is the third collaboration between the companies with a fourth project to start production in early 2012.

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RADIO Z: HORROR MOVIE TAKES OVER ERWIN, TN

Joy Everlasting Films accepts Radio Z as their next full-length, feature film

Joy Everlasting Films, a new film company based in the Appalachian region, has accepted Radio Z as their next full-length, feature film. With the vision of one day hiring people to do full-time movie-making in an area that is often overlooked by Hollywood, Joy Everlasting and director A.J. Rose hold hope for the low-budget film's success.

"I think that Radio Z has a strong chance of gaining 'cult favorite' status" states Rose.

The main hero and creatures of Radio Z contrast the popular Hollywood standard of sex symbols and common metaphors. By using the unique nature that the creatures have, Rose cultivates a new psychological angle within the horror genre.

"The creatures in this film are called 'creatures' - they're not necessarily zombies."

Erwin, TN was chosen as the location for the film because of its vintage qualities. Mom-and-pop shops, indolent streets, and wooded landscaping paint the backdrop throughout the film.

"Erwin fit the bill perfectly, and the local response to our presence here was just icing on the cake - the government, law enforcement, businesses, and families have all been fantastic," said Rose.

Although the film will be out on DVD, Rose hopes to release through local theaters in Erwin and the surrounding areas first. However, finding a theater to accommodate the film is currently proving to be a challenge for Rose since the film is recorded using a high definition, digital medium and not a reel based camera. The film is aimed for an October 2011 release, plus entry into several film festivals.

For those interested in participating in this film, it is not too late. There will be several opportunities for extras and production assistants in the near future. For information on auditions, locations, and motion classes, please visit <http://undeadmovie.webs.com/>.

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Johnny B Good

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“Roger P. Fox”

The Devil musta been some distance behind ‘cause his T-Bird hadn’t burned passed me yet. I knew that Bird weren’t cooked, though, since it’d been flyin’ steady up ‘til now.

I revved the bent eight, once more, then cut the engine.

Don’t that beat all Hell...? I thought, eyeballin’ the 281 in the distance.

I reached for the pack of due backs I had in my left, breast pocket and lit one. It took two or three strikes of the match to bring fire to it on the dash of the 59.’ After a few puffs, I stepped out, not botherin’ to close the door or cut the lights.

What road is this? Were we topside?

I wondered.

Straight away, I detected a peculiar silence ‘bout me. The world felt like it’d come to a hush, a standstill. It felt like a school yard on a Sunday evenin,’ and after the scream of the bent eight, I found the feelin’ right uncomfortable.

“What game ya playin’ now, demon?” I asked aloud into the silence.

“You requested neutral ground, Johnny,” a voice said, finally. “This is it...”
POOF!

As if summoned, the Devil appeared before me, then, in a cloud of fire and smoke. As the cloud dissipated, I could see he was no longer threaded in black leather and naked to the waste. Powerful arms crisscrossed his barreled chest, suggestin’ his arrogance. I’d be damned if the sight of him didn’t startle me. The Devil could startle the horns off a billy goat, if one be unlucky ‘nough to cross him.

I batted my eyes, not entirely understandin.’

“*Purgatorium...*” the Devil said again, flatly. “Limbo, Johnny. Do you not recognize it? Take a look about you, mortal.”

Without movin’ an inch, and still feelin’ right uncomfortable, I took a gander ‘bout, as instructed.

And, straight away, I knew the horned son-of-a-bitch was right.

There was a weird scent to the air. A fella may not have recognized it, at first, but there it was, just the same. It was the scent of no-scent... like a slice of spiced, apple pie without the spice or the apples. The moon weren’t quite right neither. It was unnaturally colored, almost transparent. The stars didn’t twinkle or shine as they should. Ever’thing felt outta kilter. Outta touch. As if the world had done been siphoned outta itself. I found my observations right surprisin.’ I reckon they disgusted me, too. Can’t hardly blame me for that, though. Now that I was recognizin’ it for what it was, this here felt like Nowheresville to me. Hardly a place an Alabama greaser, like me, would wanna be caught alive... or dead... in. I found myself achin’ to get back to the safety of the interior of 59,’ back on the road and back to the rev of the bent eight.

“And the driver of the 281?” I asked, after some pause, takin’ it in and already knowin.’ “Who he be?”

I pointed.

Before the 281, was the owner of the rig, hunched over what looked like a big heap of potatoes. When I first saw it--and before I recognized it for what it was--I thought it to be road kill, as happens to many drivers on these straightaways in the

dead of night. When I was alive, I heard many a tale of such incidents. Some more gruesome than others. But there was somethin' 'bout the way it lay, and the way he eyeballed it, that said it wasn't.

The sight of it gave me the gringles.

"Him? Of little importance..." the Devil replied. "A Roger P. Fox, I believe. He is of no concern to you or me."

"Stop puttin' on the act, demon! Can't ya see I recognize the driver of that rig? This race done be over, if I hadn't. He's the fella who run me down, ya idiot!"

The Devil sighed, a false sympathy now in his voice. "Yes... yes... the soul of Roger P. Fox has been called to relive this moment until he finds redemption or forgiveness, Johnny. He will find neither, I suppose..."

"Cut the gas!" I interrupted. "I stepped into *his* grille. He didn't throw me into it. The man was drunk!"

"Drunk or not, this is how this works, Johnny. Do not blame me, mortal. These are not my rules. Such are the ways of your Maker."

"Well, that sounds downright wrong to me," I said. "Crooked even..."

"It is disagreeable to me, as well, Johnny," the Devil agreed. "A soul can be purged of its sins after death, although it is rare. Left to their own devices, most mortals remain here, in this state, rather than confront salvation or... eternal damnation. After all, as you must now know, Hell has no dominion here. I would not go to him, Johnny B.," the Devil warned. "Roger P. Fox offers a fate much worse than you might think..."

I took 'nother drag of the cigarette and dropped it to the ground.

"Where are you off to?" the Devil asked, oddly amused. "We have a race to finish."

Yakety-yak.

I didn't answer.

I was walkin', though I could hardly believe it myself, toward the 281... the 281 Peterbilt. The sight I had spotted in my lights and ended this here road race. The machine was hunkered on the road at the edge of my lights. It'd been the only obstacle between me and my freedom. I coulda swerved 'round it easy 'nough, I knew, but hadn't, just the same.

The words of the Devil had jarred me somethin' fierce. It weren't what the Devil said, really... it was *how* he said it. I'd heard a thousand, disconcerted voices of torment and sufferin' erupt from that ugly mouth... chimin' the black bells of Hell in infernal cacophony. I'd seen him saltier than a hornet's nest, not knowin' whether to scratch his clock or wind his behind... many times, on my 'count. But there was somethin' 'bout the way the Devil looked at Roger P. Fox that didn't sit quite right. I could detect an odd sense of fear in him, I think, and that troubled me. Had he been fixin' to let me win that road race? The more I considered it now, it seemed he hadn't. He'd laid on just the right amount of fat in the fryin' pan for me to think I was cookin' it... and cookin' it good. Considerin' who the Devil was and what he represented...

No, it'd been too easy.

And the sudden appearance of a 281 Peterbilt on the side of the road? Well, that was unexpected... on both sides of the fence.

I reckoned if the Devil was gonna run me down, and finish this here road race, he woulda hopped back in that T-Bird and done it moments ago. We'd made ourselves an agreement, bound by fire, and his Bird couldn't be more than a quarter mile. Somethin' in me said he wouldn't, though. There was a force holdin' him back,

and, whatever it was, it was bigger than even he could handle.

So, I kept on walkin'... toward the 281 and Roger P. Fox.

And, for some reason, as I walked, I thought of Ed.

And window shades.

* * *

Ed once told me there is a feelin' that lingers 'bout after a person dies. He said, though the vessel is empty, it feels like the person is still there, watchin' over ya and keepin' tabs on what you're doin.' After he shot Mary Hogan with a .32-caliber revolver, for example, he said, he could sense her presence, like an angry foulness in the air, and it weren't for some time he was able to muster the courage to approach her again. Bernice Worden--who he shot dead with a .22 and dressed up like a deer in his tool shed--left the same impression, though not as powerfully strong.

But the bodies he had takin' in grave robbin' weren't as peculiar, Ed said. He said, he liked 'em more and was able to get to work on 'em right quick. I reckon the reason for that is their souls had done tuned to a different station. They'd moved on. For myself, I moved on most directly. I didn't have me much of a choice. Hell is eager. It weren't 'til much later that I learned 'bout topside events... either from the Devil hisself, to razz me, or tormented souls I happened across and was unlucky 'nough to bash ears with.

Roger P. Fox was somethin' different, though. And the closer I got to him, the more I sensed it. He weren't no saint. But he weren't no crazed, lunatic killer, neither. Not like Ed had been. Roger had done got his move on, but his soul was hangin' 'round in a place it didn't rightly belong.

Cut the gas! I stepped into his grill. He didn't throw me into it. The man was drunk!

Drunk or not, this is how this works, Johnny. Such are the ways of your Maker...

Were we topside, I wondered? Was this Route 157? If so, had Roger become some kinda ghost or evil spirit?

I had me many questions.

As I caste an eyeball to my destination, the more I felt my will no longer bein' my own. It was as if I was beginnin' to see through black painted eyes. The stars were growin' dimmer. The moon was ceasin' to shine. My mind was turnin' tortured in a way I'd never knowed before... not even in Hell. And I knew the closer I got to the 281 the more powerful the feelin'd become.

5

"Nowheresville"

I can't rightly tell how long I walked toward that big rig, but it was a long, long while. Ever' step was takin' with an awful forebodin,' the kind a fella might feel before he takes hisself a flyin' leap off into nowhere. In a way, it seemed I was killin' myself all over again--'cept this time, there was a preconceived notion of what I might lose and what that loss could be.

The loss bein'... well, my good sense.

I was none too surprised to see the eyes of the man before me were the color of my own--a deep, rusty brown. Yet, 'round the pupils, strings of blood ran through the whites like blood on snow. Roger been drinkin.' I'd been 'round it 'nough in life and could see it, even in this light. He was clothed in a pair of pleated, denim overalls. A pair of workin' boots--the kind a country farmer or railroad man might

wear--adorned his feet. In that get up, he looked just like ‘nother Clyde to me, just ‘nother trucker makin’ ‘nother haul to some undisclosed destination in the dead of night. But this weren’t no ordinary haul; it weren’t no ordinary night. As I said it’d do, the light of the moon was gone now, faded out, as if someone had done flipped the switch. The stars had twinkled out, too. The only illumination, in this nowhere place, were the lights of the 281, and they showed heavy against Roger’s slumped back like two, tiny suns, castin’ a grim shadow upon the road before him.

I glanced behind me, darin’ to see if I, too, caught the light, and found I didn’t. The tiny suns of the 281 burned right through me. I began to wonder, then, what was genuine and what was false? Who was real and who was the illusion? Roger P. Fox or myself? And left that thought alone before I lost myself a butt-kickin’ contest over it.

I reckoned it didn’t much matter.

Such questions were for philosophers and thinkers and not for no ‘count, Alabama greasers like me.

That there’s called, playin’ the fool, just so ya know.

Inwardly, I knew the reason. I’d come to a place I didn’t rightly belong. Any nosebleed with half a brain could see that. This was his world, his nowhere, and whatever place I thought to have in it, would be my nowhere, too--if I’d be fool ‘nough to allow it.

I would not go to him, Johnny B.

Coolly, I reached for the pack of due backs I had in my left, breast pocket and extended him one.

He didn’t respond.

Like a statue, Roger P. Fox remained in place, slump-backed as he had before, his bloodshot eyes starin’ out into nothin.’

Suit yourself.

I struck a match, ignitin’ it and bringin’ sulfurous fire to my mouth between cupped hands. I cupped ‘em outta habit, I guess, as there were no breeze or wind to speak of. Besides the engine of the 281, which still sputtered and turned beneath its butterfly hood, the air was still... uncomfortably so. It was as if the area ‘round us was bein’ blown over with a heavy cold, freezin’ it in place. With no moon, stars, or sky to speak of, we were separated from the rest of the road, lost in-between things, strugglin’ for an icy foothold on the edges of reality.

At least, that’s how it seemed.

Decidin’ I didn’t wanna linger here longer than required (believin’ it might even be dangerous to do so), I tried again...

“Roger!” I said. It was strange to hear my own voice. It sounded muffled, like I was shoutin’ up from a deep well. It felt heavier than usual. “Hey, nosebleed!” I said, again, ignorin’ it. “Listen, man, if you’re just gonna stand here all night feelin’ sorry for yourself,” I said, “I’ll be movin’ on down the road. I got me better things to do than to try to bash ears with a no good cherry pop who dunno the difference between an accident and a real killin’...”

And that’s ‘bout the size of it, ain’t it? I never was one for subtlety. Part of me meant ‘em words, too. ‘Nother part knew it was just me bein’ what I’ve always been... disagreeable.

Either way ya play it out, though,

... Roger responded, then.

And it was like somethin’ outta a damned, monster movie.

* * *

“*W-W-hat? Who... who’s there?*” His voice was cracked. Scratchy. Startled, I stepped back, not expectin’ him to come to life the way he did.

“*Sh-Sh-erriff... is that you, Sheriff?*” he said, again, reachin’ out.

Whoa! Hold on there, man!

As he reached for me, somethin’ told me not to let his hands touch me. Like he might infect me, if he got hold. Where before I’d seen nothin’ but the semblance of a man, the features of Roger’s face became nightmarishly twisted. Spittle began to run down the corners of his mouth, and his bloodshot eyes bulged out like small balloons. His hands contorted in misshapen knots, as if they’d been bitten repeatedly with cold. He had the appearance of a fella who had not felt the warmth of the sun for a long while.

“*It’s so d-d-ark here...*”

“What nonsense ya talkin,’ Roger?” I hollered back, doin’ ever’thing I could to hold my ground. “I ain’t the sheriff, ya idiot!”

Immediately, I realized my mistake.

Cued by the sound of my voice, Roger’s mummy-like hands reached for me again, and, this time, I didn’t believe I’d be quick ‘nough on the jump to avoid ‘em. I felt slow as molasses. It was as if an invisible rope attached itself to each of my limbs, pullin’ ‘em in all directions.

The pull of the place was overwhelmin.’

“*It is so very, very dark here...*”

Get off me, ya crazy son-of-a...!

Then, to my surprise, Roger reached right passed me... missin’ me by inches.

It was a right odd sensation.

For many moments, he continued. His eyes searchin’ me out. His hands pawin’ the air like a confused animal. Then his arms fell back to his sides, like loose spaghetti, and he slumped down to his former self, unable to perceive what he thought he had in me before.

What transpired next, though, jarred me somethin’ fierce. It was as if the air ‘round us was doused with gasoline and set to fire. Like an invalid in a nuthouse, Roger began to rock hisself over the balls of his feet. And, as he rocked, he started to chant. At first, I thought he was speakin’ in tongues, as some folk at the town church did. Some weird language bubblin’ up in his throat and not makin’ a lick a sense to anybody but hisself. But, as the chantin’ continued, the words took shape in my mind, and I realized he was offerin’ recital to somethin’ I hadn’t heard since I was a small child. I didn’t take me much of a likin’ to hearin’ it then. And, sure as shit ain’t Shinola, I wasn’t likin’ it now...

“*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall...*” he said, rockin’ hisself back and forth.

“*Humpty Dumpty had a great fall...*” he continued. “*And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men...*”

As he repeated the rhyme, I knew, then, that Roger P. Fox had done lost his marbles.

And that my name weren’t Johnny B. Roberts no more.

It hadn’t been in a long, long while.

* * *

It was plain to see where Roger was lookin,’ but *what* Roger was seein’ was ‘nother matter. He weren’t seein’ out... least, not the way that I was. After all, he’d done seen it. He’d seen it when he crunched hard on ‘em breaks and splattered my brains out over his grill. He’d seen it when he stepped from the 281 and saw the jigsaw puzzle of a human life scattered out on the road, knowin’ his own would

forever be rearranged.

Humpty Dumpty.

Some nights, when my daddy took to drinkin,' he'd recite it to us kids. He'd pick us up... then, drop us right back to the ground, ever' time he finished, with a big, boomin' laugh. He got hisself a big tickle outta that one; though I can't say we ever did.

No, what Roger P. Fox was seein' now was on the inside, and it was leakin' out and givin' form and tangibility to this here place. It was a bit like crackin' open a can of paint and sloppin' the can up with it. Or cuttin' into your arm with a flick knife and seein' your own blood. I tell ya what, if ya ever wanna back a man down, cut him. Let him see what he looks like on the inside. He'll beat his feet quicker than a bull athlete and leave ya to your business... that there's guaranteed.

Least now, I understood Roger could sense my presence. I could bash ears with him and interact with him, too, if need be... albeit in small ways. I could also sense the more I did, the more substantial I'd become to him. It was like whittlin' a block of raw wood to shape. The thought of this worried me somethin' fierce. If a fella were to whittle too much, he might find it hard to get back to what he'd been before.

Just like that fool Alice, I'd be lost in Roger's mind and chasin' storybook rabbits....

Or havin' me a knuckle brawl with Tweedledee and Tweedledum (and Roger, no doubt) over some, fool rattle...

Humpty Dumpty.

6

"Daffy"

Other than the rumble of 281, it was quiet. Roger remained as he had, slump-backed and starin' out into nothin.' It weren't just nothin,' though. Roger P. Fox had done bought his ticket and was on the fast track to Screwsville... swappin' tales with the not-so-real things in his head.

When I was alive, I had me a special fondness for the imaginary: Captain Nemo... Doc Savage... Lemuel Gulliver... Tarzan of the Apes. I read many of 'em stories, both in and outside of school, never carin' or botherin' to do much else educational. I had me a special fondness for cartoons, in particular. I'd see 'em on Friday and Saturday nights when Betty Lou and I, feelin' lumpy and with nothin' else to do, would head on over to the drive-in... the passion pit. I recall seein' me one, in which Daffy the Duck, intent on doin' one over on Bugs, drank hisself a volatile concoction of gasoline, nitroglycerin, gunpowder, and uranium-238.

"Girls, ya'd better hang onto your boyfriends..." Daffy told the audience.

Then, that fool duck swallowed a lit match and blew hisself all to hell... all on 'count he was feelin' underappreciated and sorry for hisself.

Daffy ain't nearly the big tickle now I thought him to be back then.

Keepin' a fair distance from Roger--and avoidin' the sight of the blood on the grill, havin' done seen my fill of it for the night--I walked toward the rig and peered in through the dim light of the open door of the cab. It appeared to be an ordinary 281... none too clean but none too untidy, neither. To the right of the steerin' wheel, and behind the shiftin' lever, Roger had taped hisself somethin' to the dash, as drivers of these big rigs often did. A *keepsake*, as Ed would call it. Unlike Ed, however, Roger weren't no grave robber or killer of women. It weren't a dried-up pair of lips or a

fleshy eyeball I was seein.’ It was a photograph of Jane Russell. I reckoned Roger had purchased it at a five and dime store, of some sort, along the line. In the photo, Russell was propped against a bushel of hay. In a cotton shirt and a pair of tight-fittin’ blue jeans, she appeared hardly reluctant; she looked eager, in fact... a sweet, little farm girl willin’ to offer a fella most anything, if he only dared ask for it. I always did think Russell was much prettier than Marilyn myself. But I do have me a particular likin’ for brown-haired women... stacked ones, especially. Some girls are just *born* horizontal, in my eyes.

Was that a wink?

Curious, I looked ‘round the cab a bit more.

Chewin’ candy wrappers riddled the floorboards. Tootsie Rolls. A comb and a tub of Black & White, hair-dressin’ pomade... “straight from Memphis,” it read... rested between the seats. But what attracted me most was a brown, glass shape near the passenger door.

Climbin’ into the cab, I reached for it, half-hopeful.

It was empty.

What good it’d do me, anyway, I thought.

When you’re dead--and in Nowheresville to boot--even a cigarette tastes a fright less than what it should, and I s’posed a good crank on a bottle of bourbon wouldn’t ring much different.

Still, a blind alley cat will find hisself a bit of tuna ever’ now and then...

I snatched up the comb and dipped luxuriously into the tub of Black & White, unable to detect the coconut-candied fragrance I so fondly remembered. It’d been the pomade of choice in my day... though I’d often use a dab of Sweet Georgia Brown, from time to time, just to shake things up.

A good D.A. is somethin’ I can do blindfolded. First, I combed back the hair on the sides. Then, with my right hand, I used the toothed edge of the comb to run a fine and even line from the nape of my neck to the crown, formin’ a part... that’s the duck’s butt or the duck’s ass, if ya prefer. Finally, I curled what was left, on top, and let it fall.

With just the proper amount of grease, and a little time to master it...

It’s that easy.

Best lay off ‘em shoes, honey.

* * *

It began with a *yowl* and a *yelp* and a *yap* in the distance, barely perceptible over the rumble of the rig. I hopped from the 281 and moved to the edge of the space we occupied, cautiously eyeballin’ Roger.

Ya expectin’ company?

He remained as he had before, starin’ out. His engines were runnin,’ but wherever he was, it weren’t here.

As the sounds grew steadily louder... turnin’ from a series of *yelps* and *yaps*, *yowls* and *yips*... to somethin’ resemblin’ an unmitigated *HOWL*... a form began to come together and take shape on the horizon. At first, I thought it to be an automobile approachin, ‘a T-Bird, to be precise, and my immediate concern was that the Devil had done tired of waitin’ and decided to come callin.’ Considerin’ the lack of moon, stars, or even a skyline, I was right surprised I could even see it. But, as it took shape, there was no denyin’ it.

Through the black, a bright trail of fire was makin’ its way toward us. And it weren’t no engine makin’ the noise.

It was the steady and uninterrupted growlin’ of dogs.

I realized, then, havin' been unable to do it his fool self, the Devil had sent his most foul of minions.

The jig was up.

The Hounds of Hell were upon me.

7

“Minions”

What transpired next went down quicker than a knife fight in a phone booth...

“Roger!” I called. “We have a whole heap of trouble comin' down on us!”

He stirred, cued again by the sound of my voice, but remained as he had before... silent.

The hell with it, I thought. I was well past the point of bein' cordial. It was time to haul ass. Alabama style. I turned upon the balls of my feet, like a top, and barreled into Roger P. Fox's thin frame. Puttin' my shoulders down, like a linebacker, I bellied him over and lifted him into the air.

“*S-S-heriff?*” he said.

Ignorin' it, I turned, again, runnin' with the full weight of him on my shoulders toward the only thing I could, toward the passenger door of the 281, and opened it and tossed him in, slammin' the door hard behind me.

I accomplished the feat in record seconds.

The low growls were gettin' closer now.

“I thought Hell has no dominion here, demon!” I snarled, as I maneuvered 'round the front of the 281 and plopped into the driver's seat.

Perhaps my sudden appearance in Roger's self-imposed reality had changed the rules, I thought... either that, or the Devil was the same, lyin,' no 'count son-of-a-bitch he always had been. Either way, I did know one thing to be true. I knew it instinctively. It'd be impossible to take Roger far from the 281. Returnin' to the safety of the 59' --though it was quicker to the punch and just might outrun these Hounds--weren't no option. There were other things to consider, as well. Would Roger allow hisself to stray far from my former body? Would the 281? Or would Limbo follow right along with us? This final question troubled me. How coulda getcha self away from somethin' knee deep in nothin'? With no further time to ponder it, I pressed the clutch in, poppin' the break, and the 281 began to grind slowly forward.

Outside the cab, I imagined the squish of watermelon flesh and the crackin' of bone on the road.

Roger twitched... but, otherwise, seemed unaffected.

I shifted to neutral, watchin' my rpm's, and shifted up, gainin' speed and distance. And, as we began to put on our first mile, I felt a pull, then a powerful SNAP!, like a rubber band stretched too tight. With it, the deepenin' sky, replete with stars and moon, popped suddenly into view above our heads. It was a right odd sensation... right welcomin,' too. Roger remained silent, however; I could only hope he'd noticed the change.

I reckoned our maximum speed, with tank trailer and all, couldn't have run much over 60 miles per hour. That bein' so, just how fast was a Hell Hound at a dead run, I wondered?

* * *

I ain't never had me a single round in a professional, boxin' ring. I'm

whatcha call a street fighter... a knuckle brawler. Knives, beer bottles, chairs, chains, rocks, sticks, tire irons, and even teeth... ya name it. I've seen 'em all. And, I tell ya what, when it comes to fightin,' the quickest way to double your money in a fight is to fold it over. That don't mean ya give up or quit. It means ya work with whatcha got and whatcha know.

Hell Hounds.

'Bout five sizes too big for an ordinary dog and one size less than a rodeo horse. The Devil used 'em in Hell to keep his minions in line and to rattle it's lesser occupants. He threatened to sick 'em on me once, when I was feelin' especially ornery, and I can't say I liked the thought of it none too much neither. The Hounds carried with 'em the reek of evil and ill omen. With their unmatched strength and agility, they were the worst Hell could offer a fella.

The 281 was maxed out at 'bout 67 mile an hour when the first Hound arrived. It was all the goose she had. Roger remained seated to my right, a cool expression on his face, but not sayin' a word. He appeared calm, at least, though. I reckoned it'd take some time for him to return to his former self, if he ever did. He'd been in that state of mind a long while.

The first Hound didn't do us over the way the others did. He ran along side us, up to the front of the cab, his paws poundin' the road, a thin trail of fire behind him. I looked over, makin' eye contact, and saw an awful hate swelterin' up within 'em. The Hound didn't remain long, though. Before I knew it, it'd fallin' behind us, yappin' and howlin,' as it did. It was a scout, I thought... though I was hopeful it'd been unable to keep the pace.

The second and third came upon us and moved to either side. I didn't have much maneuverability in the 281, and the road only went one direction... forward. Before I knew it, I spotted two or three more behind us, in the rearview, and the fiery trail of five or six more in the distance. We were boxed in. My only hope now was that we wouldn't run outta road or the 281 wouldn't putter outta gas. Bein' dead, as I was, has it's advantages. I could drive that rig to the ends of ever'thing, and back, never once worryin' 'bout sleep or rest.

It didn't go down this way, though.

I heard a thud, as one of the Hounds behind us took a leap and landed squarely on the steel back of the trailer. Within moments, it'd crawled to the front of the 281 and leapt on top of the cab. 'Nother bounded from the right, attemptin' to land on the butterfly hood, and missed it in a rumpled heap of legs and fur, sprawlin' off the passenger side. More joined suit, though, and before we knew it, there were three more on the trailer. One, a bit larger than the others--and probably the pack leader--had managed to land squarely on the hood this time. It remained there for a brief moment, starin' in, an awful intelligence in its eyes, then brought its head to the windshield, smashin' the glass to icy pieces 'round us.

Without the glass, we were exposed now.

I lifted a hand up, bunchin' it into a tight fist, ready to strike out the moment it stuck its ugly, black nose into the interior of the cabin.

I'd jerk a knot in its tail, I thought, before I let it sink its teeth in me.

Again, it didn't go down this way, though.

I heard a strange noise from my right. Roger was alert now, havin' come outta that cool daze, and a sound was bubblin' up in his throat. It sounded like he was fixin' to start his chantin' again. Admittedly, I almost turned and bopped him in the nose, instead. But, just as before, the words began to take shape in my mind, and I realized this weren't no nursery rhyme.

Roger was prayin.’
And prayin’ hard.
What good is that gonna do? I thought.
Little did I know then... what I do now.

A thin shaft of light, brighter than any sun or light I had ever seen, arched from the heavens above and tore into the hood of the rig. Like a heavy fist had struck, the pack leader was knocked from the hood. It whimpered, like any other dog who’d been slapped, and went sprawlin’ to the road. More light, in searin’ and shinin’ bolts, pelted down from the sky. First, knockin’ the Hound from atop the cab... then the Hounds from the trailer. Final shafts tore into the road behind us, puttin’ an end to any pursuit.

I swore I could hear the sound of trumpets. A glorious sound. And with it, the dark was pushed aside, and the heavens began to open, revealin’ a glorious splendor.

“Don’t you know what that is?” Roger asked, a frenzied tone in his voice.
“Keep driving! Keep driving toward it! Don’t stop! Please don’t stop!”
And, for the first time, in all my life, I did as I was as told.

Epilogue “Fat City”

The last time I spoke to Ed, we were perched atop a high cliff, receivin’ minor respite from Augusta and the Devil’s torture. It didn’t happen often. These occasions between us were rare. Malacoda, or “Evil Tail,” as most called him, was below us, in a deep valley, with a grabbin’ hook and lowerin’ some poor fella into a pit filled with boilin’ pitch. The fella was hollerin’ and screamin’ his head off, as most did in his predicament. The arch-demon was enjoyin’ it somethin’ fierce, though, and the cries seemed to make it only worse on him.

“Ed,” I asked, ignorin’ it, “have ya ever wondered what life woulda been like if it’d been different?”

Ed said he had, and he proceeded to tell me ‘bout a time when life *was* much more simple for him. When he was younger, he spent most of the time just goin’ to school and doin’ the daily chores on the farm. He didn’t have many friends--his momma wouldn’t allow it--but he liked to read. He liked to read a whole lot. Outside the Bible, he liked adventure stories and pulp magazines. Stories ‘bout pirate ships and buried treasure were often his favorite. Then, one day, George, his daddy, died of a heart attack. His brother, Henry, was kilt by a fire--most attributed it to asphyxiation--four years later. Finally, Augusta, who Ed cared for on his own for nearly a year, passed after a series of strokes. “She was my only friend, Johnny. The only one I ever loved.” Heartbroken, he boarded up all the rooms in the farmhouse, leavin’ only a kitchen and a small, livin’ space for hisself. Two years later, he was diggin’ up fresh graves and makin’ hisself soup bowls outta human skulls.

We all need a place to call home, I guess. Some place to belong. I never saw Ed again. But, though we were good friends, I doubt he much cared. He did have his momma at his side again, after all.

As for Roger P. Fox, he’s still drivin’ rig. The scenery is a bit different--and he now has hisself a spankin’ new, blue 379--but he’s doin’ what he seemed to enjoy most in life. I do bash ears with him, from time to time. Our visits are most always pleasant and cordial.

For myself, I find myself a little bored by the whole thing. If ya wanna know

the honest truth, I guess the shoe fit well 'nough in places, but in some places, it didn't. I get as much Black & White as I need. My hair is greased and steady at ever' turn; I often do it two or three times. I still don't look a day over 22. On rare occasions, a fella will toss me a road race, just for kicks. Still, there ain't no honky-tonks or juke joints where I am-- least, not the *good* kind. Most folks seem like they are high on somethin' else. There ain't no chasin' skirt, neither. Seems like ever'one is done smitten with love up here, and there ain't no call for it. And folks generally frown when I pull a good, ol' pack of due backs from my left pocket and light me one.

"I'm dead, ya idiot! It's not as if it's gonna kill me!"

As for the Devil, I hear tell he's still in Hell... down far, far below. And, word from the bird is, he's preparin' hisself for a knuckle brawl folks up here call *Armageddon*. It's s'posed to be some, big, ol' fight that'll shake the universe to its very core. It'll decide the fate of all us... Earth, Heaven, Hell, and ever'thing in the go-between. I do believe I'd like me a ticket to that fight. And, hell, if heaven be willin,' I may just get me a shot at the title.

My name is Johnny B. Roberts. The 'B' is for Bran-do, just like outta the movies...

THE END

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Super Duper

Chapter Fourteen

Corrine put her hand on one of her hips. The Don took a step backwards.

"So what you're telling me is Smith, my boyfriend, a man who takes an hour to make a cup of tea, ran in pursuit of Maniac Cop and you haven't seen him since."

The Don stuttered. He glanced around the room to see where Nicola was but she was too far away to hide behind.

"Th- That's pretty much it."

"And you haven't seen him or the little girl since?"

"I'm hoping this guy will tell us." The Don waved his hand at the policeman; he was still unconscious. "Nicola's looked, of course, or she wouldn't have run into you, but I can't leave this psycho with the kids and it's tough to guard him and watch the kids at the same time. Smith has changed; he's been great with the kids."

"Hmm," said Corrine. "I find it difficult to believe that he's changed enough to start knocking cops unconscious."

The Don smiled.

"Me either, but here we are."

Corrine walked over to the cop, checked his pulse and felt his temperature. Then she examined the bureaucrat's skull.

"He's got a big lump on the back of his head but I don't think that's why he's asleep."

"What do you reckon?"

"I don't know but that seems pretty minor. Let's try waving hot coffee under his nose."

"Does that actually work?" asked Nicola.

"It works on most people except Smith."

“Well what wakes Smith up?” asked Nicola. “You should try that.”
“You don't want to know and I'm not going to do it.”
The Don laughed too loud but it felt good to break the tension.

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Eleven

Ludlam pushed back the bush and studied the rolling parkland beyond. Black sheep cropped the grass that grew between groves of cedars and pines.

‘That’s where us is going,’ he told Ada, pointing at the big, decrepit-looking house beside the lake. ‘Us’s ally arranged to meet us at ‘is place.’

‘But who is this ally?’ Ada whispered. She gazed in amazement at the estate before her. ‘What house is that?’

‘That be Newstead Abbey, Miss Ada,’ said Ludlam – Ned Ludd, she supposed she should call him. But he was Ludlam to her.

‘Hang on,’ she said, as the name rang the faintest, most distant of bells. ‘Newstead Abbey?’

Ludlam had told her about this mysterious meeting last night, when she was still getting over her surprise to discover that not only was her friend the leader of the entire nationwide Luddite movement, but that everything she’d read in the history books about Ned Ludd had been wrong.

Ned Ludd didn’t exist! That was one thing they all agreed upon. Ada had read everything she could get her hands on about the period – though obviously, her researches had omitted a few things, like the fact that the Cat and Fiddle road didn’t exist yet. The best of researchers can omit such minor matters. But one thing her reading had told her was that Ned Ludd was a fiction, a semi-legendary figure used to conceal the true identity of the Luddite leaders, whose true identity was lost to history. She studied the big man crouched beside her. Well, he wasn’t history yet, she thought.

Talking of history... If her memory served her right, there was a chance that they were going to meet one of her favourite figures in English literature. Newstead Abbey...

‘So what are we supposed to do?’ she asked Ludlam. ‘Walk up to the front door?’

Ludlam frowned. ‘Eh, lass!’ he said. ‘Us brung thee along rather than any of the others ‘cause us reckoned thee’d be genteel enough for seein’ gentlemen. Us goes in by trademen’s entrance! But not yet. Wait till sunset.’

By the look of the westering sun, that would be an hour or so. Ada sat back against a tree amidst the bluebells that carpeted this wood and studied the big house by the lake.

Ludlam had told her beforehand that they even had supporters among the aristocracy. Ada wasn't sure how she felt about that. Quite apart from the fact that getting mixed up in revolutionary politics was something of a side issue, (her real goal in the nineteenth century, of course, being to hunt down Charles Babbage and assassinate him), she was disappointed by Ludlam's conservatism. Here he was, at the centre of a rebellion that had supporters throughout the North of England and the Midlands, and yet all he wanted to do was to protect his own interests. The fact that he was willing to cosy up to the aristos, rather than overthrow the whole corrupt system, was highly indicative of this.

Still, for reasons of her own, she was looking forward to meeting the owner of Newstead Abbey.

The big house looked ever more sinister as the sun descended over the lake. Shadows shrouded the crumbling stonework. As darkness increased, a few lights burned in the windows, but most of the huge place remained unlit. Ada could see it was a medieval building originally; an abbey, presumably. It looked almost like a ruin. She was irresistibly reminded of Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*.

Ada looked over at Ludlam, whose features were obscured in the gloom. He was patiently watching the house.

'When do we start?' she hissed. He turned towards her.

'Alreet, lass,' he said. 'Let's get movin', then.'

Cautiously, they broke cover and crept across the parkland. This was a clandestine meeting, Ludlam had explained, and the owner of the Abbey hadn't spoken about it to anyone but his most trusted servants. If they met a gamekeeper, it would be no use telling him that they were there to meet his lordship.

To Ada's relief, they reached the grounds of the Abbey without encountering anyone. Ludlam led Ada round the back of the great, grim, dilapidated building. They came to a small backdoor, and Ludlam rapped on it in a staccato series of knocks.

A servant answered. He looked inquiringly at Ludlam and Ada.

'Us is 'ere to see Murray.'

The servant grunted, and led them inside.

As they went in, Ada looked at Ludlam in puzzlement. Murray? Was that the name of the owner of the house? She felt disappointed. Surely Ludlam was being highly familiar, referring to him so peremptorily. She had never heard of an aristocrat called Murray. Unless it was the Earl of Moray. But surely he didn't live in Nottinghamshire...

Carrying a candle, the servant took them down a series of bare, gloomy corridors to a door, which he knocked upon. A man answered from inside.

‘Come.’

The servant ushered them inside. A genial, ruddy-nosed man in a long-tailed coat rose from a chair. He dismissed the servant.

‘Ludlam!’ he said. He looked inquiringly at Ada, and Ludlam introduced her, telling her that Murray was the butler. ‘I’m afraid his lordship has yet to arrive,’ he told them.

‘Is ‘e still in London?’ Ludlam demanded. ‘E told us to meet ‘im ‘ere, beginnin’ of May. Well, ‘ere we are! And where’s ‘is lordship?’

Ada looked from one to the other.

‘Just a minute, Mr... Murray, was it? Exactly who are we supposed to be meeting here, Ned?’

‘Why, ‘is lordship,’ said Ludlam in surprise. ‘Lord Byron.’

Ada had to sit down. Breathing deeply, she rested on a hard oak settle and stared up at her companions. Even though she had been more than half-expecting this, she felt faint at the prospect of encountering Byron.

‘I’m afraid his lordship often has this effect on females,’ Murray was saying. ‘I believe it is the result of the poesy he writes. I shall get you both some refreshment.’

‘He certainly does,’ Ada said faintly as he left the room. ‘That’s probably why he’s not here.’

She had fallen in love with Byron’s poetry when she was in her teens. As she’d got older, and her intellectual pursuits had tended more towards the sciences than the humanities, her passion had diminished, and the knowledge that she’d been named after Byron’s daughter put a dampener on things (she hated her name!), but she still found the poet - mad, bad and dangerous to know as he was - fascinating. Not that she was the only one.

‘Lady Caroline Lamb!’ she added. ‘Surely he’s in the middle of his affair with Lamb!’ She frowned. What was a man as romantic as Byron doing mixing himself up with the Luddites?

She asked Ludlam.

‘‘is lordship spoke favourably of us in the ‘ouse,’ Ludlam replied. ‘Opposed the Frame Breakin’ Bill.’

‘The what?’ Ada asked. Her mind was still on their absent host.

‘The Frame Breakin’ Bill,’ Ludlam replied. ‘The government wanted to make brakin’ stockin’ frames punishable by death.’

She remembered he'd mentioned it on their first meeting.

'And Byron opposed it?' Ada asked. Another gap in her research. She only knew him as a poet. Of course, he'd joined the Greek independence movement... but... 'Well, good for him!'

'Government passed it anyway,' Ludlam admitted. 'But 'e's definitely on us's side. That's why us arranged this meetin'.'

At that moment Murray returned with food and drink, and Ada realised she was starving. She started eating and put all aristocratic poets out of her mind.

Murray found beds for them in the servants' quarter. Ada spent the night sharing a lumpy mattress with a couple of chambermaids who woke her by getting up at the crack of dawn. Sleeping under the stars amidst a group of rebellious weavers was nothing on this.

She was in the butler's room talking to Ludlam when Murray entered with good news.

'Word has come. His lordship will be arriving this afternoon.'

Ada was feeling more excited than she had done in years. She was going to meet the most romantic of all Romantic poets, Lord Byron! Even if her mission to assassinate Babbage failed, even if she couldn't get back to her own time, even if she was marooned in the nineteenth century, at least she would have met ...

... *Lord Byron*...

She looked over at Ludlam, who was sitting nervously in his chair, turning his cap round and round in his hands. Lord Byron and Ned Ludd, both in one room!

But when Byron's coach rolled up on the gravel at the front of the house, Murray told them sternly to remain in his room until they were sent for. Ludlam, who had seemed so defiant when he heard that Byron was absent, had become more and more servile-seeming. Ada herself found that she was feeling nervous. Her lips were dry, her palms wet with perspiration. It was like the nerves she'd get before a first date. She felt like Jane Eyre meeting Mr Rochester.

She listened to the clamour that arose from the decrepit old pile on the news that the master had returned. Servants rushed up and down the passages, doors opened and slammed. Silence descended, and soon Ada could hear muted conversation, followed by what sounded like a series of oaths. Finally, the house descended into silence again.

Ada and Ludlam exchanged glances.

'Do you... ' Ada began.

She broke off as a shot rang out, followed by another. Then another. And another.

Ada leapt up.

‘What’s going on?’ she demanded.

Ludlam looked bewildered and uncertain. He was completely out of his element, Ada realised. She couldn’t believe this ineffectual middle aged man had only recently led his rebel forces in an ambush against government troops. The shots continued.

Ada spun round as the door opened.

Murray entered. ‘His lordship is at pistol practice,’ he told them. Ada took a deep, ragged breath.

‘When is he going to see us?’ she snapped.

With a dignified air, Murray sat down at his desk. ‘He will send for you when he requires you, miss,’ he said.

Ada’s previous enthusiasm suddenly left her.

‘We’ve come here on important business, Mr Murray,’ she snapped. ‘While his lordship has been chasing married women around London, Ned here has been trying to do something about the mess this country’s in. Lord bloody Byron arranged this meeting. Go and tell him we won’t be kept waiting any longer.’

Murray looked stricken. The distant crack of pistol shots punctuated the silence.

‘Please, miss,’ he said, ‘I can’t take him a message like that.’

‘Miss Ada...’ Ludlam added reprovingly. ‘Us’ll ‘ave to wait ‘is lordship’s pleasure. Thee must speak of ‘im with respect.’

‘You know, that’s what’s wrong with this bloody country!’ Ada said. ‘All this forelock-tugging to over-privileged inbred aristos! It’s about time you guillotined the lot of them!’

Murray turned and fled the room, all his customary dignity gone. Ludlam threw down his cap and towered over Ada, angry with her.

‘What dost thee think thee’s doin’?’ he demanded. ‘Talkin’ sedition like that! What wast thee thinkin’ of?’

Ada was incredulous. ‘You’re the big rebel leader!’ she said. ‘It’s you who’s leading terrorist attacks on the country’s industrial infrastructure! All I was doing was criticising the way the place is run. All these crazy lords and mad kings and ...’

Ludlam took a deep breath. ‘Us agrees with thee that things need to change,’ he said. ‘But talkin’ like that in front of people us doesn’t know could lead to gallows, lass. What if ‘e’s gone to the constable? Or even if ‘e tells ‘is master?’

The pistol shots were no longer audible. Ada heard a commotion from up the passage. Murray could be heard, speaking in worried tones. Another voice was audible, one that rang with aristocratic, devil-may-care arrogance.

'... ain't never heard the like! Blast it, where is this bluestocking? Even Shelley's ma never took such a tone! Command me into her presence will she, like the Grand Turk?'

'Demme, I had enough of women in Town! Thought if I got away from the damned fleshpots I'd get a moment of peace. Write a few of these poems they get so excited about. Where is she? In here?'

Murray replied mutedly.

The door opened and both Ada and Ludlam turned to see a figure limp into the room.

His alabaster skin, which contrasted so dramatically with the blue robe he wore, his red lips, his fine curls, the visionary look in his eyes, his youth and his resemblance to one of the more debauched but handsome Classical gods... all this failed to detract from Ada's shock as she realised that her childhood literary idol was an overweight, clubfooted midget.

'Roses are red, violets are blue,' he declaimed raucously. 'My name's Lord Byron. Who the pox are you?'

There was a smoking flintlock pistol in his hand.

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The Dark Place

Chapter 8

The evening passed quickly. The food had been delicious and they were all comfortable and relaxed in each other's company. 'I'm stuffed,' said Steve leaning back on the settee and sighing contentedly.

'I'm not surprised, the amount you've put away,' said Jess laughing. 'You won't need to eat anything tomorrow after all that.'

'Well, it would have been rude to leave such fantastic food wouldn't it?' replied Steve.

'Who'd like a coffee or a tea?' said Martin.

'I'll have a coffee,' said Jess.

'Me too,' added Isobel.

'Well, I'm going to finish this lovely glass of wine before I have anything else,' said

Steve.

‘I’ll go and put the kettle on,’ said Martin, smiling at Isobel as he left the room.

Isobel had really enjoyed her evening. Steve and Jess had been great company. Some of Steve’s jokes had been old but he told them with such enthusiasm it made them funny. Martin and Steve bounced stories and friendly insults off each other as only old friends can. Jess had been as lively as both of them had and she obviously kept some of Steve’s impulsive qualities in check.

‘They seem well suited,’ thought Isobel as she watched Steve and Jess. ‘They each seem to know what the other is thinking as though they’ve been together for years.’

‘I’m just going to the loo and I’ll see if Martin needs a hand with anything,’ said Jess as she got up from her chair and left the room.

‘Did you have a good night last Friday?’ Steve asked Isobel.

‘I was thinking about going home just before Martin came over to talk to me,’ said Isobel. ‘So I suppose I made the right decision not to leave didn’t I?’

‘We were out with a crowd from university,’ said Steve. ‘We don’t see each other on a regular basis but we keep in touch via email. One of the guys we were with lives and works in London. He was up here for the weekend to see his family so we all arranged to meet up for a few drinks.’

‘I didn’t see you leave,’ said Isobel.

‘I know,’ said Steve, laughing. ‘You and Martin were deep in conversation so we didn’t disturb you.’

‘Here you are, Isobel,’ said Jess as she came into the lounge carrying two cups of coffee. She passed one of the cups to Isobel and sat down. Martin followed her in carrying his own cup of coffee. They sat and chatted until almost two o’clock in the morning.

‘I think it’s time I went to bed,’ said Isobel. ‘Two o’clock in the morning is far too late for me.’

‘Come on, Steve,’ said Jess. ‘You’ve been nodding a couple of times so I think it’s time we were in bed as well.’

‘OK, boss,’ said Steve. ‘Let’s go.’

He stood up a little shakily and Jess grinned as she said, ‘Are you drunk, Steve Jones?’

‘Not at all,’ Steve replied. ‘I’m just pleasantly merry.’

‘Come on then,’ said Jess taking his arm. ‘Let’s go. We’ll see you two in the

morning,' Jess told Martin and Isobel as she guided Steve out of the room.

'They're a lovely couple,' said Isobel when they were alone.

'Yes, they are,' Martin replied. 'Steve has been my best mate since we were just kids and I think the world of both of them.'

Isobel got up from the settee and sat on Martin's lap in one of the big armchairs. Martin put his arms around Isobel shoulders and hugged her.

'I'm glad you liked them,' he said. 'You and Jess seemed to get on really well.'

'She's lovely,' Isobel replied, 'but I got the impression she's not that happy in her job.'

'What makes you say that?' asked Martin puzzled.

'I asked her what she did for a job,' said Isobel, 'and she suddenly frowned and looked really fed up. She looked away quickly and when she looked back at me, she was smiling again. I just got the impression something wasn't right, that's all.'

'I don't know anything about that and Steve's never mentioned anything,' said Martin.

'Well, maybe I got it wrong,' said Isobel. 'I'm really tired so I'm going to bed. I've had a lovely night with you and Jess and Steve but I can't keep my eyes open much longer.' Isobel stood up.

Martin grinned as he said, 'These late nights are no good, are they? but at least it's Sunday tomorrow so we don't have to get up for work.'

'It's a good job,' said Isobel smiling. She put her arms round Martin and kissed him gently. 'I'll see you later on this morning,' she said, looking into Martin's eyes.

As Martin moved to turn off the fire, Spook lifted his head from the floor and meowed at him.

'It's no good squawking,' said Martin. 'The fire's going off and you're going in the kitchen.'

Isobel bent down and picked Spook up.

'Come on, Spook. Don't take any notice of him,' she said as she walked towards the kitchen carrying the cat. Spook was putting loudly and Martin smiled as he turned off the lights and made his way to the kitchen. Isobel had put Spook on his chair and was talking to him as she stroked his head.

'You'll spoil him,' said Martin grinning.

'We all like to be spoiled sometimes, don't we, Spook?' Isobel said as she stroked the

cat. Spook meowed in agreement. ‘See,’ said Isobel. ‘He understands, you know.’ Isobel stroked Spook once more then she and Martin left the kitchen and made their way upstairs. Spook looked at the door that had closed behind them then jumped down from his chair and went through the cat flap into the snow-covered garden.

‘So what do you think of Isobel?’ Jess whispered to Steve as they lay in bed.

‘I think she’s very nice,’ Steve mumbled.

‘OK, I’ll speak to you tomorrow when you’re awake,’ said Jess smiling.

‘That’s a wonderful idea,’ Steve replied sleepily.

Less than a minute later Steve was breathing heavily and Jess knew he was asleep. As she lay there in the darkness, Jess heard Martin and Isobel come upstairs. Martin made his way into the main bedroom while Isobel went into one of the other bedrooms.

‘They make a great couple,’ thought Jess to herself as she started to drift. ‘They seem well suited and Martin obviously loves her any fool can see that.’ Soon Jess was breathing deeply and evenly as she also slept.

Martin had quickly undressed and pulled on a pair of old tracksuit bottoms before climbing into bed where he now lay looking at the ceiling. Isobel had cleaned her face and slipped into her nightclothes before getting into bed. It felt strange to her, being in bed in someone else’s house. She wondered if Martin was still awake and what he was thinking about if he was. As she lay in bed and started to drift, Isobel wondered if she should have told Martin about her nightmare.

Once more, Martin found himself in total darkness. As his head started to spin from the disorienting lack of a reference point, he crouched down and moved his hands towards where he hoped he would find solid ground. His hands touched the rough surface he was standing on and the sickly feeling of vertigo started to recede. A few moments later, Martin’s surroundings began to reveal themselves as a pale light seemed to come from the very ground itself and illuminate the monochrome landscape. Martin slowly stood up straight and surveyed his surroundings. He was standing again in the middle of a road, which stretched away into the distance whichever way he looked.

Without thinking, Martin turned to his right and started to jog along the centre of the road. As he jogged forwards, Martin once again began to feel a growing sense of unease. He made an effort to stop jogging but found that he was still moving forward along the strangely lit road. Sweat started to break out on Martin’s forehead as he tried to force himself to reduce his rapidly increasing pace but try as he might there was nothing he could do. His body seemed to be moving of its own volition without any conscious effort on his part.

Martin looked over his shoulder and the wall of darkness was once again approaching him from behind. As he turned to face what was ahead Martin saw what had at first looked like a formless mound was now taking shape. Martin risked another glance

over his shoulder and now the blackness was closer and gaining fast. Martin fancied he could see a pair of blood red eyes in the darkness but he couldn't be sure. As he sprinted along the road, Martin saw that ahead of him in the distance was a small figure standing motionless in the centre of the road.

Martin could feel an icy coldness at his back and as he looked, again over his shoulder the wall of darkness was upon him. The blood red eyes were there close behind him and icy hands seemed to be grasping his shoulders and dragging him to the ground. As he pitched forwards, Martin could see the figure of a child standing in the centre of the road ahead of him. Darkness enveloped him and icy fingers raced over his body grasping for his throat as an all-consuming fear seemed to rush into his mind, filling it with blackness.

'Martin, Martin, wake up!' shouted Isobel as she shook Martin's shoulders and tried to wake him from whatever dream was causing him to shout out in his sleep. Martin suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, sweat streaming from his body and his eyes wide open.

'What, what's the matter?' he mumbled as he slowly became aware of his surroundings.

'You were having a nightmare and you were shouting something about trying to save her,' said Isobel as she tried to quell her own fear. Martin's head slumped forward and he drew in great shuddering breaths as his body slowly relaxed. Isobel put her arms around Martin's shoulders and pulled him close.

'You had me so worried,' she said. 'I didn't know what was happening when I woke up and heard you shouting. I thought I was dreaming or something.'

Jess was standing in the doorway to Martin's bedroom and Steve had also appeared behind her.

'Is everything alright?' she asked.

'I had a nightmare,' said Martin, 'one I've had before.' Martin pushed the duvet back with his feet and got shakily to his feet.

As he stood up, Jess gasped, 'Martin what happened to your back?'

Martin's shoulders and upper back were crisscrossed with scratches, from which fresh blood was oozing.

Isobel had cleaned Martin's back with disinfectant and the bleeding had stopped. He had pulled a sweatshirt over his head and now they all sat in silence round the table in the kitchen sipping coffee, each lost in their own thoughts. There had been no sign of Spook when they came into the kitchen and Martin wondered where the cat had gone.

'Do you want to talk about it?' Isobel asked Martin quietly as she reached over the table and took his hand. At the same time, Isobel was struggling with her desire to tell Martin everything about her own nightmare and share her fears about what was

happening.

‘There’s not much to say,’ began Martin slowly. ‘That’s the second time I’ve had that dream. Well not exactly the same dream it seems to have progressed since the first one.’ Martin smiled ruefully.

‘What happened to your back?’ asked Steve.

‘No idea,’ replied Martin, ‘but what happened in my dream seems to have somehow appeared on my body when I woke up.’ Martin held up his hand as Steve started to protest. ‘I know it sounds weird,’ he said, ‘but the first time I had the dream I hurt my knees and when I woke up my knees were scraped raw. Now something claws my back in my dream and I have scratches all over my shoulders. I don’t have a clue what’s going on but whatever is causing this is happening in my dreams.’

At that moment there came an unearthly screeching from outside the back door then a loud bang as Spook came charging through the cat flap meowing loudly. Before Martin could turn around Spook had run out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

‘Now what the hell is the matter with him,’ said Martin crossly as he stood up.

Martin walked up the stairs, wondering what was wrong with Spook. Why had he been screaming outside the back door and what had scared him so much that he had come through the cat flap as though something had been chasing him. There was no immediate sign of Spook when Martin reached the top of the stairs.

‘I wonder where he’s hiding himself,’ thought Martin. A quick look under the bed he had so recently been sleeping in did not shed any light on Spook’s whereabouts. Neither did a search of the bathroom or Steve and Jess’s bedroom. ‘Well, that only leaves the room Isobel’s is using,’ thought Martin as he pushed open the door and went into the bedroom. Martin knelt down and looked under the bed.

Spook’s amber eyes were glowing in the half-light as he looked back at Martin from beneath the bed. Spook was crouched against the wall with his back arched and the fur standing up on his head and neck.

‘What’s the matter with you Spook?’ Martin asked Spook quietly.

Spook uncurled himself and began to move towards Martin’s outstretched hand. Suddenly Spook flattened himself against the floor and a threatening low growl started to come from his throat. Spook began to retreat towards the wall and the growling became deeper. As Martin knelt on the floor, he suddenly shivered and noticed his breath was making white clouds in front of his face. He stood up and realised that the temperature in the room had plummeted. As Martin turned towards the door, he saw the shadowy figure standing in the corner of the room.

The intense cold seemed to radiate from that part of the room as though any warm air was being dispelled by an icy blast. Martin’s mind was in turmoil.

‘How can it be so cold inside the bedroom and who the hell is that?’ he thought as his

brain frantically tried to rationalise just what was happening. As though he were sleepwalking, Martin took a step towards the figure. He tried to resist but as much as he tried, he couldn't stop his feet moving. As Martin lifted, his foot to take another step Spook ran out from under the bed and headed for the open door.

As Spook moved, the force compelling Martin seemed to waver and he felt the force holding him lessen. He tried to put his foot back on the floor but as he lowered his foot, Spook ran beneath it. The combined effect of Martin struggling to retain control of his own movements and Spook running beneath his foot were enough to unbalance Martin. His feet went from beneath him and he pitched forward crashing his head against the wooden corner of the bedstead.

Downstairs Isobel, Steve and Jess heard the crash as Martin fell to the bedroom floor above them. Steve leapt to his feet and ran for the stairs with Isobel and Jess close behind. He took the stairs two at a time and nearly tripped over Spook who was running downstairs. Steve reached the bedroom door as Isobel and Jess made it to the top of the stairs.

'Martin, are you OK?' Steve shouted as he pushed open the bedroom door. He entered the bedroom at a run and nearly fell over the prostrate figure in front of him.

'Martin, Martin,' Steve said as he crouched next to Martin's head. Martin moaned as Steve turned him over onto his back. There was large red mark on Martin's forehead, just above his left eye but the skin had not been broken.

'Martin, are you OK mate?' said Steve as he shook Martin's shoulders. Isobel flicked on the light switch as she came into the room just in front of Jess.

'Oh my God,' Isobel exclaimed as she saw Martin on the floor. Isobel and Jess knelt on the floor next to Martin who was slowly coming to his senses. His hand reached for his forehead and he winced in pain as his fingers found the large swelling that was appearing on his forehead.

'Ow! That hurts,' said Martin quickly pulling his hand away. Steve helped Martin sit up and lean against the side of the bed.

'That's a lovely bump you've got coming up there,' said Steve grinning in spite of the seriousness of the situation.

'I'll go and get a cold towel,' said Jess heading for the bathroom. Isobel knelt on the floor next to Martin and put her arms round his shoulders. She hugged him tightly as she tried to stop herself from crying.

'I'm OK,' said Martin as he smiled at Isobel. 'I just managed to give myself a sore head'

'What happened?' asked Steve.

'Let's go downstairs and I'll tell you,' said Martin as he slowly got to his feet.

As Martin stood up Jess brought a hand towel from the bathroom that she had soaked in cold water.

‘Here, Martin. Press this against the bump it’ll help take down the swelling,’ she said passing the towel to Martin.

‘Thanks Jess,’ said Martin taking the towel and wincing as he pressed it against the swelling on his head.

Sitting at the table in the kitchen Isobel, Jess and Steve looked expectantly at Martin.

‘I’m not really sure exactly what happened,’ said Martin tentatively. ‘I was looking under the bed at Spook. He was growling and the fur was standing up on his back.’

‘We heard a loud bang from upstairs,’ interrupted Steve, ‘and we just ran upstairs and found you on the floor.’

‘As I was saying,’ continued Martin. ‘Spook was under the bed and I was trying to coax him out when I noticed it had suddenly gone really cold in the room.’

‘Was the window open?’ asked Steve questioningly.

‘No, the window wasn’t open,’ said Martin. ‘I noticed my breath was making white clouds in front of me and that’s what made me notice how cold it had gone. I stood up from the side of the bed and that’s when I thought I saw someone standing in the corner of the room.’

Isobel took hold of Jess’s hand to comfort her as Jess looked at the kitchen door as though she expected someone to be standing there.

‘I felt as though something was forcing me to move towards whatever was in the corner and as I lifted my foot Spook ran underneath it and tripped me up. That’s when I bashed my head,’ Martin said ruefully.

‘There was no one in the room with you when I got there,’ said Steve.

‘I’ve no idea what’s going on,’ said Martin. ‘I don’t believe in ghosts or spirits or anything like that. What about the rest of you, what do you think?’

‘Maybe it’s the food or something,’ volunteered Steve.

‘The food?’ said Isobel, looking puzzled.

‘You know, all the monosodium glutamate they put in Chinese food,’ explained Steve.

‘So how do you explain the fact that we haven’t seen anything weird?’ asked Isobel.

‘I don’t know,’ said Steve angrily. ‘Have you got any better ideas?’

‘No,’ said Isobel defensively, ‘but we’ve all had pretty much the same to eat, so surely it would have affected all of us and not just Martin?’

‘There’s Spook as well,’ said Jess hesitantly. ‘He didn’t have any of the food and something certainly frightened him?’

‘We’re not going to get much sleep tonight, are we?’ said Martin as he looked round the table at the others. ‘It’s half past four and we’re all wide awake. Let’s go and sit in the lounge. It’s more comfortable in there.’

As they sat in the lounge, Isobel decided it was time to tell Martin, Jess and Steve about the nightmare she had the previous night. The similarities couldn’t be ignored, the red eyes, the freezing cold that seemed to accompany the dreams and the dark figure that she had seen.

‘I had a terrible nightmare on Friday night,’ Isobel said as Martin, Jess and Steve all looked towards her. ‘I dreamt I was in deep water and something heavy was wrapped round my ankles and dragging me under the water. I couldn’t get my head above the surface and whatever was round my ankles was dragging itself up my body. I looked down through the water and although I couldn’t see anything clearly through the water, I could see a pair of red eyes, burning blood red eyes, staring at me.’

‘I woke up with my pillow across my face and threw it on the floor. I thought it must have been the weight of the pillow across my nose and mouth that caused me to think I couldn’t breathe. When I leant out of bed to get my pillow I thought I saw someone or something standing in the darkness at the edge of my bedroom. I was so scared I screamed put my hands over my eyes, started crying, and didn’t know what to do. After a little while, I plucked up the courage to take my hands away from my face and turn on the bedside light but there was nothing there. The room was freezing cold and I couldn’t understand what was happening.’

Tears were gathering at the corners of Isobel’s eyes. Jess sat next to her and put her arms round her shoulders, comforting her. Isobel leant her head against Jess’s shoulder. She felt better for having told someone about her dreams but wondered just what it all meant. How could she and Martin have dreams that involved such similar things?

‘This is weird,’ said Steve running his fingers through his hair. ‘How can you two have similar nightmares unless you’ve both experienced whatever it is that’s causing your brains to create these images and feelings?’

‘This is the first time either of us has mentioned it to anyone,’ said Martin. ‘Never mind each other. I had my first nightmare on Monday night and it’s taken five days for the second one to come along. Isobel had her nightmare last night so there’s no real pattern is there?’

‘I don’t believe in mass hysteria or anything like that,’ said Steve. ‘There must be some kind of rational explanation.’

‘How can we both talk about seeing and feeling similar things?’ said Isobel. ‘We both

saw something with red eyes in our dreams. When we woke up the room was freezing cold and how do you explain the figure standing in the room?'

'Well, what's the alternative?' said Steve angrily. 'That you're both being haunted by the same ghost?'

'There's something else,' said Martin quietly before going on to tell them about the message that had appeared in his email inbox.

'So now we've got ghosts who can use computers and communicate by email,' said Steve exasperatedly. 'What happened to the old trusted methods like the Ouija board, rattling the odd chain or throwing things across the room?'

Jess giggled and Martin smiled despite the angry look on Steve's face.

'I don't have a clue about any of this,' Martin said, 'but I'm not making it up and I've got the cuts and bruises to support what I'm telling you.'

'I was scared,' added Isobel. 'I didn't want to tell anyone about my dreams in case they thought I was going crazy. I had no idea Martin had experienced anything like this until tonight.'

'We're not getting anywhere with this are we?' said Martin. 'I'm going to make a coffee or some tea who'd like some?'

Steve, Jess and Isobel all said they'd have tea. Martin went to the kitchen and filled the kettle, before switching it on to boil. Walking over to the other side of the kitchen, he leant back against the worktop and stared at the floor. There had been no sign of Spook when Martin came into the kitchen and he wondered where the cat had gone. He hoped that if Spook had gone outside he was OK. He looked up as Isobel came into the kitchen. Isobel moved towards him and Martin put his arms around her holding her.

Isobel leant her head against Martin's shoulder as she said, 'I was really frightened before when you started shouting. I wondered if I was dreaming at first. I didn't know where the noise was coming from.'

Martin kissed Isobel on the forehead. 'I'm sorry if I frightened you,' he said 'I didn't do it on purpose.'

Isobel smiled as she looked into Martin's eyes. 'I know you didn't do it on purpose but why do you think we're having these dreams?' she said looking suddenly serious.

'I've no idea at all,' Martin replied. 'I can't work out how we could both have dreams or nightmares or whatever they are that are so similar. It just doesn't make any sense. Maybe Steve's right and we're being haunted by the same ghost,' he said, grinning as he looked into Isobel's worried eyes.

'Don't joke about this, Martin,' said Isobel seriously. 'I'm really worried about what's happening.'

Steve and Jess appeared in the doorway as Martin and Isobel leant against each other.

‘Hey, you two,’ said Steve with a forced cheeriness as they came into the kitchen. ‘We were getting worried being on our own.’ Steve had his arm around Jess who looked pale and scared. Her face appeared stark under the bright halogen spotlights.

‘Sit down Jess,’ said Isobel pulling a chair out from the table. ‘The kettle’s nearly boiled so your tea will only be a minute.’

Jess sat down at the table and Steve sat opposite her while Isobel and Martin busied themselves putting tea bags into cups. Isobel put two steaming cups of tea on the table in front of Jess and Steve before pouring hot water into two more cups for Martin and her.

‘So where do we go from here?’ said Steve. ‘We’re no nearer knowing what’s been happening are we?’

‘No, you’re right. We don’t know what the dreams mean,’ said Martin, ‘but we do know that Isobel and I have had similar experiences so maybe it’s something connected to us?’

‘Well, how can that be?’ asked Steve. ‘You said yourself you had the first dream on Monday, you’d only know Isobel a couple of days then so how do you get the connection?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Martin, ‘but what if I’m right?’

‘OK, say you are right,’ said Steve, ‘and it’s something connected somehow to you and Isobel. How do you explain the scraped knees and scratches on your back tonight? You can’t be physically hurt in a dream can you?’

Jess put her hand on Steve’s arm. ‘Let’s leave it for now Steve,’ she said. ‘I’m really tired but I don’t want to go back upstairs. Let’s go and sit in the lounge maybe we can get some sleep and sort things out later when it’s light?’

‘You three go and sit down. I’ll go upstairs and get the duvets and some pillows,’ said Martin.

Martin returned to the lounge with duvets and pillows and they all made themselves comfortable on the settee and the chairs. Steve and Jess were sitting on one sofa with an armchair in front of them to rest their feet on while Martin and Isobel did the same on the smaller of the two sofas. The rest of the night passed uneventfully.

Martin woke at just after nine. He had a stiff neck and he couldn’t feel his arm. He gently moved Isobel, who was resting on his arm, and she moaned and opened her eyes.

‘Hello,’ she said sleepily. ‘Looks like we did get some sleep,’ she said as she smiled at Martin. As Isobel sat up Martin shook his hand and massaged his arm as the blood

started to flow back into his arm and hand causing him pins and needles. ‘How’s your head?’ Isobel asked as she rubbed Martin’s arm to help ease the sensation.

‘I’ve got a bit of a headache,’ he replied, ‘but I think I’ll live.’ As Isobel and Martin were talking, Spook appeared from behind the settee. He walked over to the door and immediately started to scratch at the bottom of the door and meow plaintively. ‘So that’s where you’ve been hiding,’ said Martin smiling.

‘I think he wants to go out,’ said Isobel as she stretched her arms above her head. Jess and Steve were lying on the other settee and Jess opened her eyes as Martin got up to open the door for Spook.

‘Morning,’ Jess mumbled as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

‘You certainly know how to throw an interesting dinner party Martin,’ she said smiling. Steve yawned and stretched.

‘Morning,’ he said with a cheerfulness he didn’t feel. ‘Are you going to put the kettle on?’ he asked Martin.

‘Yes,’ said Martin laughing, ‘and I’ll put some toast in the toaster as well.’

‘If you want to go and get showered you can use the en suite or the bathroom.’ While Martin made toast and hot drinks, Isobel used the en suite and Steve and Jess used the main bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, they were all seated round the table in the kitchen. Isobel, Steve and Jess were all wearing jeans and jerseys while Martin still wore the old tracksuit bottoms and sweatshirt. A large plate of toast was sitting in the middle of the table along with a pot of jam and dishes of margarine and butter. Martin busied himself putting a pot of coffee on to boil and filling the kettle with water before also switching that on to boil.

‘Right. Who wants tea and who wants coffee?’ he asked. Jess and Isobel asked for tea while Steve said he’d wait for the coffee. Martin made tea for the two women then looked out of the kitchen window at the snow-covered garden.

‘Martin,’ said Isobel, breaking into his thoughts.

‘Sorry, I was miles away,’ Martin replied. ‘What did you say?’

‘I was asking you what you planned to do about what happened last night?’ said Isobel.

‘I don’t know,’ said Martin. ‘I’m not sure there is anything I can do is there?’

‘You’ll probably laugh at this,’ Isobel said tentatively, ‘but do you think we should go and see a spiritualist or a medium or something?’

‘You don’t seriously mean that do you?’ said Steve.

‘Have you got any better ideas?’ Isobel replied.

‘No,’ said Steve ‘but don’t you think this is starting to sound like some bad film about possession or something? You’ll have blood oozing out of the walls and priests performing exorcisms next! Priests and vicars are the biggest con artists in the world.

‘They peddle a system that preys on people’s insecurities, especially old people. You know the ones who suddenly get religion when they reach a point in their lives when they know they don’t have long before they shuffle off this mortal coil. Where’s the proof in the stuff they trot out about everlasting life and the Holy Lord our God, it’s all a load of nonsense!’ Steve sat back in his chair with a triumphant look on his face.

‘I hadn’t thought about going to see a priest,’ said Isobel thoughtfully.

‘Oh come on!’ said Steve forcefully. ‘I was only joking about going to see the priests and stuff. There must be some rational explanation for what’s happening.’

Martin hadn’t said anything as Isobel and Steve had been talking but now he voiced his own opinion. ‘I think,’ he began ‘that whatever is happening has some kind of rational explanation. But, and this is the bit you’ll struggle with Steve.’ Martin looked at Steve as he spoke. ‘There might also be things going on that we don’t understand.’

‘Like what?’ said Steve.

‘I don’t know but there are things like psychology that might be able to suggest some kind of answer,’ said Martin.

‘Surely you don’t mean the power of the mind,’ said Steve scornfully. ‘You’re beginning to sound like Uri Gellar or David Blaine and we all know they’re professional magicians who trick people for a living.’

‘Well, maybe you’re right,’ said Martin. ‘But I’ve seen people who should by all rights be dead who have somehow managed to stay alive and their bodies have eventually healed when we’d written them off. So don’t be too quick to discount the power your mind has over your body.’

‘That’s as may be,’ said Steve, ‘but you’re trying to convince me that whatever is causing these dreams or hallucinations, or whatever they are, is affecting two people at the same time. Two people who only met each other last weekend and have only spent about 24 hours together at most.’

Martin knew he was never going to convince Steve that whatever was happening might not be easily explained, so he decided to try a different approach.

‘OK,’ he began. ‘How do you explain the scratches on my back and shoulders? In my dream something was clawing at my back and dragging me down as I ran.’

‘Auto-suggestion?’ said Steve.

‘Isn’t that exactly the point I was trying to make about psychology and our minds?’ said Martin smiling. ‘We don’t know everything and we certainly don’t completely understand exactly what our minds can do and just what control they have over our bodies.’

‘I give up,’ said Steve holding both his hands up towards Martin. ‘You and Isobel go and see whoever you want about this but I’m not coming to visit you when they lock you both up in Rainhill.’

They all laughed at Steve’s reference to the old asylum that had been situated just outside Liverpool and had been the subject of many stories and legends when they were growing up.

‘I don’t think it will come to that,’ said Martin when they had all stopped laughing.

Steve and Jess left later that afternoon. Isobel had offered to give them a lift home but they’d insisted on telephoning for a taxi.

‘There’s no point you driving over to our house and then having to come all the way back here. Especially with the roads in the state they are,’ Steve had said when Isobel offered to take them home. As they waved Jess and Steve off, Martin and Isobel were both feeling apprehensive about what they were going to do about their dreams although neither one of them had said anything to the other. Martin closed the front door and they made their way to the lounge and sat down.

‘So what do we do now?’ asked Isobel.

‘I don’t know,’ Martin replied. ‘Would you like to go for a walk? I’m sure the village and especially the country park will look lovely with all the snow.’

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ said Isobel. ‘Some fresh air would do us both some good.’

Ten minutes later Martin and Isobel were walking hand in hand along the snow-covered road towards the village. Although it had stopped, snowing the late afternoon sky was a threatening dark grey and it was still bitterly cold.

‘I think we’ll get some more snow, don’t you?’ Martin said. Isobel looked thoughtfully skywards before replying.

‘By the look of those clouds I’d say you’re right,’ she replied.

They walked on in silence until they were standing outside St Mary’s church at the entrance to the country park. They stood hand in hand and gazed at the church framed against the dark grey sky. The sharply angled roof over the knave of the church and the trees and expanse of grass around were covered with snow.

‘It looks like a photograph from a Christmas postcard,’ said Isobel slipping her arm round Martin and pulling him closer to her.

‘Except it’s dark and gloomy looking instead of bright and cheery,’ said Martin laughing.

‘I suppose so,’ said Isobel laughing along with him.

‘I think it looks a bit spooky to be honest,’ said Martin thoughtfully.

They passed the church and began to walk down the long road that ran through the middle of the country park. A cold wind whipped at them as they passed the church and made their way into the park. Isobel shivered as she pulled herself closer to Martin and leant against his shoulder.

‘That wind goes right through to your bones, doesn’t it?’ she said as she huddled close to Martin.

They were alone as they walked into the park, no one else had braved the cold, and the large fields of grass stretched out on either side of them. About two hundred yards away on their right a dark line of trees and shrubs marked the edge of the park. As Martin and Isobel walked, a dark shadow moved between the trees and kept pace with them. By some unknown instinct the woodland birds and small creatures avoided the presence and in its wake all was silent and still. After about half a mile the road bent slightly to the right and after another fifty yards, it angled to the left. Martin and Isobel were now hidden from the gates and could only be seen by anybody approaching them along the road from the other side of the park.

‘Do you think it’s going colder?’ Isobel asked Martin as they walked along the snow-covered road.

‘I think it is,’ said Martin, ‘and it seems to be getting darker as well.’ The light was definitely going and they stopped and looked round as the daylight faded. ‘This is really weird,’ said Martin.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Isobel quietly ‘let’s go back.’

They turned around and began to retrace their steps. The wind seemed to have changed direction and was now blowing against their backs flattening their coats against them and pushing them forwards. As they approached the first bend in the road, the light had almost gone and Isobel felt as though cold fingers were wandering up and down her spine. Martin also felt unnerved and the short hairs on the back of his neck had involuntarily tightened. The wind shifted direction again and was now blowing in their faces. Snow began to fall once more and the wind blew a sudden flurry of snow into their faces. Martin and Isobel had to lean into the wind in as they walked forward. The snow was driving into their faces and it stung their eyes and lips as though it were trying to hold them back and halt their progress.

Martin held his hand up to shield his face from the driving snow as he turned towards Isobel.

‘This is unbelievable,’ he said. ‘It’s like we’re in the Arctic or something. I’ve never seen weather like this before.’

Isobel smiled and nodded her agreement as she tried to shelter from the snow against Martin's shoulder. They had made the second turn in the road and were now pushing their way against the wind and making their way slowly towards the park gates in the distance. The wind was howling across the fields now and the snow was beginning to pile up against the trees. Martin's head and shoulders were covered with snow and he did his best to shield Isobel from the wind. After what seemed an eternity they neared the park gates, the wind lessened as the church, and the village buildings sheltered them from the biting wind.

As they made their way through the gates and out of the park, the wind suddenly lessened and snow fell gently to the ground instead of driving into their faces. They crossed the road and in the shelter of one of the buildings looked back through the gates into the park. The road into the park disappeared into what looked like a blizzard once it reached the fields. They could still see the church through the gloom and the building seemed to mark the point where the snow and wind intensified.

'I'm glad we got out of the park when we did,' said Martin. 'You'd have thought we were out on some open moor or something the way the weather changed.'

Isobel looked worried as she turned towards Martin.

'That wasn't natural, Martin. It was as though something was trying to keep us in there. Couldn't you feel it?'

'It was just the wind,' Martin replied. 'We were only walking through a park how could something have been trying to keep us in there?'

'I don't know,' said Isobel, 'but it was as though I could feel icy fingers scratching up and down my back.'

'Come on,' said Martin taking Isobel's hand. 'Let's get back to the house and get out of these wet clothes.'

They walked back to Martin's house through the lightly falling snow. Once they were inside the front door, the feeling that something was stalking her and she could do nothing about it began to lessen and Isobel felt better. Spook seemed to be none the worse after whatever had frightened him the previous night and he rubbed himself round Isobel's feet purring loudly as soon as they made their way into the kitchen. Isobel stroked Spook's head and took comfort from the cat's warmth and affection.

'I'm going to go and get a shower,' said Martin. 'Then I'll make us a sandwich or something if you like?'

'I think I'd like to head home if that's OK with you,' replied Isobel. 'It's getting late and I don't like leaving the house empty all the time.'

Martin looked disappointed and even though he tried to keep it out of his voice, he couldn't completely mask his feelings.

‘OK, I’ll just go and get a dry pair of jeans,’ he said as he left the kitchen.

Isobel looked at Spook and said, ‘I’m sorry Spook, but I really need to get home tonight. I’ll be back soon though.’ Spook meowed and rubbed his head against Isobel’s hand.

Martin came back into the kitchen a few minutes later. He was wearing a clean pair of jeans and warm looking brown jumper.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to have shower and change your clothes before you go?’ he asked Isobel.

‘Thanks Martin, but I really just want to get home and check on the house,’ Isobel replied.

She moved towards Martin and put her arms around him before looking into his eyes and then kissing him. Martin held Isobel close, and knew he didn’t want her to go home tonight. Isobel kissed Martin again and then moved away from him and towards the door. ‘I’ll just nip upstairs and get my bag and then I’ll make a move,’ she said. She returned to the hallway moments later with her overnight bag.

‘Shall I follow you back to the house?’ Martin asked as he came into the hallway.

‘Don’t worry I’ll be fine,’ said Isobel ‘and I’ll ring you when I get home so you know I’ve made it in one piece,’ she said smiling.

Martin walked Isobel to her car. They hugged and said their goodbyes in the cold garage. Isobel slowly drove the car out of the garage and across the snow-covered drive way. Martin quickly closed and locked the garage door before hurrying over to where Isobel had stopped her car. He leaned into the open window and kissed her.

‘Take care on the way home, won’t you?’ he said earnestly.

‘I will,’ said Isobel, ‘and I’ll ring you as soon as get home.’

Martin watched Isobel slowly drive out of the gates. He waved and smiled but inside he was feeling very lonely.

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Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE EXPLANATION.—MARCHDALE'S ADVICE.—THE PROJECTED REMOVAL, AND THE ADMIRAL'S ANGER.

This extremely sudden movement on the part of Varney was certainly as unexpected as it was decisive. Henry had imagined, that by taking possession of the only entrance

to the summer-house, he must come into personal conflict with the being who had worked so much evil for him and his; and that he should so suddenly have created for himself another mode of exit, certainly never occurred to him.

"For Heaven's sake, Flora," he said, "unhand me; this is a time for action."

"But, Henry, Henry, hear me."

"Presently, presently, dear Flora; I will yet make another effort to arrest the headlong flight of Varney."

He shook her off, perhaps with not more roughness than was necessary to induce her to forego her grasp of him, but in a manner that fully showed he intended to be free; and then he sprang through the same aperture whence Varney had disappeared, just as George and Mr. Marchdale arrived at the door of the summer-house.

It was nearly morning, so that the fields were brightening up with the faint radiance of the coming day; and when Henry reached a point which he knew commanded an extensive view, he paused, and ran his eye eagerly along the landscape, with a hope of discovering some trace of the fugitive.

Such, however, was not the case; he saw nothing, heard nothing of Sir Francis Varney; and then he turned, and called loudly to George to join him, and was immediately replied to by his brother's presence, accompanied by Marchdale.

Before, however, they could exchange a word, a rattling discharge of fire-arms took place from one of the windows, and they heard the admiral, in a loud voice, shouting,—

"Broadside to broadside! Give it them again, Jack! Hit them between wind and water!"

Then there was another rattling discharge, and Henry exclaimed,—

"What is the meaning of that firing?"

"It comes from the admiral's room," said Marchdale. "On my life, I think the old man must be mad. He has some six or eight pistols ranged in a row along the window-sill, and all loaded, so that by the aid of a match they can be pretty well discharged as a volley, which he considers the only proper means of firing upon the vampyre."

"It is so," replied George; "and, no doubt, hearing an alarm, he has commenced operations by firing into the enemy."

"Well, well," said Henry; "he must have his way. I have pursued Varney thus far, and that he has again retreated to the wood, I cannot doubt. Between this and the full light of day, let us at least make an effort to discover his place of retreat. We know the locality as well as he can possibly, and I propose now that we commence an active search."

"Come on, then," said Marchdale. "We are all armed; and I, for one, shall feel no hesitation in taking the life, if it be possible to do so, of that strange being."

"Of that possibility you doubt?" said George, as they hurried on across the meadows.

"Indeed I do, and with reason too. I'm certain that when I fired at him before I hit him; and besides, Flora must have shot him upon the occasion when we were absent, and she used your pistols Henry, to defend herself and her mother."

"It would seem so," said Henry; "and disregarding all present circumstances, if I do meet him, I will put to the proof whether he be mortal or not."

The distance was not great, and they soon reached the margin of the wood; they then separated agreeing to meet within it, at a well-spring, familiar to them all: previous to which each was to make his best endeavour to discover if any one was hidden among the bush-wood or in the hollows of the ancient trees they should encounter on their line of march.

The fact was, that Henry finding that he was likely to pass an exceedingly disturbed, restless night, through agitation of spirits, had, after tossing to and fro on his couch for many hours, wisely at length risen, and determined to walk abroad in the gardens belonging to the mansion, in preference to continuing in such a state of fever and anxiety, as he was in, in his own chamber.

Since the vampyre's dreadful visit, it had been the custom of both the brothers, occasionally, to tap at the chamber door of Flora, who, at her own request, now that she had changed her room, and dispensed with any one sitting up with her, wished occasionally to be communicated with by some member of the family.

Henry, then, after rapidly dressing, as he passed the door of her bedroom, was about to tap at it, when to his surprise he found it open, and upon hastily entering it he observed that the bed was empty, and a hasty glance round the apartment convinced him that Flora was not there.

Alarm took possession of him, and hastily arming himself, he roused Marchdale and George, but without waiting for them to be ready to accompany him, he sought the garden, to search it thoroughly in case she should be anywhere there concealed.

Thus it was he had come upon the conference so strangely and so unexpectedly held between Varney and Flora in the summer-house. With what occurred upon that discovery the readers are acquainted.

Flora had promised George that she would return immediately to the house, but when, in compliance with the call of Henry, George and Marchdale had left her alone, she felt so agitated and faint that she began to cling to the trellis work of the little building for a few moments before she could gather strength to reach the mansion.

Two or three minutes might thus have elapsed, and Flora was in such a state of mental bewilderment with all that had occurred, that she could scarce believe it real, when suddenly a slight sound attracted her attention, and through the gap which had been

made in the wall of the summer-house, with an appearance of perfect composure, again appeared Sir Francis Varney.

"Flora," he said, quietly resuming the discourse which had been broken off, "I am quite convinced now that you will be much the happier for the interview."

"Gracious Heaven!" said Flora, "whence have you come from?"

"I have never left," said Varney.

"But I saw you fly from this spot."

"You did; but it was only to another immediately outside the summer house. I had no idea of breaking off our conference so abruptly."

"Have you anything to add to what you have already stated?"

"Absolutely nothing, unless you have a question to propose to me—I should have thought you had, Flora. Is there no other circumstance weighing heavily upon your mind, as well as the dreadful visitation I have subjected you to?"

"Yes," said Flora. "What has become of Charles Holland?"

"Listen. Do not discard all hope; when you are far from here you will meet with him again."

"But he has left me."

"And yet he will be able, when you again encounter him, so far to extenuate his seeming perfidy, that you shall hold him as untouched in honour as when first he whispered to you that he loved you."

"Oh, joy! joy!" said Flora; "by that assurance you have robbed misfortune of its sting, and richly compensated me for all that I have suffered."

"Adieu!" said the vampyre. "I shall now proceed to my own home by a different route to that taken by those who would kill me."

"But after this," said Flora, "there shall be no danger; you shall be held harmless, and our departure from Bannerworth Hall shall be so quick, that you will soon be released from all apprehension of vengeance from my brother, and I shall taste again of that happiness which I thought had fled from me for ever."

"Farewell," said the vampire; and folding his cloak closely around him, he strode from the summer-house, soon disappearing from her sight behind the shrubs and ample vegetation with which that garden abounded.

Flora sunk upon her knees, and uttered a brief, but heartfelt thanksgiving to Heaven for this happy change in her destiny. The hue of health faintly again visited her cheeks, and as she now, with a feeling of more energy and strength than she had been

capable of exerting for many days, walked towards the house, she felt all that delightful sensation which the mind experiences when it is shaking off the trammels of some serious evil which it delights now to find that the imagination has attired in far worse colours than the facts deserved.

It is scarcely necessary, after this, to say that the search in the wood for Sir Francis Varney was an unproductive one, and that the morning dawned upon the labours of the brother and of Mr. Marchdale, without their having discovered the least indication of the presence of Varney. Again puzzled and confounded, they stood on the margin of the wood, and looked sadly towards the brightening windows of Bannerworth Hall, which were now reflecting with a golden radiance the slant rays of the morning sun.

"Foiled again," remarked Henry, with a gesture of impatience; "foiled again, and as completely as before. I declare that I will fight this man, let our friend the admiral say what he will against such a measure I will meet him in mortal combat; he shall consummate his triumph over our whole family by my death, or I will rid the world and ourselves of so frightful a character."

"Let us hope," said Marchdale, "that some other course may be adopted, which shall put an end to these proceedings."

"That," exclaimed Henry, "is to hope against all probability; what other course can be pursued? Be this Varney man or devil, he has evidently marked us for his prey."

"Indeed, it would seem so," remarked George; "but yet he shall find that we will not fall so easily; he shall discover that if poor Flora's gentle spirit has been crushed by these frightful circumstances, we are of a sterner mould."

"He shall," said Henry; "I for one will dedicate my life to this matter. I will know no more rest than is necessary to recruit my frame, until I have succeeded in overcoming this monster; I will seek no pleasure here, and will banish from my mind, all else that may interfere with that one fixed pursuit. He or I must fall."

"Well spoken," said Marchdale; "and yet I hope that circumstances may occur to prevent such a necessity of action, and that probably you will yet see that it will be wise and prudent to adopt a milder and a safer course."

"No, Marchdale, you cannot feel as we feel. You look on more as a spectator, sympathising with the afflictions of either, than feeling the full sting of those afflictions yourself."

"Do I not feel acutely for you? I'm a lonely man in the world, and I have taught myself now to centre my affections in your family; my recollections of early years assist me in so doing. Believe me, both of you, that I am no idle spectator of your griefs, but that I share them fully. If I advise you to be peaceful, and to endeavour by the gentlest means possible to accomplish your aims, it is not that I would counsel you cowardice; but having seen so much more of the world than either of you have had time or opportunity of seeing, I do not look so enthusiastically upon matters, but, with

a cooler, calmer judgment, I do not say a better, I proffer to you my counsel."

"We thank you," said Henry; "but this is a matter in which action seems specially called for. It is not to be borne that a whole family is to be oppressed by such a fiend in human shape as that Varney."

"Let me," said Marchdale, "counsel you to submit to Flora's decision in this business; let her wishes constitute the rules of action. She is the greatest sufferer, and the one most deeply interested in the termination of this fearful business. Moreover she has judgment and decision of character—she will advise you rightly, be assured."

"That she would advise us honourably," said Henry, "and that we should feel every disposition in the world to defer to her wishes our proposition, is not to be doubted; but little shall be done without her counsel and sanction. Let us now proceed homeward, for I am most anxious to ascertain how it came about that she and Sir Francis Varney were together in that summer-house at so strange an hour."

They all three walked together towards the house, conversing in a similar strain as they went.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Ten: Guinevere

Arthur was having similar thoughts. Everything was dark as he opened his eyes, and he seemed to be lying amidst silk sheets. He listened. Nothing, but a distant murmur of the wind. He wondered what had happened. Was this heaven? The last thing he remembered was being shot.

He slowly drifted away into sleep.

When he next woke, the sun was shining brightly through a crack in the curtains. He was in a bed in a large bedroom. He didn't recognise it at all. When he tried to get up pain shot through his body. He heard someone groan, and realised it was him. The ceiling spun. For a moment, he saw a girl looking down at him in concern, a very pretty girl, he couldn't help noticing. He tried to smile at her, to brighten up that solemn face, but before he could wrestle the necessary muscles into submission, he blacked out.

It seemed like an eternity of darkness passed before he opened his eyes to see the girl sitting at the side of the bed. He tried to reach out to touch her, but his limbs felt like they were cased in concrete. Seeing his efforts, the girl reached over and gently pushed his head back against the pillow.

'I'm Guinevere,' she said.

'Where am I?' he asked, and was dismayed when she giggled at him. 'What is it?' he added, roughly.

'What a line!' she exclaimed. Then she frowned. 'I suppose it's fair enough, because you're not to know where you are, but I couldn't help laughing. I'm like that, impulsive. As I said, my name's Guinevere. My father is Lord Cameliard. And you're the famous king, Arthur! Aren't you young!'

Arthur lay back, wearied by this flow of words though strangely soothed by it. He felt incredibly warm and comfortable as he gazed up at the laughing girl.

‘How did I get here?’ he managed.

‘You were brought here after the battle at Carohaise,’ Guinevere said. ‘That was horrible. They were attacking for day after day, air-raids. Then their soldiers... Carohaise is a mess. Couldn’t you have got here sooner?’ She giggled some more. ‘You just don’t think, you heroes!’

‘Hero?’ Arthur was non-plussed. ‘But what happened to me in the battle? I remember pain...’

‘You were shot,’ said a familiar voice from behind him. Arthur rolled over, wincing at the pain, to see Merlin standing in the entrance to the room.

‘I told you to be careful in battle,’ the old man added. ‘The medics had a devil of a job removing the bullet.’ Arthur lifted up the bedclothes and saw a large circular scar in his side. Merlin looked at Guinevere. ‘Perhaps you could tell your father that Arthur is awake.’

Arthur heard Guinevere rise. The touch of lips on his cheek startled him and he looked round to see Guinevere crossing the room with a dancing step. She gave Arthur one last coquettish glance, followed by a little wave, and went.

Merlin followed Arthur’s gaze disapprovingly. ‘Beware of that one, Arthur,’ he said. ‘She’ll bring only trouble.’

‘What?’ Arthur demanded. ‘She’s really nice.’ Feeling weak again, he lay back. ‘Did I get myself shot, Merlin?’ he asked in a more subdued voice.

Merlin came to his side. ‘Yes you did,’ he said. ‘You take foolish risks, Arthur. Remember, you are responsible for your subjects, not just yourself. Everything would fall apart if you were killed.’

Arthur nodded repentantly. ‘I’ll be more sensible in future, Merlin, honest,’ he said. ‘But did we win? Did we defeat Rience?’

Merlin sat down beside the bed. ‘You defeated him,’ he said. ‘Rience fled. We think he’s gone to take shelter with his masters, the insurgent lords. Not that it’ll do him much good.’

‘What’s the news from the north?’ Arthur asked. ‘And how did you get on in Bedegraine?’

‘The dig has produced enough treasure trove to part-finance your next campaign,’ Merlin said. ‘As for the north, the latest news tells us that the heathen uprising has spread to the south east. Lot’s forces seem unable to cope. It looks like you’ll soon have to fight the heathen.’

Arthur lifted a limp hand. ‘I can’t very well fight in this state, can I?’ he said bitterly, as a large figure bustled into the room.

‘How is he, Merlin?’ Leodegrance boomed. ‘My daughter says his majesty’s awake again!’

‘Lord Cameliard,’ said Merlin, formally. ‘His majesty is out of his coma. Your daughter nursed him well.’

Leodegrance beamed down at Arthur. ‘Your majesty!’ he exclaimed, taking his hand. ‘How can I ever thank you? Without your timely intervention I think it might well have been the end of Cameliard. In future, I will provide you with all the troops I can against your enemies, whether they are insurgents or heathens. I hear you sent the Lord Protector packing?’

Arthur nodded weakly, feeling bowled over by Leodegrance’s larger-than-life persona. ‘But Merlin tells me the heathens are rising throughout Britain.’

Leodegrance grinned. ‘Don’t worry, your majesty,’ he said. ‘We’ll soon have

them running back home to Germany. Talking of overseas guests, more welcome ones this time, a couple of chaps from Brittany have been anxious to see you.'

'Ban and Bors?' Arthur asked. 'They're welcome. But maybe later. I'm feeling so tired.'

Guinevere appeared at the door. 'I told you, dad,' she scolded Leodegrance, 'he's not ready for visitors. He needs tender loving care.'

Leodegrance grinned again. 'Come on, Merlin,' he said. 'Best leave his majesty to be nursed by my daughter. Yes, Ban and Bors would like to see you as soon as is convenient,' he went on, as he led Merlin towards the door. 'Seems their lands are under attack, and they want to go and defend them.'

Guinevere pointedly closed the door and slipped over to Arthur's side. 'Now, you don't want to be worrying about that,' she said, putting a cool hand on his brow. Arthur sank back, relaxing as she rearranged his pillows. He really would have to speak to Ban and Bors. Of course they could go, if Claudas was attacking again. Did the war never end?

He sank into dreamless sleep.

The following day he was sufficiently recovered to give an audience to his Breton allies. Propped up in his bed with Guinevere at his side, he smiled weakly at Ban and Bors.

'My apologies for keeping you waiting,' he said. 'My idiot fault, letting myself be shot.'

'Nonsense, your majesty,' Ban protested. 'Fortunes of war. However, my brother and I are both in a bit of a rush to get home. Much as we've appreciated your hospitality, and that of your father, my lady' – he added, with a charming smile at Guinevere – 'but we have word of clashes between Claudas and our people. We Bretons have no wish to take French leave, but I must ask...'

'You want to go, of course,' Arthur interrupted. 'By all means. As soon as I'm better, I'll send men to aid you.'

Ban smiled and exchanged glances with Bors. 'I appreciate the offer, your majesty,' Ban went on, 'but your country needs all the men it can get to defend it. These are troubled times for us all. With your leave...?'

'As I've said, you can go as soon as you wish,' Arthur replied. 'You're right; I have my own house to put in order. But as soon as I can, I'll send troops to aid you. I hope I can lead them myself. Without you, this war might have turned out very differently.'

Ban looked sombrely down at him. 'I very much fear the war is not yet over,' he said. With that, he and his taciturn brother left the room.

'What a lovely man,' Guinevere murmured, her eyes shining.

Arthur shot her a sharp look, and she broke into a smile. 'But of course, he can't compare with your majesty,' she said teasingly. Arthur flushed. When he had regained his composure, he said:

'I'm afraid I'll have at least one thing in common with Ban,' he said.

Guinevere looked him up and down. 'What's that, your majesty?'

'I can't stay here,' he said. 'Ban's right. The war's not over. Pretty soon I'll have to prepare to fight whoever it is survives – Lot's insurgents or the heathen.'

Guinevere leant over him. 'If you think I've nursed you back to health so you can throw your life away,' she began hotly.

Arthur shook his head. 'I have to fight,' he said. 'But I promised Merlin that I'd take no more unnecessary risks. I realise how important I am to my people.'

'I wonder if you realise how important you are to me,' Guinevere said softly. Arthur's heart boomed loudly in his ears as Guinevere leant closer to kiss him. Rank had its privileges, and it seemed that being a teenage king had its own perks.

The kiss was soft, warm, and prolonged, and by the end of it, Arthur was flushed, but not with illness or indeed embarrassment. Guinevere broke away first, and gazed into Arthur's eyes.

'You have to go, I realise,' she said. 'But don't you forget about me, King Arthur. I'll be waiting for you.'

Briefly, Arthur remembered Lisanor, and he felt guilty, like a child who had done wrong. But now he was a man; a conqueror. His enemies ran from him, women fell into his arms. He leaned forward to steal another kiss when the door opened and Merlin walked in.

The two young people drew apart, but Merlin seemed to have noticed nothing.

'I'm glad to see you're looking better,' the old man said. He gave Guinevere a cold look. 'I think you've spent enough time lounging around in bed,' he added.

'You've got a job to do. As soon as you're dressed, I want you down in the conference hall with the others. There's much to discuss. Now Ban and Bors have withdrawn, we need to ensure that we have as much support as we can muster.'

Before Arthur could object, he turned on his heel and stalked out. Guinevere looked after him, troubled.

'I don't think he likes me,' she said.

In the conference hall, Arthur found Leodegrance, Bedivere, Kay, and Merlin. Kay rushed over to shake his hand and guide him to a chair on one side of the large circular conference table. Bedivere grinned as Arthur sat down.

'Good to see you, your majesty,' he said. 'You've got your first war wound.'

'Our young king is a fighter,' Leodegrance laughed. 'Good thing too. That's what the country needs right now. The troubles are back with a vengeance, it seems, as bad as they were in the old days, when last we had a king.' He indicated the huge table round which they were sitting; it had many more places, room enough for twenty four people. 'Back in Uther's time, this was where he planned all his strategies. He gave knighthoods to all his circle of advisors; Lot was one of them, Uriens too. And I, myself, young idiot that I was back then, I was another. Sir Leodegrance KRT – Knight of the Round Table.'

'Thanks, Leodegrance,' Merlin said. 'I too remember that time. We must hope that our new king proves less rash than his predecessor. But you're right. Heathen militants are at large in the east and north. Lord Lothian seems unable to hold them. I had hoped that the two problems might cancel each other out, but alas no.'

'I suggest we gather our forces at a good position to attack the main concentrations of heathen militants,' said Arthur, who had been a little bored by the reminiscences of the two older men, although one thing had caught his attention.

'What you say about King Uther's Order of the Round Table gives me an idea. We need everyone on our side who can plan a campaign against the enemy together. All the best military minds, everyone with the largest forces. Then we can strike.'

'We're too close to the action here,' Kay pointed out. 'The heathens are massing on the other side of the Pennines. We need to be somewhere safe, until we've gathered our forces.'

'Might I suggest South Wales?' Merlin said. 'Somewhere near Cardiff. Caerleon springs to mind.'

‘Good idea,’ said Arthur, acknowledging Kay and Merlin. ‘Send messages to all our supporters to gather in Caerleon. We’ll use that as our base to attack the heathens in the south east, then move our way up country.’

A month later, and Arthur was surveying his assembled troops on the parade ground outside Caerleon when a message came.

‘Refugees, your majesty,’ said the messenger urgently. ‘They want to speak to you personally.’

Arthur looked irritably at the man. ‘My heart goes out to them,’ he said, ‘but I can’t meet and greet every refugee to come here.’ A camp had sprung up outside the town, refugees from the fighting in the north and east, flocking together for the protection his growing army offered.

‘Her ladyship was very insistent,’ the messenger replied apologetically.

‘Her ladyship?’ Arthur said, his curiosity aroused. Not that he’d rate a refugee more highly because she was of aristocratic birth; he wasn’t a snob. But maybe this was the Lady Lisanor. He’d heard nothing from her since leaving Bedegraine.

‘It is Lady Lothian,’ the aide replied. ‘And with her are her sons.’

Arthur stared out across the ranks of troops in bewilderment. ‘You mean Lord Lothian’s wife has come here? She wants me to take her under my wing?’

‘It’s a trick,’ said Kay dismissively, from his side. Arthur shook his head doubtfully.

‘I wish Merlin were here,’ he said. ‘He’d know what to do. But he’s gone wandering again.’ He turned to the aide. ‘Very well, I’ll go and see her. Can’t Lord Lothian look after his own? What’s her name, anyway?’

‘Morgaine,’ Kay said. ‘You know, she’s Uther’s step-daughter. Lord Lothian married her when she was still in her teens.’

Arthur considered this. He’d been expecting Lot’s wife to be as old as the lord himself, but maybe she was younger. Maybe she was pretty. Then again, if she was Uther’s stepdaughter, maybe she had a better claim to the throne than he did. That was disturbing.

He left Kay to inspect the troops and went to find her.

‘Lady Lothian?’ Arthur asked, looking at the tall, imperious woman who stood in the middle of the conference hall. The three youths who were lounging in chairs against the wall leapt up as Arthur entered, and looked at him with a mixture of fear and distrust. Arthur noticed in particular one lad about his age, with Lot’s flaming red hair, although his face was more open. But his attention returned immediately to the woman when she spoke.

‘I am Morgaine, Lady Lothian, your majesty,’ she acknowledged with a curtsy. She indicated the three boys. ‘May I present my sons, Gawain, Agravaine and Gaheris.’

‘Welcome to Caerleon,’ Arthur said, a little wryly. ‘I hear that the Borders are in chaos. The heathen are up in arms. It’s the same in Yorkshire and the South East.’

‘They are reinforced by other heathen from the Continent,’ Morgaine replied. Her aristocratic drawl was throaty, vibrant. Although she was old, Arthur guessed about thirty, she was still good-looking in a powerful way, and her smart business suit

enhanced her trim body. She wore what he realised must be expensive scent.

‘I’m sorry to see that your husband couldn’t make it,’ Arthur added. ‘Has he remained to fight?’

Morgaine inclined her head. ‘He sent us to you because he thought we would be safe here,’ she added, looking at Arthur defiantly. ‘You may be his enemy, but he hopes you will be a gentleman.’

Arthur looked askance at her and her sons. ‘Of course,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Your husband and I have our differences, but I’m sure he’ll see sense soon enough. Meanwhile, you can be sure that your stay here will be as comfortable as it can be under the circumstances. I assure you I will not take advantage of your presence.’ He had meant that he wouldn’t use them as hostages, but the smouldering look Morgaine gave him suggested she had other ideas.

‘I am sure I will be perfectly comfortable with camp life,’ she said. ‘When I was as young as Gawain here, I became accustomed to it, with my stepfather.’

Arthur nodded. ‘Of course, your stepfather was King Uther,’ he said. ‘You must have been with him on campaign.’ A thought struck him. Was her claim to the throne better than his? She wasn’t of the royal blood, but the last king had married Morgaine’s mother. Surely that was a better claim than Arthur’s own. He caressed the pommel of the sword from the stone, which he wore as a dress sword. Morgaine noticed, and her eyes met Arthur’s.

Over the following weeks, Morgaine and her sons remained with Arthur as he prepared for the war against the heathen. He found that he got on well with the eldest boy, Gawain, despite some initial coldness. After all, Arthur had been at war with Gawain’s father until recently. But once they got past this, Arthur saw that it was part of the loyalty that made up so large a part of Gawain’s character. Gawain’s brothers were less charming, being very much smaller editions of their father, brutal and bullying – not that they tried anything on Arthur on the few occasions he was with them.

Their mother, on the other hand, spent a great deal of time with Arthur, as much as he could spare her. She seemed fascinated by him, and he in his turn found this sophisticated older woman particularly attractive. Her personality was stronger than Lisanor, she was less immature, less innocent, than Guinevere. They went for walks and ate together. Arthur became aware that people were talking, but he didn’t care.

It was only a matter of time before they spent the night together.

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Brigands of the Moon

XI

I turned from the deck. Miko was near me! So he had dared show himself here among us! But I realized he could not be aware we knew he was the murderer. George Prince had been asleep, had not seen Miko with Anita. Miko, with impulsive rage had shot the girl and escaped. No doubt now he was cursing himself for having done it. And he could very well assume that Anita had died without regaining consciousness to tell who had killed her.

He gazed at me now. I thought for an instant he was coming over to talk with me.

Though he probably considered he was not suspected of the murder of Anita, he realized, of course, that his attack on me was known. He must have wondered what action would be taken.

But he did not approach me. He moved away and went inside. Moa had been near him; and as though by prearrangement with him she now accosted me.

"I want to speak to you, Set Haljan."

"Go ahead."

I felt an instinctive aversion to this Martian girl. Yet she was not unattractive. Over six feet tall, straight and slim. Sleek blond hair. Rather a handsome face; not gray, like the burly Miko, but pink and white; stern lipped, but feminine, too. She was smiling gravely now. Her blue eyes regarded me keenly. She said gently:

"A sad occurrence, Gregg Haljan. And mysterious. I would not question you—"

"Is that all you have to say?" I demanded.

"No. You are a handsome man, Gregg—attractive to women—to any Martian woman."

She said it impulsively. Admiration for me was on her face, in her eyes—a man cannot miss it.

"Thank you."

"I mean, I would be your friend. My brother Miko is so sorry about what happened between you and him this morning. He only wanted to talk to you, and he came to your cubby door—"

"With a torch to break its seal," I interjected.

She waved that away. "He was afraid you would not admit him. He told you he would not harm you."

"And so he struck me with one of your Martian paralyzing rays!"

"He is sorry...."

She seemed gauging me, trying, no doubt, to find out what reprisal would be taken against her brother. I felt sure that Moa was as active as a man in any plan that was under way to capture the Grantline treasure. Miko, with his ungovernable temper, was doing things that put their plans in jeopardy.

I demanded, "What did your brother want to talk to me about?"

"Me," she said surprisingly. "I sent him. A Martian girl goes after what she wants. Did

you know that?"

She swung on her heel and left me. I puzzled over it. Was that why Miko struck me down and was carrying me off? I did not think so. I could not believe that all these incidents were so unrelated to what I knew was the main undercurrent. They wanted me, had tried to capture me for something else.

Dr. Frank found me mooning alone. "Go to bed, Gregg. You look awful."

"I don't want to go to bed."

"Where's Snap?"

"I don't know. He was here a little while ago." I had not seen him since the burial of Anita.

"The Captain wants him," he said.

Within an hour the morning siren would arouse the passengers. I was seated in a secluded corner of the deck, when George Prince came along. He went past me, a slight, somber, dark-robed figure. He had on high, thick boots. A hood was over his head, but as he saw me he pushed it back and dropped down beside me.

For a moment he did not speak. His face showed pallid in the dim starlight.

"She said you loved her." His soft voice was throaty with emotion.

"Yes." I said it almost against my will. There seemed a bond springing between this bereaved brother and me. He added, so softly I could barely hear him: "That makes you, I think, almost my friend. And you thought you were my enemy."

I held my answer. An incautious tongue running under emotion is a dangerous thing. And I was sure of nothing.

He went on, "Almost my friend. Because—we both loved her, and she loved us both." He was hardly more than whispering. "And there is aboard one whom we both hate."

"Miko!" It burst from me.

"Yes. But do not say it."

Another silence fell between us. He brushed back the black curls from his forehead. "Have you an eavesdropping microphone, Haljan?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

"I was thinking..." He leaned closer. "If, in half an hour, you could use it upon Miko's cabin—I would rather tell you than anyone else. The cabin will be insulated, but I shall find a way of cutting off that insulation so that you can hear."

So George Prince had turned with us. The shock of his sister's death—himself allied with her murderer—had been too much for him. He was with us!

Yet his help must be given secretly. Miko would kill him instantly if it became known. He had been watchful of the deck. He stood up now.

"I think that is all."

As he turned away, I murmured, "But I do thank you...."

The name Set Miko glowed upon the door. It was in a transverse corridor similar to A22. The corridor was forward of the lounge: it opened off the small circular library.

The library was unoccupied and unlighted, dim with only the reflected lights from the nearby passages. I crouched behind a cylinder case. The door of Miko's room was in sight.

I waited perhaps five minutes. No one entered. Then I realized that doubtless the conspirators were already there. I set my tiny eavesdropper on the library floor beside me; connected its little battery; focused its projector. Was Miko's room insulated? I could not tell. There was a small ventilating grid above the door. Across its opening, if the room was insulated, a blue sheen of radiance would be showing. And there would be a faint hum. But from this distance I could not see or hear such details, and I was afraid to approach closer. Once in the transverse corridor, I would have no place to hide, no way of escape. If anyone approached Miko's door, I would be trapped.

I threw the current into my apparatus. I prayed, if it met interference, that the slight sound would pass unnoticed. George Prince had said that he would make opportunity to disconnect the room's insulation. He had evidently done so. I picked up the interior sounds at once; my headphone vibrated with them. And with trembling fingers on the little dial between my knees as I crouched in the darkness behind the cylinder case, I synchronized.

"Johnson is a fool." It was Miko's voice. "We must have the passwords."

"He got them from the radio room." A man's voice: I puzzled over it at first, then recognized it. Rance Rankin.

Miko said, "He is a fool. Walking around this ship as though with letters blazoned on his forehead, 'Watch me.... I need watching.' Hah! No wonder they apprehended him!"

Rankin's voice said: "He would have turned the papers over to us. I would not blame him too much. What harm—"

"Oh, I'll release him," Miko declared. "What harm? That braying ass did us plenty of harm. He has lost the passwords. Better he had left them in the radio room."

Moa was in the room. Her voice said, "We've got to have them. The Planetara, upon

such an important voyage as this, might be watched."

"No doubt it is," Rankin said quietly. "We ought to have the passwords. When we are in control of this ship...."

It sent a shiver through me. Were they planning to try and seize the Planetara? Now? It seemed so.

"Johnson undoubtedly memorized them," Moa was saying. "When we get him out—"

"Hahn is to do that, at the signal." Miko added, "George could do it better, perhaps."

And then I heard George Prince for the first time, "I'll try."

"No need," Miko said unexpectedly.

I could not see what had happened. A look, perhaps, which Prince could not avoid giving this man he had come to hate. Miko doubtless saw it, and the Martian's hot anger leaped.

Rankin said hurriedly, "Stop that!"

And Moa, "Let him alone, you fool! Sit down!"

I could hear the sound of a scuffle. A blow—a cry, half suppressed, from George Prince.

Then Miko: "I will not hurt him. Craven coward! Look at him! Hating me—frightened!"

I could fancy George Prince sitting there with murder in his heart, and Miko taunting him:

"Hates me now, because I shot his sister!"

Moa: "Hush!"

"I will not! Why should I not say it? I will tell you something else, George Prince. It was not Anita I shot at, but you! I meant nothing for her but love. If you had not interfered—"

This was different from what we had figured. George Prince had come in from his own room, had tried to rescue his sister, and in the scuffle, Anita had taken the shot instead of George.

"I did not even know I had hit her," Miko was saying. "Not until I heard she was dead." He added sardonically, "I hoped it was you I had hit, George. And I will tell you this: you hate me no more than I hate you. If it were not for your knowledge of ores—"

"Is this to be a personal wrangle?" Rankin interrupted. "I thought we were here to plan—"

"It is planned," Miko said shortly. "I give orders, I do not plan. I am waiting now for the moment—" He checked himself.

Moa said, "Does Rankin understand that no harm is to come to Gregg Haljan?"

"Yes," Rankin said. "And Dean. We need them, of course. But you cannot make Dean send messages if he refuses, nor make Haljan navigate."

"I know enough to check on them," Miko said grimly. "They will not fool me. And they will obey me, have no fear. A little touch of sulphuric—" His laugh was gruesome. "It makes the most stubborn, very willing."

"I wish," said Moa, "we had Haljan safely hidden. If he is hurt—killed—"

So that was why Miko had tried to capture me? To keep me safe so that I might navigate the ship.

It occurred to me that I should get Carter at once. A plot to seize the Planetara—but when?

I froze with startled horror.

The diaphragms at my ears rang with Miko's words: "I have set the time for now—two minutes—"

It seemed to startle Rankin and George Prince as much as it did me. Both exclaimed: "No!"

"No? Why not? Everyone is at his post!"

Prince repeated, "No!"

And Rankin, "But can we trust them? The stewards—the crew?"

"Eight of them are our own men! You didn't know that, Rankin? They've been aboard the Planetara for several voyages. Oh, this is no quickly planned affair, even though we let you in on it so recently. You and Johnson.... By God!"

There was a commotion in the stateroom. I crouched, tense. Miko had discovered that his insulation had been cut off! He had evidently leaped to his feet. I heard a chair overturn. And the Martian's roar: "It's off! Did you do that, Prince? By God, if I thought—"

My apparatus went suddenly dead as Miko flung on his insulation. I lost my wits in the confusion: I should have instantly taken off my vibrations. There was interference: it showed in the dark space of the ventilator grid over Miko's doorway, a snapping in

the air, there—a swirl of sparks.

I heard with my unaided ears Miko's roar over his insulation: "By God, they're listening!"

The scream of hand sirens sounded from his stateroom. It rang over the ship. His signal! I heard it answered from some distant point. And then a shot: a commotion in the lower corridors....

The attack upon the Planetara had begun!

I was on my feet. The shouts of startled passengers sounded, a turmoil beginning everywhere.

I stood momentarily transfixed. The door of Miko's stateroom burst open. He stood there, with Rankin, Moa and George Prince crowding him.

He saw me. "You, Gregg Haljan!"

He came leaping at me.

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The Hollow Hills

Part Three

‘Here we are,’ said Nick, grinning with relief.

The whole tunnel system was a lot larger than he remembered it - which was odd, since he’d been much smaller when he was last here - but they’d found the interpretation centre easily enough. He raised his flickering lighter to illuminate the portacabin that lay against the left hand wall and tried the door.

‘Locked,’ he said and slipped a hand into one of the long shoplifter’s pockets in his jacket. Producing a set of lock-picks, he glanced at the lock, then chose one and set to.

‘Come on,’ said Hamish impatiently, a few minutes later. ‘Fuckin’ James Bond would have been in there in no time!’

Nick glanced up, pushing his dreadlocks out of his face.

‘James Bond isn’t real,’ he snapped. ‘Picking locks takes time. It’s not as easy as they make out.’

‘Och, for fuck’s sake,’ said Hamish. He pushed Nick aside and shoulder barged the door.

It fell inwards and a rotting skeleton leapt out at him.

Hamish screamed like a schoolgirl and turned to run. Nick grabbed him and held him fast. 'What's up with the big bad Scot?' he sneered gleefully and pointed.

Hamish followed everyone else's gaze. The putrid corpse lay half in, half out of the portacabin, unmoving.

'Thought it was a fuckin' zombie or something, didnae I?' Hamish said.

Eloise crouched down beside the corpse.

'Looks fairly fresh,' she said. 'Comparatively.' The corpse was rather less skeletal than it had seemed on first impressions, but it was hideously thin and wasted, so much so that its dead skin hung from the bones like parchment. Eloise glanced up. She gasped.

'What is it?' asked Osborne, moving forward. In the flickering light of Nick's light, he caught a glimpse of the inside of the portacabin. 'Shit,' he said.

He stepped over the wasted corpse in the doorway and felt along the wall for a light switch. Finding one, he flicked it. Somewhat to his surprise, it was working.

It illuminated a ghastly scene.

Scattered across the room, lying in heaps at the bottom of the maps and photos that lined the walls, were five or six other corpses, all in a similar state of decay. On a table lay seven miner-style hard hats with torches attached to them.

The others crowded through the door, Osborne and Eloise helping the wounded policeman over the first corpse. Roberts gazed weakly around.

'What happened here?' he murmured.

'This must be one of the parties that went missing,' said Eloise. 'They must have retreated back to the interpretation centre... and then starved to death?'

Nick shuddered.

'But people don't just starve to death in England...' he said.

'This is Wales, boy,' said Roberts with mock-reproof.

The crustie shrugged. 'Even in Wales,' he said. 'People don't starve to death. Why didn't they try to find help? What stopped them from returning to the surface?'

'Maybe this will explain,' said Eloise. With her usual morbid curiosity, she had been rooting around the rotting corpses. She turned to them, holding a notebook in her hand. 'This was with one of the bodies,' she added. She took it over to the table where Roberts was sitting, painfully hugging his wounded torso. 'It reads like a diary,' she reported after a minute. 'I don't know what the bloke who wrote it was called, but he refers to the rest of his party by their Christian names, except one. Seems he was here with his family and they had one guide. Listen to this;

...and we retreated to the interpretation centre, but Jimmy said

he can still hear them coming.

They're out there in the dark, he said, ready to do what they did to Rachel, to us. But we're trapped now. We cannot get out.

We've run out of food now.

Just now, I glanced out of the window, and I saw the eyes again, hundreds of them, like a sea of red specks covering the cavern floor. More have come from the caves. We are trapped. We cannot get out.

We cannot get out...

'These people died here, starved to death... because they were terrified by something outside. Something they'd encountered in the tunnels!'

'But what?' asked Hamish.

'I think we can guess that,' said Osborne grimly. 'I think...'

'Wait a minute...' said Eloise urgently. She held up a hand for silence and listened. 'Osborne, turn the light out.'

'What?' demanded the biker, bewildered.

'Just do it,' she hissed.

Shrugging, Osborne complied.

Pitch dark. Except... from outside came a faint red glow. Eloise stepped across the dark room and went to the window.

'Look!' she screamed.

The cavern beyond was alive with red sparks that hung like fireflies in the gloom.

Osborne snapped on the light.

'What? What?' he demanded.

'There's something out there!' Eloise said, her face white. 'It's the Tylwyth Teg! They've followed us here - and we're trapped!'

'We gotta find a way out,' said Hamish wildly. 'What we gaun to do?'

'There's no way out,' said Roberts despondently. 'This must be what happened to these tourists! The Little People have come up from the bowels of the earth to wreak their revenge on the folk who robbed them of their lands!'

'Aye,' said Hamish. He took a breath. 'But there's one important difference between them and us. We're big.' He took out his spear. 'Freedom!' he screamed. He kicked

down the door and rushed outside.

‘Hamish!’ wailed Eloise. ‘There’s too many of them! They’ll kill him!’

‘We’d better help him!’ shouted Osborne. He took a bike chain from his waist from under his jacket and followed Hamish into the cavern.

Nick and Eloise exchanged glances, then turned to Roberts.

‘Come on,’ Nick said. ‘Safety in numbers. Without our big bold warriors to defend us, we’re fucked.’ He took something out of his pocket. ‘And I’ve got this,’ he added. He led them into the darkness.

The moment they reached the cabin door, things came rushing up through the darkness. While they were still in the light of the interpretation centre, they were safe - the Little People clearly feared the light. But Hamish and Osborne were somewhere up ahead, lumbering shapes in the darkness surrounded by swarms of red flickers. Shouts and cries from the Scot and the Yorkshireman broke the silence of the cavern, punctuated by brutal noises.

‘Quick!’ Nick shouted. He grabbed something from the table and with uncharacteristic bravery, led them at a run.

Something in the darkness clawed at Eloise and she fell back with a scream. But then Nick was there. There was a flash and a sizzle of electricity and something fell back, gasping. Eloise caught a horrific blue-lit glimpse of something small, manlike, with strangely mottled reptilian skin, but then the darkness returned.

The things were all around them, their eyes glinting in the darkness. But when they came too close, a crackle came from Nick’s direction and the circle of eyes moved back. Soon Eloise and her companions reached Hamish and Osborne.

‘Eloise, is that you?’ Hamish demanded through gritted teeth.

‘We decided we’d follow you,’ she said. ‘How are you doing?’

‘These things just won’t show themselves,’ Osborne cried in frustration. ‘Ah, take that, you bastard!’ There was a lash and a crunch from the darkness nearby.

‘And when they wound you, it’s not like a normal wound,’ added Hamish painfully. ‘It burns.’

‘I think we should head for the caves,’ said Roberts.

‘Can you make it?’ Eloise asked. The policeman muttered a weak affirmative. ‘Well, come on then!’ she shouted. They began to run.

Soon they reached the edge of the cavern. ‘You know what we could do with in this situation?’ said Eloise.

‘What?’ asked Nick.

‘We should have picked up those helmets in the portacabin,’ she said.

‘What, like this?’ Nick replied. A light flashed on and they all saw that he was

wearing a helmet with a lamp on it.

‘Watch out!’ shouted Osborne, that instant. Nick swung round and the beam of light from his helmet caught a running figure, like a deer in the headlights. The thing screeched with agony - the only sound they ever heard from their pursuers - and crumpled to the floor.

Grinning, Nick swung his head from side to side, sweeping the cavern with the light from his miner’s lamp. The troglodytes scuttled into the safety of the darkness.

‘We’ve scared them off!’ shouted Hamish triumphantly.

‘I scared them off,’ Nick corrected, turning and transfixing him with the torchlight.

‘You’ve been doing a lot of fighting for once,’ said Eloise. ‘What was that thing you got the Little People with?’

Nick produced a camera flashgun. Where the flash would have been there was a long metal coil.

‘Hand-made anti-mugging device,’ he said with a grin. ‘It sends this almighty electric shock through the coil and electrocutes any fucker who comes near me. I made it when we were in Westchester.’

‘A fuckin’ woman’s weapon,’ sneered Hamish, contemptuously. Nick turned round.

‘Yeah?’ he demanded. ‘You think so?’ He menaced the Scot with his gadget.

‘Alright, kids, stop that,’ said Roberts. He stepped forwards into the light and turned Nick away. ‘Now, I think we should...’ He choked off his final words as something whipped through the air and caught him in the side.

He toppled to the floor.

Nick glanced down and the light shone on a man with an arrow jutting from his torso.

‘Shit!’ said Osborne. ‘They’ve got bows and arrows! Someone grab Roberts. Now run!’

As they sped for the archway to the caves, the air filled with a humming like a swarm of angry bees and a shower of stone-tipped arrows plunged down on them. Nick glanced back briefly to reveal the distant shapes of about twenty stunted archers lined across the cave floor. Then he turned and led them from the cavern.

They rushed through the caves beyond, Hamish and Eloise holding Roberts between them. Eloise glanced around her as she ran; the brief flashes of Nick’s torch lit up a chaotic series of fairyland scenes of stalactites and stalagmites and clear, crystal pools that reflected them like elfin citadels.

‘Which way?’ Eloise demanded of Roberts. The wounded policeman glanced around.

‘There!’ he bubbled, pointing towards an archway between two stalactite-stalagmite pillars. ‘It leads direct to the shaft.’

‘Nick!’ Eloise called. ‘That way!’

They hurried across the cavern. As they did so, there was a hum of tiny bows. Stone-tipped arrows pitched down out of the dark.

Eloise was panting with relief when she reached the arch unwounded. She turned back to see her companions thundering up behind her, arrows whistling around them.

‘Hurry!’ Hamish shouted. Nick and Osborne were bringing up the rear. Nick glanced back and the lighthouse flash of his lantern briefly illuminated their pursuers.

Hamish whipped out a knife from his sock and sent it spinning towards the enigmatic figures. There was a wet thud from the dark mass and something toppled to the cavern floor. Then another flight of arrows came winging towards them.

‘Down here!’ shouted Eloise, dragging Roberts and Hamish after her. Osborne and Nick came running down the passage after them. ‘Through this?’ Eloise asked, indicating an archway at the other end of the passage. Weakly, Roberts nodded.

‘Just across the chasm, then up a chimney in the rock, then we’re near the exit,’ he gasped.

The Little People were still audible behind them.

‘Come on!’ yelled Nick. He led them at a run through the far arch -

and stopped short.

Beyond them, a cavern opened out on all sides - fell away into a yawning, gut-wrenching, bottomless pit beneath them. A slim bridge spanned the thirty-foot gap. On the far side, Nick’s torch showed a steeply inclining chimney up the rock face beyond. Above them, where the chimney led to, the shaft angled to the right and the top was out of sight.

Eloise turned to Hamish and Osborne.

‘You’re the big brave heroes,’ she said. ‘You’ll have to keep the Little People at bay while Nick and me get Roberts across the chasm. Otherwise we’ll never make it.’

‘Aye,’ said Osborne. ‘Easy!’

Hamish swished his spear around. ‘Dinna fash, Eloise,’ he growled. ‘We’ll do it.’ He looked up in surprise as Osborne clasped his hand.

‘Together,’ the biker vowed. Hamish glared at him for a second, then gave him a curt nod.

‘Aye,’ he replied. ‘Together!’

Eloise turned to Nick. ‘Come on, give me a hand.’

The crustie took hold of the policeman, supporting him on the other side from Eloise. Slowly and tentatively, they stepped out onto the bridge, Eloise leading, Nick bringing up the rear.

The noise of fighting from behind them failed to seize their attention as they made their nervous way. Eloise kept her gaze on the far wall, illuminated by Nick's torch and tried not to wonder how deep the abyss went.

Strangely, it seemed as if a distant light was glimmering below them. As she inched forward, she wondered if it wasn't magma - it seemed unlikely that the shaft would go far enough, but there was no other explanation for a light being below them, was there?

But it wasn't red, like magma would be - it was eerily like the light of a summer's day. Some freak effect, Eloise assumed and tried to ignore it, just as she turned a deaf ear to the desperate struggle audible behind her.

But then Hamish shouted, 'Eloise! We can't hold them!'

Eloise, unable to stop herself, turned. So did Nick and his beam flashed across the chamber wall, finally coming to rest on the ledge they had quit.

Osborne and Hamish stood at the centre of a seething mass of tiny figures, which were hacking and jabbing at them with bronze-tipped axe and spears. As Nick's light settled on them, they turned and glared angrily across the gap. Some dropped, but others turned as if to deal with this new attacker. Eloise distinctly saw one of the creatures, away from the battle, fling a spear directly towards the source of the light beam.

Nick saw it too. With lightning-quick reactions, he ducked and Eloise felt Roberts slump as Nick briefly let go of him. Then she felt a thud from the policeman's body, as if he had been hit and Roberts slumped over, suddenly a dead weight. Eloise overbalanced. She let go of the policeman and grabbed for the edge of the bridge.

To her horror, Roberts, unable to help himself, slipped straight over the edge. Heart beating overtime, Eloise tried to grab him and seized hold of his wrist.

Nick was lying at the edge of the bridge on the other side. His helmet had twisted round as he fell and although he was looking up at Eloise, the light shone straight down the chasm. Eloise's eyes were caught irresistibly by the beam and her gaze trailed it down into the depths.

Her eyes narrowed. She frowned. Then her eyes widened with shock.

'Oh my god!' she murmured. Her grip slackened.

The last any of them heard of Roberts was a final despairing wail as he disappeared into the abyss.

Eloise leapt up, her eyes wild. She sped across the bridge. It was as if she was running in her sleep, Nick thought. He expected her to slip over the edge at any moment. But she crossed it and reached the chimney leading up the shaft.

She began to scramble upwards and the darkness swallowed her up.

'What did she see...?' Nick said. He was about to glance down the shaft himself when he heard footsteps from behind him. He looked up to catch Hamish and Osborne in

his torch-beam.

‘Shine that somewhere else, fuckwit!’ Hamish growled, wincing. ‘And stop lounging around. We’re getting the fuck out!’ Behind him, Nick could see the horde of Little People advancing despite the torchlight.

For once, Nick was loath to disagree.

They finally caught up with Eloise at the top of the shaft. She was scrambling up ahead of them as they neared the lip and Hamish called out to her from below.

‘Eloise! Eloise!’

At last she stopped, panting, at the top.

‘Wha - what?’ she asked, peering down into the shaft. Nick reached her and sat down beside her. The cavern beyond was lit dimly by daylight, filtering in through an archway to their right - at last, the way out!

‘I don’t think those things will follow us here,’ Nick said, glancing round. ‘That shaft was pretty difficult for us to climb and as for them...’

‘Why did you drop Roberts?’ Hamish demanded, staring at Eloise.

‘Did I...?’ she said vacantly. ‘Oh no...’

‘Yeah, Eloise,’ said Nick. ‘What did you drop him for? I know I let go of him, but I had to dodge that fuckin’ spear. I thought you had hold of him...’

‘Quiet,’ Osborne commanded. He moved over to Eloise and said gently; ‘You saw something that scared you, didn’t you, Eloise?’ She looked blindly up at him, then nodded slowly. ‘What was it?’ Osborne persisted.

‘I...’ The words seemed to stick in her mouth. She tried again. ‘I grabbed Roberts as he went over, but then I looked down the shaft.’

‘What, did you get vertigo?’ asked Nick, more sympathetic now.

‘I suppose so,’ murmured Eloise.

‘Well, he was the fuckin’ polis anyway,’ Hamish snarled savagely. ‘Disnae matter that much.’

‘But that wasn’t what made me drop him,’ Eloise went on, ignoring the Scot. ‘I stared down into the abyss and realised I could see the bottom. If you went back to the bridge and looked down there, you probably could, too. But I wouldn’t advise it.’

‘Can’t be that deep, then,’ said Nick.

Eloise stared at him in reminiscent horror. ‘But it is,’ she murmured. ‘It is.’ She broke off, as if unable to continue. She tried again. ‘Do you remember back when we first met, at the travellers’ campsite? And you had that joint with you? And we shared it?’

‘Oh yeah.’ Nick laughed. ‘You’d never done weed before. You were well freaked

out!’

‘I lay on the grass outside the tent, staring up at the stars,’ said Eloise. ‘And there came a moment when the sky was no longer two-dimensional. It might have been an illusion, but suddenly I could see it 3-D. The larger stars were closer, the smaller stars further away... and I could see that the Milky Way was just one spiral arm of the Galaxy. I could see the whole Galaxy stretching out before me for millions of miles and I could see it three dimensionally. I looked out upon the universe and for the first time I saw space for what it is.

‘It was the same when I gazed into the abyss.’

‘Did the abyss gaze into you?’ asked Osborne. Eloise shook her head, irritated by the interruption.

‘There was light down there; that’s why I could see the bottom. I could see the colossal walls of the abyss plunging away beneath me, for miles and miles. Then they came to a stop and beyond them... it opened out. And thousands of miles below, I could see... I could see forests and oceans and deserts... like seeing the Earth from space. And between them and me hung a miniature sun, glowing like a white-hot furnace...’

She looked up, her eyes still wide. ‘I saw the inside of the planet!’ she gasped in horror. ‘And there was a whole world in there!’

‘I saw the Hollow Earth!’

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Carmilla

IX

The Doctor

As Carmilla would not hear of an attendant sleeping in her room, my father arranged that a servant should sleep outside her door, so that she would not attempt to make another such excursion without being arrested at her own door.

That night passed quietly; and next morning early, the doctor, whom my father had sent for without telling me a word about it, arrived to see me.

Madame accompanied me to the library; and there the grave little doctor, with white hair and spectacles, whom I mentioned before, was waiting to receive me.

I told him my story, and as I proceeded he grew graver and graver.

We were standing, he and I, in the recess of one of the windows, facing one another. When my statement was over, he leaned with his shoulders against the wall, and with his eyes fixed on me earnestly, with an interest in which was a dash of horror.

After a minute's reflection, he asked Madame if he could see my father.

He was sent for accordingly, and as he entered, smiling, he said:

"I dare say, doctor, you are going to tell me that I am an old fool for having brought you here; I hope I am."

But his smile faded into shadow as the doctor, with a very grave face, beckoned him to him.

He and the doctor talked for some time in the same recess where I had just conferred with the physician. It seemed an earnest and argumentative conversation. The room is very large, and I and Madame stood together, burning with curiosity, at the farther end. Not a word could we hear, however, for they spoke in a very low tone, and the deep recess of the window quite concealed the doctor from view, and very nearly my father, whose foot, arm, and shoulder only could we see; and the voices were, I suppose, all the less audible for the sort of closet which the thick wall and window formed.

After a time my father's face looked into the room; it was pale, thoughtful, and, I fancied, agitated.

"Laura, dear, come here for a moment. Madame, we shan't trouble you, the doctor says, at present."

Accordingly I approached, for the first time a little alarmed; for, although I felt very weak, I did not feel ill; and strength, one always fancies, is a thing that may be picked up when we please.

My father held out his hand to me, as I drew near, but he was looking at the doctor, and he said:

"It certainly is very odd; I don't understand it quite. Laura, come here, dear; now attend to Doctor Spielsberg, and recollect yourself."

"You mentioned a sensation like that of two needles piercing the skin, somewhere about your neck, on the night when you experienced your first horrible dream. Is there still any soreness?"

"None at all," I answered.

"Can you indicate with your finger about the point at which you think this occurred?"

"Very little below my throat--here," I answered.

I wore a morning dress, which covered the place I pointed to.

"Now you can satisfy yourself," said the doctor. "You won't mind your papa's lowering your dress a very little. It is necessary, to detect a symptom of the complaint

under which you have been suffering."

I acquiesced. It was only an inch or two below the edge of my collar.

"God bless me!--so it is," exclaimed my father, growing pale.

"You see it now with your own eyes," said the doctor, with a gloomy triumph.

"What is it?" I exclaimed, beginning to be frightened.

"Nothing, my dear young lady, but a small blue spot, about the size of the tip of your little finger; and now," he continued, turning to papa, "the question is what is best to be done?"

Is there any danger?" I urged, in great trepidation.

"I trust not, my dear," answered the doctor. "I don't see why you should not recover. I don't see why you should not begin immediately to get better. That is the point at which the sense of strangulation begins?"

"Yes," I answered.

"And--recollect as well as you can--the same point was a kind of center of that thrill which you described just now, like the current of a cold stream running against you?"

"It may have been; I think it was."

"Ay, you see?" he added, turning to my father. "Shall I say a word to Madame?"

"Certainly," said my father.

He called Madame to him, and said:

"I find my young friend here far from well. It won't be of any great consequence, I hope; but it will be necessary that some steps be taken, which I will explain by-and-by; but in the meantime, Madame, you will be so good as not to let Miss Laura be alone for one moment. That is the only direction I need give for the present. It is indispensable."

"We may rely upon your kindness, Madame, I know," added my father.

Madame satisfied him eagerly.

"And you, dear Laura, I know you will observe the doctor's direction."

"I shall have to ask your opinion upon another patient, whose symptoms slightly resemble those of my daughter, that have just been detailed to you--very much milder in degree, but I believe quite of the same sort. She is a young lady--our guest; but as you say you will be passing this way again this evening, you can't do better than take your supper here, and you can then see her. She does not come down till the

afternoon."

"I thank you," said the doctor. "I shall be with you, then, at about seven this evening."

And then they repeated their directions to me and to Madame, and with this parting charge my father left us, and walked out with the doctor; and I saw them pacing together up and down between the road and the moat, on the grassy platform in front of the castle, evidently absorbed in earnest conversation.

The doctor did not return. I saw him mount his horse there, take his leave, and ride away eastward through the forest.

Nearly at the same time I saw the man arrive from Dranfield with the letters, and dismount and hand the bag to my father.

In the meantime, Madame and I were both busy, lost in conjecture as to the reasons of the singular and earnest direction which the doctor and my father had concurred in imposing. Madame, as she afterwards told me, was afraid the doctor apprehended a sudden seizure, and that, without prompt assistance, I might either lose my life in a fit, or at least be seriously hurt.

The interpretation did not strike me; and I fancied, perhaps luckily for my nerves, that the arrangement was prescribed simply to secure a companion, who would prevent my taking too much exercise, or eating unripe fruit, or doing any of the fifty foolish things to which young people are supposed to be prone.

About half an hour after my father came in--he had a letter in his hand--and said:

"This letter had been delayed; it is from General Spielsdorf. He might have been here yesterday, he may not come till tomorrow or he may be here today."

He put the open letter into my hand; but he did not look pleased, as he used when a guest, especially one so much loved as the General, was coming.

On the contrary, he looked as if he wished him at the bottom of the Red Sea. There was plainly something on his mind which he did not choose to divulge.

"Papa, darling, will you tell me this?" said I, suddenly laying my hand on his arm, and looking, I am sure, imploringly in his face.

"Perhaps," he answered, smoothing my hair caressingly over my eyes.

"Does the doctor think me very ill?"

"No, dear; he thinks, if right steps are taken, you will be quite well again, at least, on the high road to a complete recovery, in a day or two," he answered, a little dryly. "I wish our good friend, the General, had chosen any other time; that is, I wish you had been perfectly well to receive him."

"But do tell me, papa," I insisted, "what does he think is the matter with me?"

"Nothing; you must not plague me with questions," he answered, with more irritation than I ever remember him to have displayed before; and seeing that I looked wounded, I suppose, he kissed me, and added, "You shall know all about it in a day or two; that is, all that I know. In the meantime you are not to trouble your head about it."

He turned and left the room, but came back before I had done wondering and puzzling over the oddity of all this; it was merely to say that he was going to Karnstein, and had ordered the carriage to be ready at twelve, and that I and Madame should accompany him; he was going to see the priest who lived near those picturesque grounds, upon business, and as Carmilla had never seen them, she could follow, when she came down, with Mademoiselle, who would bring materials for what you call a picnic, which might be laid for us in the ruined castle.

At twelve o'clock, accordingly, I was ready, and not long after, my father, Madame and I set out upon our projected drive.

Passing the drawbridge we turn to the right, and follow the road over the steep Gothic bridge, westward, to reach the deserted village and ruined castle of Karnstein.

No sylvan drive can be fancied prettier. The ground breaks into gentle hills and hollows, all clothed with beautiful wood, totally destitute of the comparative formality which artificial planting and early culture and pruning impart.

The irregularities of the ground often lead the road out of its course, and cause it to wind beautifully round the sides of broken hollows and the steeper sides of the hills, among varieties of ground almost inexhaustible.

Turning one of these points, we suddenly encountered our old friend, the General, riding towards us, attended by a mounted servant. His portmanteaus were following in a hired wagon, such as we term a cart.

The General dismounted as we pulled up, and, after the usual greetings, was easily persuaded to accept the vacant seat in the carriage and send his horse on with his servant to the schloss.

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