



This

Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Abandoned Motorway Junction" by Hywel Williams. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

Days of High Adventure: The Shadow Kingdom - Part Three by Robert E Howard - *Kull glimpses the truth behind the Valusian kingdom...* SWORD AND SORCERY

Conversations With Dead People - Part Three by C Priest Brumley - *Doctor Swanhurst experiences a mental intrusion...* HORROR

The Hettford Witch Hunt by James Rhodes - *Gary is tired but no one will let him sleep. Least of all the Christ Brigade...* OCCULT SIT-COM

State of Emergency - Part Twenty-Two by David Christopher - *Series Finale: What awaits Will at the end of the road?* SCIENCE FICTION

Choice Hill Farm by Paul Melhuish - *What lurks outside the farm?...* HORROR

Guinea Pig Gothic by John Campbell - *Why has Terry returned from the dead?* HORROR

Thieves From The Stars - Part Three by Rex Mundy - *Theodric enters the hollow hills...*
SWORD AND SORCERY

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampire: Part Thirty Nine ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest. *Before Twilight... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney...* GOTHIC HORROR

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 34) by Ray Cummings - *On the rocks near the ship, helmet lights of prowling brigands occasionally showed...* SPACE OPERA

EDITORIAL

This week we welcome two new writers; Paul Melhuish, author of horror space opera novel [Terminus](#), with the first part of his story *Choice Hill Farm*, and John Campbell, who has been published widely in many webzines, and whose book [Red Circus: A Dark Collection](#) is published by Wild Highlander Press. He brings us Part One of his vampire story *Guinea Pig Gothic*.

We also see a return of *The Hettford Witch Hunt*, in which Gary is faced by the horrors of the Christ Brigade. Meanwhile C Priest Brumley zombie horror tale *Conversations with Dead People* and David Christopher's post-apocalyptic political thriller *State of Emergency* both reach the end of the road. In *Days of High Adventure: The Shadow Kingdom*, King Kull learns the horrific truth, the hollow mockery that is Man's dominion over the empire of Valusia. In *Thieves from the Stars*, Theodric the Saxon encounters the dwellers in the hollow hills. And of course, our classic serials, *Varney the Vampyre* and *Brigands of the Moon*, continue unabated.

Gavin Chappell.

THE SHADOW KINGDOM by Robert E Howard

Chapter III: They That Walk The Night

The moon had not risen when Kull, hand to hilt, stepped to a window. The windows opened upon the great inner gardens of the royal palace, and the breezes of the night, bearing the scents of spice trees, blew the filmy curtains about. The king looked out.

The walks and groves were deserted; carefully trimmed trees were bulky shadows; fountains near by flung their slender sheen of silver in the starlight and distant fountains rippled steadily. No guards walked those gardens, for so closely were the outer walls guarded that it seemed impossible for any invader to gain access to them.

Vines curled up the walls of the palace, and even as Kull mused upon the ease with which they might be climbed, a segment of shadow detached itself from the darkness below the window and a bare, brown arm curved up over the sill. Kull's great sword hissed halfway from the sheath; then the King halted. Upon the muscular forearm gleamed the dragon armlet shown him by Ka-nu the night before.

The possessor of the arm pulled himself up over the sill and into the room with the swift, easy motion of a climbing leopard.

"You are Brule?" asked Kull, and then stopped in surprise not unmingled with annoyance and suspicion; for the man was he whom Kull had taunted in the Hall of Society; the same who had escorted him from the Pictish embassy.

"I am Brule, the Spear-slayer," answered the Pict in a guarded voice; then swiftly, gazing closely in Kull's face, he said, barely above a whisper:

"Ka nama kaa lajerama!"

Kull started. "Ha! What mean you?"

“Know you not?”

“Nay, the words are unfamiliar; they are of no language I ever heard—and yet, by Valka!—somewhere—I have heard—”

“Aye,” was the Pict’s only comment. His eyes swept the room, the study room of the palace. Except for a few tables, a divan or two and great shelves of books of parchment, the room was barren compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace.

“Tell me, king, who guards the door?”

“Eighteen of the Red Slayers. But how come you, stealing through the gardens by night and scaling the walls of the palace?”

Brule sneered. “The guards of Valusia are blind buffaloes. I could steal their girls from under their noses. I stole amid them and they saw me not nor heard me. And the walls—I could scale them without the aid of vines. I have hunted tigers on the foggy beaches when the sharp east breezes blew the mist in from seaward and I have climbed the steppes of the western sea mountain. But come—nay, touch this armlet.”

He held out his arm and, as Kull complied wonderingly, gave an apparent sigh of relief.

“So. Now throw off those kingly robes; for there are ahead of you this night such deeds as no Atlantean ever dreamed of.”

Brule himself was clad only in a scanty loin-cloth through which was thrust a short, curved sword.

“And who are you to give me orders?” asked Kull, slightly resentful.

“Did not Ka-nu bid you follow me in all things?” asked the Pict irritably, his eyes flashing momentarily. I have no love for you, lord, but for the moment I have put the thought of feuds from my mind. Do you likewise. But come.”

Walking noiselessly, he led the way across the room to the door. A slide in the door allowed a view of the outer corridor, unseen from without, and the Pict bade Kull look.

“What see you?”

“Naught but the eighteen guardsmen.”

The Pict nodded, motioned Kull to follow him across the room. At a panel in the opposite wall Brule stopped and fumbled there a moment. Then with a light movement he stepped back, drawing his sword as he did so. Kull gave an exclamation as the panel swung silently open, revealing a dimly lighted passageway.

“A secret passage!” swore Kull softly. “And I knew nothing of it! By Valka, someone shall dance for this!”

“Silence!” hissed the Pict.

Brule was standing like a bronze statue as if straining every nerve for the slightest sound; something about his attitude made Kull’s hair prickle slightly, not from fear but from some eery anticipation. Then beckoning, Brule stepped through the secret doorway which stood open behind them. The passage was bare, but not dust-covered as should have been the case with an unused secret corridor. A vague, gray light filtered through somewhere, but the source of it was not apparent. Every few feet Kull saw doors, invisible, as he knew, from the outside, but easily apparent from within.

“The palace is a very honeycomb,” he muttered.

“Aye. Night and day you are watched, king, by many eyes.”

The king was impressed by Brule’s manner. The Pict went forward slowly, warily, half crouching, blade held low and thrust forward. When he spoke it was in a whisper and he continually flung glances from side to side.

The corridor turned sharply and Brule warily gazed past the turn.

“Look!” he whispered. “But remember! No word! No sound—on your life!”

Kull cautiously gazed past him. The corridor changed just at the bend to a flight of steps. And then Kull recoiled. At the foot of those stairs lay the eighteen Red Slayers who were that night stationed to watch the king’s study room. Brule’s grip upon his mighty arm and Brule’s fierce whisper at his shoulder alone kept Kull from leaping down those stairs.

“Silent, Kull! Silent, in Valka’s name!” hissed the Pict. “These corridors are empty now, but I risked much in showing you, that you might then believe what I had to say. Back now to the room of study.”

And he retraced his steps, Kull following; his mind in a turmoil of bewilderment, “This is treachery,” muttered the king, his steel-gray eyes a-smolder, “foul and swift! Mere minutes have passed since those men stood at guard.”

Again in the room of study Brule carefully closed the secret panel and motioned Kull to look again through the slit of the outer door. Kull gasped audibly. For without stood the eighteen guardsmen!

“This is sorcery!” he whispered, half-drawing his sword. “Do dead men guard the king?”

“Aye!” came Brule’s scarcely audible reply; there was a strange expression in the Pict’s scintillant eyes.

They looked squarely into each other's eyes for an instant, Kull's brow wrinkled in a puzzled scowl as he strove to read the Pict's inscrutable face. Then Brule's lips, barely moving, formed the words; "The-snake-that-speaks!"

"Silent!" whispered Kull, laying his hand over Brule's mouth. "That is death to speak! That is a name accursed!"

The Pict's fearless eyes regarded him steadily.

"Look, again, king Kull. Perchance the guard was changed."

"Nay, those are the same men. In Valka's name, this is sorcery—this is insanity! I saw with my own eyes the bodies of those men, not eight minutes ago. Yet there they stand."

Brule stepped back, away from the door, Kull mechanically following.

"Kull, what know ye of the traditions of this race ye rule?"

"Much—and yet, little. Valusia is so old—"

"Aye," Brule's eyes lighted strangely, "we are but barbarians—infants compared to the Seven Empires. Not even they themselves know how old they are. Neither the memory of man nor the annals of the historians reach back far enough to tell us when the first men came up from the sea and built cities on the shore. But Kull, men were not always ruled by men!"

The king started. Their eyes met.

"Aye, there is a legend of my people—"

“And mine!” broke in Brule. “That was before we of the isles were allied with Valusia. Aye, in the reign of Lion-fang, seventh war chief of the Picts, so many years ago no man remembers how many. Across the sea we came, from the isles of the sunset, skirting the shores of Atlantis, and falling upon the beaches of Valusia with fire and sword. Aye, the long white beaches resounded with the clash of spears, and the night was like day from the flame of the burning castles. And the king, the king of Valusia, who died on the red sea sands that dim day—” His voice trailed off; the two stared at each other, neither speaking; then each nodded.

“Ancient is Valusia!” whispered Kull. “The hills of Atlantis and Mu were isles of the sea when Valusia was young.”

The night breeze whispered through the open window. Not the free, crisp sea air such as Brule and Kull knew and reveled in, in their land, but a breath like a whisper from the past, laden with musk, scents of forgotten things, breathing secrets that were hoary when the world was young.

The tapestries rustled, and suddenly Kull felt like a naked child before the inscrutable wisdom of the mystic past. Again the sense of unreality swept upon him. At the back of his soul stole dim, gigantic phantoms, whispering monstrous things. He sensed that Brule experienced similar thoughts. The Pict’s eyes were fixed upon his face with a fierce intensity. Their glances met. Kull felt warmly a sense of comradeship with this member of an enemy tribe. Like rival leopards turning at bay against hunters, these two savages made common cause against the inhuman powers of antiquity.

Brule again led the way back to the secret door.

Silently they entered and silently they proceeded down the dim corridor, taking the opposite direction from that in which they previously traversed it. After a while the Pict stopped and pressed close to one of the secret doors, bidding Kull look with him through the hidden slot.

“This opens upon a little-used stair which leads to a corridor running past the study-room door.”

They gazed, and presently, mounting the stair silently, came a silent shape.

“Tu! Chief councilor!” exclaimed Kull. “By night and with bared dagger! How, what means this, Brule?”

“Murder! And foulest treachery!” hissed Brule.

“Nay”—as Kull would have flung the door aside and leaped forth—“we are lost if you meet him here, for more lurk at the foot of those stairs. Come!”

Half running, they darted back along the passage.

Back through the secret door Brule led, shutting it carefully behind them, then across the chamber to an opening into a room seldom used. There he swept aside some tapestries in a dim corner nook and, drawing Kull with him, stepped behind them. Minutes dragged. Kull could hear the breeze in the other room blowing the window curtains about, and it seemed to him like the murmur of ghosts. Then through the door, stealthily, came Tu, chief councilor of the king. Evidently he had come through the study room and, finding it empty, sought his victim where he was most likely to be.

He came with upraised dagger, walking silently.

A moment he halted, gazing about the apparently empty room, which was lighted dimly by a single candle. Then he advanced cautiously, apparently at a loss to understand the absence of the king. He stood before the hiding place-and- “Slay!” hissed the Pict.

Kull with a single mighty leap hurled himself into the room. Tu spun, but the blinding, tigerish speed of the attack gave him no chance for defense or counterattack. Sword steel flashed in the dim light and grated on bone as Tu toppled backward, Kull’s sword standing out between his shoulders.

Kull leaned above him, teeth bared in the killer's snarl, heavy brows as cowl above eyes that were like the gray ice of the cold sea. Then he released the hilt and recoiled, shaken, dizzy, the hand of death at his spine.

For as he watched, Tu's face became strangely dim and unreal; the features mingled and merged in a seemingly impossible manner. Then, like a fading mask of fog, the face suddenly vanished and in its stead gaped and leered a monstrous serpent's head!

"Valka!" gasped Kull, sweat beading his forehead, and again; "Valka!"

Brule leaned forward, face immobile. Yet his glittering eyes mirrored something of Kull's horror.

"Regain your sword, lord king," said he. "There are yet deeds to be done."

Hesitantly Kull set his hand to the hilt. His flesh crawled as he set his foot upon the terror which lay at their feet, and as some jerk of muscular reaction caused the frightful mouth to gape suddenly, he recoiled, weak with nausea. Then, wrathful at himself, he plucked forth his sword and gazed more closely at the nameless thing that had been known as Tu, chief councilor. Save for the reptilian head, the thing was the exact counterpart of a man.

"A man with the head of a snake!" Kull murmured. "This, then, is a priest of the serpent god?"

"Aye. Tu sleeps unknowing. These fiends can take any form they will. That is, they can, by a magic charm or the like, fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to."

"Then the old legends were true," mused the king; "the grim old tales few dare even whisper, lest they die as blasphemers, are no fantasies. By Valka, I had thought—I had guessed—but it seems beyond the bounds of reality. Ha! The guardsmen outside the door—"

“They too are snake-men. Hold! What would you do?”

“Slay them!” said Kull between his teeth.

“Strike at the skull if at all,” said Brule. “Eighteen wait without the door and perhaps a score more in the corridors. Hark ye, king, Ka-nu learned of this plot. His spies have pierced the inmost fastnesses of the snake priests and they brought hints of a plot. Long ago he discovered the secret passageways of the palace, and at his command I studied the map thereof and came here by night to aid you, lest you die as other kings of Valusia have died. I came alone for the reason that to send more would have roused suspicion.

“Many could not steal into the palace as I did. Some of the foul conspiracy you have seen. Snake-men guard your door, and that one, as Tu, could pass anywhere else in the palace; in the morning, if the priests failed, the real guards would be holding their places again, nothing knowing, nothing remembering; there to take the blame if the priests succeeded. But stay you here while I dispose of this carrion.”

So saying, the Pict shouldered the frightful thing stolidly and vanished with it through another secret panel. Kull stood alone, his mind a-whirl. Neophytes of the mighty serpent, how many lurked among his cities? How might he tell the false from the true? Aye, how many of his trusted councilors, his generals, were men? He could be certain—of whom?

The secret panel swung inward and Brule entered.

“You were swift.”

“Aye!” The warrior stepped forward, eyeing the floor. “There is gore upon the rug. See?”

Kull bent forward; from the corner of his eye he saw a blur of movement, a glint of steel. Like a loosened bow he whipped erect, thrusting upward. The warrior sagged upon the sword, his own clattering to the floor. Even at that instant Kull reflected grimly that it was appropriate that the traitor should meet his death upon the sliding, upward thrust used so much by his race. Then, as Brule slid from the sword to sprawl motionless on the floor, the face began to merge and fade, and as Kull caught his breath, his hair a-prickle, the human

features vanished and there the jaws of a great snake gaped hideously, the terrible beady eyes venomous even in death.

“He was a snake priest all the time!” gasped the king. “Valka! What an elaborate plan to throw me off my guard! Ka-nu there, is he a man? Was it Ka-nu to whom I talked in the gardens? Almighty Valka!” as his flesh crawled with a horrid thought; are the people of Valusia men or are they all serpents?”

Undecided he stood, idly seeing that the thing named Brule no longer wore the dragon armlet. A sound made him wheel.

Brule was coming through the secret door.

“Hold!” Upon the arm upthrown to halt the king’s hovering sword gleamed the dragon armlet. “Valka!” The Pict stopped short. Then a grim smile curled his lips.

“By the gods of the seas! These demons are crafty past reckoning. For it must be that one lurked in the corridors, and seeing me go carrying the carcass of that other, took my appearance. So. I have another to do away with.”

“Hold!” there was the menace of death in Kull’s voice; “I have seen two men turn to serpents before my eyes. How may I know if you are a true man?”

Brule laughed. “For two reasons. King Kull. No snake-man wears this”—he indicated the dragon armlet—“nor can any say these words,” and again Kull heard the strange phrase; “*Ka nama kaa lajerama.*”

“*Ka nama kaa lajerama*” Kull repeated mechanically. “Now, where, in Valka’s name, have I heard that? I have not! And yet-and yet—”

“Aye, you remember, Kull,” said Brule. “Through the dim corridors of memory those words lurk; though you never heard them in this life, yet in the bygone ages they were so terribly

impressed upon the soul mind that never dies, that they will always strike dim chords in your memory, though you be reincarnated for a million years to come. For that phrase has come secretly down the grim and bloody eons, since when, uncounted centuries ago, those words were watch-words for the race of men who battled with the grisly beings of the Elder Universe. For none but a real man of men may speak them, whose jaws and mouth are shaped different from any other creature. Their meaning has been forgotten but not the words themselves.”

“True,” said Kull. “I remember the legends— Valka!” He stopped short, staring, for suddenly, like the silent swinging wide of a mystic door, misty, unfathomed reaches opened in the recesses of his consciousness and for an instant he seemed to gaze back through the vastness that spanned life and life; seeing through the vague and ghostly fogs dim shapes reliving dead centuries—men in combat with hideous monsters, vanquishing a planet of frightful terrors.

Against a gray, ever-shifting background moved strange nightmare forms, fantasies of lunacy and fear; and man, the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdom-less striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murderous child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire. . . . Kull drew a hand across his brow, shaken; these sudden glimpses into the abysses of memory always startled him.

“They are gone,” said Brule, as if scanning his secret mind; “the bird-women, the harpies, the bat-men, the flying fiends, the wolf-people, the demons, the goblins—all save such as this being that lies at our feet, and a few of the wolf-men. Long and terrible was the war, lasting through the bloody centuries, since first the first men, risen from the mire of apedom, turned upon those who then ruled the world.

“And at last mankind conquered, so long ago that naught but dim legends come to us through the ages.

“The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars. Ah, that was a grim and secret war!

“Among the men of the Younger Earth stole the frightful monsters of the Elder Planet, safeguarded by their horrid wisdom and mysticisms, taking all forms and shapes, doing deeds

of horror secretly. No man knew who was true man and who false. No man could trust any man. Yet by means of their own craft they formed ways by which the false might be known from the true. Men took for a sign and a standard the figure of the flying dragon, the winged dinosaur, a monster of past ages, which was the greatest foe of the serpent.

“And men used those words which I spoke to you as a sign and symbol, for as I said, none but a true man can repeat them. So mankind triumphed. Yet again the fiends came after the years of forgetfulness had gone by—for man is still an ape in that he forgets what is not ever before his eyes. As priests they came; and for that men in their luxury and might had by then lost faith in the old religions and worships, the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people, and people bow again to the serpent god in new form; and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection between this power and the power men overthrew eons ago. As priests the snake-men are content to rule—and yet—” He stopped.

“Go on.” Kull felt an unaccountable stirring of the short hair at the base of his scalp.

“Kings have reigned as true men in Valusia,” the Pict whispered, “and yet, slain in battle, have died serpents—as died he who fell beneath the spear of Lion-fang on the red beaches when we of the isles harried the Seven Empires. And how can this be. Lord Kull?”

“These kings were born of women and lived as men!”

“Thus—the true kings died in secret—as you would have died tonight—and priests of the Serpent reigned in their stead, no man knowing.”

Kull cursed between his teeth. “Aye, it must be. No one has ever seen a priest of the Serpent and lived, that is known. They live in utmost secrecy.”

“The statecraft of the Seven Empires is a mazy, monstrous thing,” said Brule. “There the true men know that among them glide the spies of the Serpent, and the men who are the Serpent’s allies—such as Kaanuub, baron of Blaal—yet no man dares seek to unmask a suspect lest vengeance befall him. No man trusts his fellow and the true statesmen dare not speak to each other what is in the minds of all. Could they be sure, could a snake-man or plot be unmasked before them all, then would the power of the Serpent be more than half broken; for all would then ally and make common cause, sifting out the traitors. Ka-nu alone is of sufficient shrewdness and courage to cope with them, and even Ka-nu learned only enough of their plot

to tell me what would happen—what has happened up to this time. Thus far I was prepared; from now on we must trust to our luck and our craft. Here and now I think we are safe; those snake-men without the door dare not leave their post lest true men come here unexpectedly. But tomorrow they will try something else, you may be sure. Just what they will do, none can say, not even Ka-nu; but we must stay at each other's sides. King Kull, until we conquer or both be dead. Now come with me while I take this carcass to the hiding-place where I took the other being."

Kull followed the Pict with his grisly burden through the secret panel and down the dim corridor.

Their feet, trained to the silence of the wilderness, made no noise. Like phantoms they glided through the ghostly light, Kull wondering that the corridors should be deserted; at every turn he expected to run full upon some frightful apparition. Suspicion surged back upon him; was this Pict leading him into ambush? He fell back a pace or two behind Brule, his ready sword hovering at the Pict's unheeding back.

Brule should die first if he meant treachery. But if the Pict was aware of the king's suspicion, he showed no sign. Stolidly he tramped along, until they came to a room, dusty and long unused, where moldy tapestries hung heavy. Brule drew aside some of these and concealed the corpse behind them. Then they turned to retrace their steps, when suddenly Brule halted with such abruptness that he was closer to death than he knew; for Kull's nerves were on edge.

"Something moving in the corridor," hissed the Pict. "Ka-nu said these ways would be empty, yet—"

He drew his sword and stole into the corridor, Kull following warily. A short way down the corridor a strange, vague glow appeared that came toward them. Nerves a-leap, they waited, backs to the corridor wall; for what they knew not, but Kull heard Brule's breath hiss through his teeth and was reassured as to Brule's loyalty.

The glow merged into a shadowy form. A shape vaguely like a man it was, but misty and illusive, like a wisp of fog, that grew more tangible as it approached, but never fully material. A face looked at them, a pair of luminous great eyes, that seemed to hold all the tortures of a million centuries. There was no menace in that face, with its dim, worn features, but only a great pity—and that face—that face—

“Almighty gods!” breathed Kull, an icy hand at his soul; “Eallal, king of Valusia, who died a thousand years ago!”

Brule shrank back as far as he could, his narrow eyes widened in a blaze of pure horror, the sword shaking in his grip, unnerved for the first time that weird night. Erect and defiant stood Kull, instinctively holding his useless sword at the ready; flesh acrawl, hair a-prickle, yet still a king of kings, as ready to challenge the powers of the unknown dead as the powers of the living.

The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow. Straight on went the shape with slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet; vanishing about a bend of the corridor.

“Valka!” muttered the Pict, wiping the cold beads from his brow; “that was no man! That was a ghost!”

“Aye!” Kull shook his head wonderingly. “Did you not recognize the face? That was Eallal, who reigned in Valusia a thousand years ago and who was found hideously murdered in his throne-room—the room now known as the Accursed Room. Have you not seen his statue in the Fame Room of Kings?”

“Yes, I remember the tale now. Gods, Kull! that is another sign of the frightful and foul power of the snake priests—that king was slain by snake-people and thus his soul became their slave, to do their bidding throughout eternity! For the sages have ever maintained that if a man is slain by a snake-man his ghost becomes their slave.”

A shudder shook Kull’s gigantic frame. “Valka! But what a fate! Hark ye”—his fingers closed upon Brule’s sinewy arm like steel—“hark ye! If I am wounded unto death by these foul monsters, swear that ye will smite your sword through my breast lest my soul be enslaved.”

“I swear,” answered Brule, his fierce eyes lighting. “And do ye the same by me, Kull.” Their strong right hands met in a silent sealing of their bloody bargain.

CONVERSATIONS WITH DEAD PEOPLE by C Priest Brumley

Part 3: Revelations.

The darkened room set above the grisly scene was as still as death. Doctor Swanhurst stared down at the tableau below him, shock plastered across his aging face in a grimace that seemed almost medieval in its intensity. He hadn't thought Specimen Sixteen-Ten would be *that* powerful of a dominant, no matter what the case. Expectations shattered, he waited for any sign of what was to come next.

Doctor Swanhurst...

Emile Swanhurst jumped out of his chair from the sudden mental intrusion. He could hear it as well as if a man next to him had spoken, but of course, no one was allowed in the viewing room with him at any time. Which means... Was it even possible? Did his range for the telepathy reach that far? His gaze fell ever downward, glossing over the gored carcass of Sarah Peterson and landing on the body of the specimen strapped down to the table. It looked much as it had before, with one notable exception.

It was all too aware. And it was staring directly at him.

Good evening, Doctor.

The Doctor flinched once more from the intrusion, throwing his gnarled right hand up to cover his face in a childish gesture.

“What do you want, you damn thing?”

A few things. Answers, primarily. To start: Who are you, where am I, and what happened?

Doctor Swanhurst forced a scornful laugh through the veil of shock and pain enveloping his being. His hand shook with terror and indignation as he responded.

“Do you really think I would give information of the kind to the damn thing hurting me? Are you a fool?”

A fool I may be, Doctor, but who's the bigger: the man who just killed your compatriot, or the fool who allows himself to be tortured by the killer for what he believes is a noble reason? Think carefully, Doctor.

The specimen continued to stare at him, as if he were able to track the location no matter where he was.

What am I?

Doctor Swanhurst gave in with a sigh. Pulling his hand away from his face, he noticed the

streak of thick red that raced across its palm and shied away.

“Well, I think the term that would suit you best (and I am loath to use it),” Doctor Swanhurst added, mostly to himself, “would be ‘zombie’, though that is not entirely accurate scientifically...”

Get on with it, Doctor.

“Yes, of course, I’m so sorry. Where was I? You subsist on flesh, though human flesh is not a necessity. You can be separated from your disparate body parts and live, although when your core is destroyed the parts are as well. If you are capable and in a good enough position to do so, you can put yourself back together and live on, as your body does not decay in the traditional sense. Why this happens, I have no idea,” he finished, adding a weary look to the operating table below.

So you’re saying I’m effectively immortal, yes?

“As far as I can tell, yes.”

Specimen Sixteen-Ten seemed thoughtful to Dr. Swanhurst. The Doctor pressed on, trying to keep the information flowing while he devised a plan of escape.

“It could be a valid, rational, scientific reason behind everything. Or it could be magic for all I know. One of the reasons for all of this,” Doctor Swanhurst swept his hand around him to emphasize his point, “Would be to, as they say, ‘figure it out’. I can tell you, we’re no closer to understanding the how and why you can exist as you do, than we are of confirming string theory or making death rays that work.”

I see. If that’s the case, how am I able to do this?

“You can read my mind and control my body because you are what I like to call a hive leader. I have a hypothesis about that. Do you happen, if I may ask, do you seem to remember the man who bit you in the attack?”

Yes. Quite vividly, in fact.

“Before he attacked you, I followed him for quite some time. Sometimes it was myself, sometimes compensated staffers. Either way, it was very dangerous to us. But in the course of our studies, we found the other creatures would flock to him. I came to realize he was a cell leader of a sort, organizing the others through some form of telepathic link, sending them forth to wreck havoc on the world. Why, I don’t know. I was hoping that by having you here...”

That I would answer your questions for you, doctor? You’ve a poor taste in judgment, man.

“Well, to be fair, I have come to recognize my sin of hubris as of late...”

Silence followed, as the two men thought of what they would next say.

Why did you let me kill Sarah? I saw her mind before the... Incident. She was a good person; well, better than most people I know, yourself included...

Doctor Swanhurst bristled at the insult. “She knew what she was doing. I explained, in full prior to her assignment, the possibility of her mortality being called in to question. She signed a waiver to that affect as well, we all have. When your, for lack of a better phrase, ‘powers’ came to being, I admit I was quite curious as to what you were capable of...”

And so you sacrificed her for your own curiosity? Poor choice again, doctor.

“I am beginning to see that, slowly but surely.”

Of course. Hindsight, and all that.

The old man sat up from his perch on the floor of the viewing room, his back stiff from the odd angle and lack of support. In a business-like tone, he asked, “What are you to do with me?”

I am not sure, but if I were to guess, I think I will let you live, after you release me. You’ve been an invaluable source of information, and I plan on calling on you again in the future. We are curious, you see.

The Doctor perked up from curiosity, the popping along his spine becoming louder with each movement.

“‘We’? Who are ‘we’? Are there more of you nearby?”

This is not the place or time for you to be asking questions.

“Young man, you are in my laboratory! I have done nothing to harm you, aside from securing you to a table and sewing your mouth shut so your fleshlust wouldn’t lead to loss of life! I have not attacked you, I have not berated you, I have answered every question you have put before me in as complete a way as is possible! Now answer the damn question, you insufferable creature! Are there more of you hive leaders out there and can you communicate with them or not?” He ended with a huff.

The silence was unbearable.

On second thought, Doctor, I think it’s time we said good night.

“Wha-? Oh!”

Tears formed at the corner of Doctor Swanhurst’s eyes as the impact of Specimen Sixteen-

Ten's words fell upon him. His hands formed balls, knuckles white as bone under the strain of the taut skin. He thought of his options, of half-formed plans devised during the conversation of ways he could escape, but they all seemed useless and quite laughable now. The entire wing of the building they were in was secure, doors locked in a grid-like pattern that was impossible to decipher unless you were trained or...

Scrape... Click.

I can read your mind, Doctor, remember?

Scrape... Click.

The nervous sweat that previously been a mere sheen on Doctor Swanhurst's brow had broken forth, rivulets falling like rain down his terrified visage.

Scrape... Click.

And by the way, doctor, you were wrong. Earlier you stated your sin was hubris. Here's your correction: it was pride. Good-bye, doctor. Enjoy your end.

They pushed the door open, ten, twenty, a hundred of the creatures, staring at Doctor Swanhurst as one. They swarmed forward, shambling forth in a slow gait and filling the small room with their numbers, leaving him no room for escape and no options. With a long and mournful sigh, he sat down in his chair and waited for the end.

-Fin.

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by J Rhodes

Previously: Gary was offered a job by his bosomy secondary school English teacher, Mrs. Fuller. Also, his night of passion with a gothic girl whose name he wasn't sure of came back to haunt him at the pub quiz night which Mrs. Fuller was attending. Milton inadvertently cured Dan of a demon-summoning death-curse by passing it on to himself. And, the Hettford Witch Hunt accepted a new member: Carrie. Her competence and social skills wowed them all.

Episode Four: The Christ Brigade

1.

Dan was red in the face, his unblinking stare fixed on the cage on the table. In the cage stood Roaster, Milton's favourite (and only chicken). Dan stamped his foot for emphasis before he began talking.

"That thing is a feral animal; I do not want to stare at it whilst I eat my cornflakes."

Milton leapt to his own defence:

"There's a picture of a chicken on the cornflakes box. Not far below it there is a bowl with cornflakes and milk under which..."

He held up one finger to silence the interruption that Dan's rapid deep breath had pre-empted.

"Under which is emblazoned the legend – serving suggestion."

Dan took another deep breath.

"When Kellogg's wrote that on the box I don't think they had placing a live chicken in front of your cereal bowl in mind."

"Then why did they put it there, Dan?"

"It's a company logo."

"Don't be stupid; what does a chicken have to do with cornflakes?"

"Chickens eat corn."

"I know that Dan, I own a chicken."

"So there's your connection."

"But they don't eat cereal; I mean how would they hold the spoon?"

Dan relaxed, just a tiny bit.

“I don’t like eating in front of livestock; it’s just rude – like picking up an elderly relative for a relaxing spin in a hearse.”

“We’re not going to eat her, are we?”

“No, but...”

Dan couldn’t think of anything. Then he said.

“She’s a bit smelly. Explain to me again why she needs to be in here.”

Milton walked to the window and opened the curtain. Outside was a crowd of about thirty people holding placards and luminous orange crucifixes.

“Because of them” Milton said, “We must keep Roaster safe.”

“They’re Christians. I don’t think they go in for sacrificing poultry. That’s more your usual customers.”

“Customer,” corrected Milton.

“You’ve been busy recently.”

“With middle aged women buying pulp fiction, not Voodoo priestesses. Any mob is a threat to a chicken; Jesus didn’t feed the five thousand with loaves and Quorn sausages.”

“Well, this is the price of success.”

“We barely broke even this month.”

“Which compared to our usual 100% losses is a staggering upswing.”

Milton frowned:

“That is what’s brought these muppets, I suppose.”

Dan nodded and pursed his lips in sincerity.

“Well, what do you want to do about it?” he asked.

“I don’t know, do you want to call Carrie and tell her tonight’s meeting is off.”

“You call her, she’s your girlfriend.”

“She is not.”

“She is, in fantasy land.”

Milton shrugged and picked up the phone.

“We should call Gary, too.”

2.

Gary’s phone rang; he shivered and hoped that Alison would answer it. He listened for the sound of movement and heard only the steady stream of the shower. He decided to answer it.

“Yes.”

Gary listened to the voice at the other end of the phone.

“No, you haven’t woken me up, Milton, I work nights, – I’ve only just got to bed.”

He listened to Milton’s voice talking to him again.

“Well, it’s not the Batphone. I have to sleep at some point.”

Gary yawned over whatever it was that Milton was saying.

“OK, OK, I’ll try and get down there in a bit.”

He put the phone down and unplugged it. Pulling the blanket over his head to block the bright sunlight that was making a mockery of his curtains, Gary closed his eyes and waited for sleep. He envisioned a forest and a pale moon. Then he imagined he could hear the rustle of leaves and soft hands rubbing his shoulders. He reached the luminal space between waking and dream; it was warm and welcoming like a womb-gina.

“Who was that?” Alison asked.

Gary pulled his blanket down and squinted at her. She was entirely naked except for the towel she had wrapped around her hair.

“What?”

“On the phone? Who was it?”

“Milton.”

“What did he want?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t listening. I was trying to get to sleep.”

Alison put her leg on the bed and leant over as she slipped on one of her socks. The raising of her thigh formed a beautiful arc that met with her buttock. Her breasts jingled at him as she leant forward.

“Are you doing that on purpose?”

“Getting dressed, you mean?”

Gary thought about it.

“Yes.”

“I did consider going nude but I didn’t think you’d approve.”

“Well, if you’re going to be all sexy and naked you could at least have sex with me. It would help me get to sleep too.”

“I’ve just had a shower, sorry.”

“You should be, I’m horny as hell now.”

“Since you’re wide awake, do you mind if I dry my hair properly?”

“Why not?” Gary asked, “I’m already awake, go for the gusto.”

Alison finished getting dressed under the close scrutiny of Gary. When she had finished and turned on the noisy hairdryer, Gary pretended to go to the toilet.

“I’m back at three today,” Alison told him when he came back into the bedroom, “I’ll try not to wake you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Gary “I won’t be here.”

“You sound sulky; I said I wouldn’t wake you.”

“It’s not you, it’s everybody. Ten to one odds, as soon as you go some bastard will knock on the door trying to sell me milk or insurance or religion.”

“Are you going to see Milton?”

“No, I’m going to put an end to it all.”

Alison brushed her hair and the hair drier made an intermittent swishy noise as though a rat were trying to free itself from the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner.

“That sounds ominous,” said Alison. “If you do anything drastic, try not to make a mess.”

3.

Milton flipped the shop sign to *Open* and looked out at the hoard of protesters. One of the placards read simply “Blasphemy,” whilst another read “Burn in Hell!” Others had the number of chapter and verse from specific parts of the Bible.

“It’s odd that they do that,” Milton noted.

“What? Protest?”

“No, put things like Mathew 12:31 on their banners. Surely only the converted are going to know what they’re talking about.”

“What does Mathew 12:31 say?”

“I haven’t the first idea, which is my precise point.”

“You should strike back and quote them Exodus 22:18 – Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. See how boned up they are on that one. ”

“Don’t give them ideas, Dan; I’m sure they’ve made their minds up that we’re Satan’s footmen already. We don’t want them reaching for the torches.”

“That would be ironic, witch hunters killed for the sin of witchery.”

“Christians aren’t supposed to kill anyone.”

“It’s definitely a mixed message.”

The crowd were singing Hosanna, and holding up their plastic crosses as if they might make Milton, Dan and the shop disappear entirely. Dan waved at them and swayed slightly in time to the music. Milton shot him a disapproving glare.

“What? It’s catchy, plus they’re giving us the day off. Nobody will dare cross that line of psychos.”

“The women who buy these novels,” Milton picked up a copy of a book the protesters were protesting, “know no mortal fear.”

“Too stupid, I suppose.”

“I don’t think it is; I suspect it has something to do with hormones.”

“Do you mean because the key audience is girls in puberty and ladies approaching a certain age?”

“Something like that but less sexist.”

Dan raised an eyebrow.

“Explain the concept to me again.”

Dan held aloft the offending book. The front cover was black with three prominent letters K, W and P boldly displayed across the cover. The W had been made to look like vampire fangs whereas the K and P were both done in dripping red paint. Between the three letters, there were other letters in smaller print that announced the novel’s title: Kissy McWolfPyre.

“Well, Kissy is a vampire.”

Dan nodded.

“And in the first novel, he is attacked by a female werewolf.”

Dan nodded again.

“Because werewolves are part human, he becomes part human. That’s not good if you’re a blood drinking monster, apparently. So he sets out to break the curse of the werewolf by killing the werewolf who bit him. That way, he can go back to being just one monster rather than two monsters - one of whom is a little bit human.”

“OK.”

“Anyway, to cut a long story short, he falls in love with the werewolf in her human form and mopes about feeling a crushing combination of ennui, spleen and angst that nobody but a two-monster human could understand. Then, he has to decide whether or not to kill the woman and break the curse.”

“That actually sounds quite good.”

“It isn’t, I assure you.”

Dan chuckled.

“It doesn’t sound any worse than anything else we have in here, so what’s their problem?”

Dan motioned to the crowd outside.

“Buggered if I know.”

Dan thought about it for a moment.

“Shall we ask them?”

4.

Gary sat opposite Mrs. Fuller. He was trying his best not to think about the fact that the last time he had seen her she had been shown photographic evidence of him cheating on Alison who was one of her friends.

“So, about that job?”

Mrs. Fuller sipped her tea. She had given him a mug too but he was too shaky to hold it.

“Yes?”

“Erm, I’ve been thinking a lot about it and I’d very much like to give it a try. If that’s OK.”

“That’s fine.”

“It’s not too late, because I know it’s been a couple of weeks since last spoke about it.”

“No, it’s not a problem, Alison told me to put you down as a definite last week.”

Gary blanched.

“How thoughtful of her.”

“She said she’d spoken to you.”

Gary nodded.

“It’s fine, she has.”

“So you’ll start in September. Do you want to come in and look at the school?”

“No thanks, I’ve seen it.”

“Lots of new stuff has happened since you left.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“OK, well, you just start reading up on Chaucer.”

Gary tried to think of something clever to say but he had nothing. They sat in awkward stillness for a few moments.

“So,” said Mrs. Fuller. “Is everything alright with the Julie situation?”

“Well, I last saw her in the same photograph as you did, I think things are OK – I’m keeping quiet about it and Alison only brings it when she’s losing an argument.”

“Very wise,” said Mrs. Fuller, “on both counts. Glad you two are getting on.”

“We’re OK; I think she’s happy I’m taking this job.”

“The all-night garage is not for you.”

“It would be fine if the rest of the world could accept that I have to sleep.”

“You do look tired. Do you want to go upstairs for a lie down?”

Gary flashed back to a fantasy he had had when he was one of Mrs. Fuller’s students ten years before. He felt himself stiffen, and then almost immediately felt like punching himself in the balls. Those things were a menace.

“No. Thanks for the offer, though. Maybe another time?”

Mrs. Fuller’s laugh came as a tremendous relief to Gary once his sleep deprived brain had caught up with his mouth.

“I best am going,” he told her.

5.

Dan stood on a chair and looked down at the crowd below him. The wind was catching his beard with what he hoped was the majesty of a waving flag. He held up both his arms to silence the crowd. The crowd who were already looking at him in a respectful silence looked at him in a slightly confused respectful silence.

“Now, now,” Dan started. “Can one of you nice people tell me exactly what the problem is?”

“You’re selling that book,” said a man on the front row.
The man on the front row had a tattoo – Dan didn’t like him.

“We are a bookshop” Dan stated, “We do that.”

“It’s evil,” shouted a woman near the back.

The crowd booed gently at Dan and raised their orange crucifixes.

A prickle of redness began to creep across Dan’s cheeks. He raised both his arms again.

“Silence! Crikey, what I am trying to ask is why you think it’s evil?”

“It is blasphemous,” said the man with the tattoo.

Dan took a deep breath.

“OK, so you are upset that one book – Kissy McWolfPyre – is at odds with another book, The Bible?”

The crowd booed. Dan raised his hands.

“Let us assume that I have not read either book, can somebody please explain what the problem is?”

A woman stepped forward; her thin face was almost entirely hidden by large framed glasses and a mop of curly hair.

“Are you familiar with Jesus?”

“I’m not an idiot,” Dan told her.

“Well, there is a character called Jesus in the novel that sleeps with a virgin called Mary. It’s a deliberate attack on our faith.”

“And she’s his mother,” added the man with a tattoo.

“Wait,” said Dan “how can she be a virgin and his mother? That’s just ridiculous.”

The crowd eyeballed Dan in unison.

“She’s not his real mother,” explained a young girl who looked to Dan as though she were too pretty to believe in things.

“She’s the werewolf who bites him, so she is called his wolf-mother.”

“Well,” Dan shrugged, “it does seem needlessly contentious, but we didn’t write it.”

“Worst still,” added the girl Dan thought was pretty, “he get’s bitten by a vampire, dies and comes back to life three days later – as a wolfdog.”

Dan looked behind himself to see if Milton was going to do anything to support his effort. Milton smiled and gestured to the crowd. Dan got down from the chair and gently shoved Milton towards the crowd.

“It’s his shop.”

The crowd jeered. Milton cleared his throat.

“I’ve flicked through the book, Jesus is a Central American character, – I believe it is a popular Hispanic name.”

Someone in the crowd nodded, that was good enough for Milton.

“I’m sure the rest is just coincidence.”

“You should be worried about your soul.” The man who spoke was the one holding the placard that read Mathew 12:31. “Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.”

“Ah” said Milton. “But what about Luke 10:23?”

“I’m not familiar with that passage.”

“I knew it!”

Milton walked back into the shop with look of triumph on his face.

6.

Gary stopped to rest against a brick wall; his vision was a little blurry. It was the fourth day of a five day stint of nightshifts and he had only managed a total of ten hours’ sleep over the lot of it. He had one sole objective, to get home to bed. He leant forward and took a few deep breaths; he was not used to feeling that bad when he was sober. Mercifully, he didn’t vomit.

Gary felt a hand on his back.

“Are you alright?”

Gary looked up. He groaned internally and he saw the girl's face. Julie's black lipstick smiled at him. He hadn't seen her since the night of their indiscretion; he dug deep into his mind to think of something to say that would get rid of her without causing her to be upset.

"Fine thanks, how are you?"

"You don't look fine. I live just around the corner. Do you want to come in for a cup of tea?"

"No, it's alright – I live just around the corner too."

"It's a small world."

"No, it's a tiny village."

Julie chuckled.

"I haven't seen you since that night," she said.

"I know, I live with someone – I thought it would be best not to."

Julie sighed.

"I've never done anything like that before, I feel really bad about it."

Gary lifted his head up and looked at the girl; her heavy mascara drew a black line around eyes that were welling with tears. Gary groaned internally.

"It's fine," he said, "it was mostly my fault."

"It just made me feel so cheap!"

Julie began sobbing,

"You must hate me!"

Gary glanced around the street nobody seemed to be looking so he hugged her.

"I don't hate you, it was really nice – it's just, you know, Alison."

Julie pulled away from Gary.

"You like her more than me," she put her hand in her face and blubbed.

"No, no, it's just erm, she's my girlfriend we live together, –it's been a long time and erm..."

Julie let her hands drop and stared him directly in the face. She didn't blink.

"Listen, I'm really tired and I don't feel very well," Gary told her, "I'll catch up with you another time."

Being careful not to look back Gary walked around the corner to his house. As he did so, he almost tripped over the unpleasant youth Saul who had recently furnished Alison with a photograph of Gary's infidelity. Saul met Gary's bad tempered glare with a diarrheic smile.

7.

"Hello Carrie," Milton was saying.

"You sound frantic, is everything alright?"

Milton sighed into the phone receiver.

"Well, not really, my shop is being held under siege by a fringe Christian group."

"Why?"

"They have moral objections to Kissy McWolfPyre."

"What's that?"

"A pulp vampire novel."

"Oh, which one?"

"It's the first in the series."

"No," said Carrie, "which fringe religious group?"

"I don't know actually, is it important?"

"Find out for me and give me a call back."

Milton shrugged.

"OK, are you coming tonight?"

"Yes, now go ask them."

Milton did as he was told.

8.

Sleep began to hug Gary like a warm blanket, which was doubly great because he was also hugged in a warm blanket. He imagined the crackle of fire, and the rustle of leaves relaxing him.

The door to his room swung open and banged loudly against the bedside dresser.

"Gary Sparrow, you absolute tosser."

Gary's eyes strained to open.

"What have I done now?"

Alison folded her arms and thinned her lips.

"Well why don't you tell me?"

"I hugged that Julie girl. Sorry, she was crying."

"Is that it?"

"Yeah it was like ten minutes ago, how did you know?"

Alison sat down on the bed.

"Saul just showed me a picture on his phone."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Why was she crying?"

"Because I don't want to be with her."

"Good!"

Alison sat down on the bed.

"I accepted that job at the school," Gary said quickly. "I start in September."

Alison's lips thickened out a little.

"Just be honest, is there anything going on with you and Julie?"

"That was the first time I've seen her since that night, it was just awkward. Sorry."

"I don't think I know what I'd do if you did that to me again."

"I won't, I promise."

Gary reluctantly sat up and kissed Alison.

"I love you."

She hugged him back.

"Thank you for taking that job."

Gary yawned:

“You’re welcome.”

Alison stood back up.

“I suppose I better get back to work. What are you doing for the rest of the day?”

Gary looked at her in bewilderment. What the hell is wrong with people? he thought.

“I might sleep.”

“You should nip down to Occultivated. All hell is breaking loose there.”

9.

Gary tried to reason with the crowd; Dan had insisted it was his turn.

“Go on, you’re the one with a degree, – You’re the one with all that reason and rhetoric.”

“I’m not sure I’m at my best today,” Gary told him.

“Go on, you’ll be fine.”

“They’re called the Christ Brigade, if that helps,” added Milton.

The Christ Brigade stared at Gary, who with his black ringed eyes, shoulders slouched, and stammering sense of fatigue looked for all the world like one of the actors in the Heroin Screws You Up campaign of the mid to late Eighties.

“Look can you just all fuck off,” Gary told them, “I’m really tired.”

The crowd did not respond.

“Have some decency please; I think I might be dying.”

The man with the tattoo said.

“We’ll leave when you stop selling that book.”

“OK,” Gary reasoned, “but as long you’re here – nobody will buy the book. So, there’s no point in you being here unless you go away.”

“It’s blasphemy,” shouted the mop haired glasses woman.

“Kissy McWolfPyre? Blasphemy? Are you kidding? Have you been inside the shop?”

“Den of iniquity,” someone shouted.

“Yes, exactly,” Gary retorted, “There’s far worse stuff than that. The Bible of Satan, the Keys of Solomon – you name it.”

“Satanists are just lazy Christians,” said the man with the tattoo. “They believe in God and the Devil but they can’t be bothered going to heaven, still essentially they support the foundations of Christianity. Our problem is with this book.”

He pointed to the poster in the shop window that showed a pretty young man crying in front of a mirror that gave no reflection of him.

“The people in this shop are good people; they’re just trying to make a living.”

The crowd booed Gary.

“Also, they hunt witches – you don’t get more Christian than that.”

The Christ Brigade began to pelt Gary with orange crosses. He made a dash for the shop door.

“Patronising bastard,” he heard someone scream.

10.

“Are you coming to the meeting tonight?” Milton asked.

“You mean the pub quiz? No, I have to work,” Gary told him.

“Still, I suppose you might be able to get some sleep there.”

“I doubt it.”

Gary yawned, Dan handed him a cup of coffee.

“Don’t mind the chicken,” Dan said.

“I’m too tired to mind anything, but when I get less tired I’ve got other stuff to sort out.”

“Such as?”

“Saul.”

Milton frowned in concern.

“I thought he was leaving Alison alone now.”

“He is; it’s me he’s after now. He took a picture of me hugging Shakespeare’s Sister early.”

Dan laughed.

“Hugging?”

“She was crying. Look, I don’t want to get into it.”

“What are you going to do?”

Gary shrugged.

“There are people with bigger problems.”

Gary pointed at the safe where Milton had stored his death curse. Milton winced.

“Don’t remind me.”

“You only have three weeks,” Gary said.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, Carrie says she has something up her sleeve.”

Dan walked over to Milton and put his arm around him sympathetically.

“You can always pass the curse back to me,” Dan told him.

“Ah,” Milton said, “you know I could never do that.”

“Yes,” said Dan, “that’s why I said it.”

The tender moment was interrupted by the sound of the phone ringing. Milton picked it up.

“Oh, hello Carrie.”

Milton put his hand over the receiver.

“It’s Carrie,” he mouthed to Dan and Gary.

“They were still out there a few minutes ago,” Milton said.

Milton carefully put the phone down on its side.

“She said to check now,” he told them.

Milton walked out to the kitchen window and raised the curtain. The crowd had gone and the only sign of them was a few orange crucifixes scattered around. Milton ran back to the phone.

“They’re gone, however did you do it?”

“You’re not wrong, I’ll see you later.”

Milton turned to Gary and Dan.

“She said she’s wonderful.”

Dan chuckled at Milton, Gary just stared ahead.

11.

By the time that Gary finally made it to sleep, it was nine thirty at night and he was at work. He leaned forward with his elbows up on the cash register and let his eyelids droop. It was not a restful sleep but it might just tide him over until the next customer arrived.

The shop bell rang.

“We got you, kiwi-lover.”

Saul and Paul were stood glaring at him. Gary stood up.

“What are you going to do? Take a picture of me?”

“We already did,” said Saul, “sleeping on the job.”

“We’re gonna show it to Ron,” said Paul.

“Oh right, I don’t actually care.”

“You will care when you have no job,” said Saul.

“Whatcha gonna do then?” Paul added.

“I don’t need a job to be able to afford your mum,” Gary told them. “I pay her in breadcrumbs.”

“Don’t you talk about our mum,” Saul slammed his hand on the counter.

“I’ll stop talking about her when you idiots fuck off.”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “Well, we’re not going to take it.”

Gary yawned.

“Fuck off lads,” he said.

He sat back down and started going back to sleep. Saul and Paul looked at each other, quickly stuck some chewing gum in their pockets, and walked out.

12.

The pub was less busy than it had been the week before. A hastily written note on the chalk board informed the room that “The Mysterious Julie is Cancelled this week (pub quiz still on).”

“So run me through it one more time,” Dan said.

Carrie took a swig of her pint.

“I’m in marketing.”

“I get that, but how did you get rid of the Christ Brigade?”

“I was wondering that too,” Milton told her.

“They’re one of our clients. Most of the members are good hearted and vulnerable people but the management are cold calculating pricks.”

“How so?”

“Well, essentially the Christ Brigade is a marketing brand for a Christian publisher but despite being well funded they’re not doing so great. They’re bordering on being a cult.”

“Milton knows that one,” interjected Dan, “he’s always been bordering on being a cunt.”

“That you Dan,” Milton said calmly.

“Anyway, I told them one of our reps had arrived to drop off their sample literature to your shop and you’d cancelled your order of their manifesto, ‘the even better news Bible.’”

“Well, done you,” said Milton.

“So their manager told them all to leave.”

“Shouldn’t he be called their priest?” Dan asked.

“Nope, they all work in his publishing mill. I think he pays them in heaven.”

“Terrible,” said Dan.

“There are worse things,” said Carrie “but not too many.”

They all took another drink. At the back of the room, the quiz master clicked his microphone on.

“OK, question three. The bestselling author Tamsin Palmer wrote which novel?”

Milton smiled at them all.

“I definitely know the answer to this one,” he said.

He took the paper and he wrote the name of the book on it, being careful to turn the letter W into vampire fangs.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

THE STORY SO FAR:

Reencountering his old teacher Professor Quigley, Will Youds finds his interest in politics reignited, particularly when Quigley entrusts him with the location of the manuscript for his Manifesto, a book the Professor maintains is destined to transform contemporary society. The Professor's students Daisy and Rex persuade him to join them all on a demo against the draconian National Security Bill proposed by the home secretary Susan Verlaine. Despite receiving a warning against this from a mysterious security man called Tarrant, Will joins the demo which soon turns into a riot during which Quigley is arrested and later dies in police custody.

A public enquiry exonerates the police for any connection with Quigley's death. More riots ensue and meet a serious crackdown from the security forces. Will, angry at the Professor's murder, allows himself to be persuaded into making an attempt on the home secretary's life. The political situation rapidly spins out of control and central London sinks into anarchy as people flee and the security forces fight amongst themselves. Rex arranges for them to escape by helicopter, but Will and the others must travel across a dangerous city to get to Battersea heliport. When they reach the helicopter, Will refuses to go, and instead turns and goes back into the hell that is London. He knows that Quigley's Manifesto is concealed in a hotel room in Shepherds Bush and feels that he must find it and take it to Quigley's publisher if the country is to stand any chance of returning to normality.

On his way he encounters Mercer, a rogue member of the security forces who decides to help Will get Quigley's manifesto and take it to Oxford. They battle their way through a violent London, find the manifesto, and head for the suburbs. As they do so, they see groups of soldiers moving into the capital. They also learn that the government has been attacked by rogue security men and those who escaped assassination have fled for Oxford. Making their way through the edges of London, they see three policemen raping a young woman, and save her, shooting one of the policemen and driving off the others. They take the girl back to her house in a gated community but they are tracked there by the surviving police and their comrades who besiege the place. Will and Mercer rally some of the inhabitants and they fight off the police until they can escape in a car.

Reaching High Wycombe they find civil war breaking out around them as 'rebels' under the control of the government-in-exile in Oxford fight 'loyalists' under the control of the home secretary, who survived Will's assassination attempt but has been crippled. Attempting to cross the lines, they are captured and taken to a command post where Will is amazed to meet his brother Geoff, a captain in the army. Geoff is about to help Will get out of the warzone when he receives orders to give Will up to the security services who have been tracking him ever since he made his attempt to assassinate the home secretary.

Will is taken to meet Tarrant in a nearby custody suite. Tarrant explains that it was he who provided the inspiration and the weaponry for the assassination attempt, his intention being to convince the home secretary to introduce even more draconian legislation, effectively

ending democracy as we know it. He is pleased by Will's work on his behalf and wants him to join the security services as an assassin, but Will refuses...

Chapter Twenty Two: Liberty

Will knew he was going to die.

He sat in the tiny cubicle aboard the prison van, a locked door to his right with a frosted pane letting in a dim, dismal light, the side of the van to his left. Barely enough room to move. He could hardly stand up. All he could do was sit there and listen to the rumble of the engine and the distant noise of the ongoing battle. But that was rapidly receding into the distance.

This was it, then, he thought bitterly. He had no hope of getting Quigley's Manifesto to Oxford now. Tarrant clearly knew nothing about it, or didn't care if he did. The pendrive remained in Will's sock, digging into his flesh. They'd find it on his dead body.

Because he was going to die. It seemed fantastic, unbelievable. Of course he'd die, one day, but not now, not at his age. And yet Tarrant couldn't afford to let Will live. He was an embarrassment. And Tarrant wasn't the kind of man to let an embarrassment trouble him for long.

He'd be shot while trying to escape. That must mean that somewhere between here and the prison the home secretary had prepared for him, Tarrant was going to have him shot. Maybe shoot him himself. Will didn't think that was something Tarrant was afraid of.

Even if he drew the line at killing him in the police cells. Not like it had been with the Professor, Will realised. Tarrant had been responsible for Quigley's death; it was obvious, whatever any public enquiry had said. And yet, in this lawless new world, Tarrant was afraid to do the same to Will. Why? Because of how the home secretary would react. Tarrant was as much of a career-freak as Geoff.

Will heard gunfire from outside. The van came to a sudden halt. He looked up, heard shouting from the cab. Feet pounded on the gangway outside. Someone was at the cell door. It clicked open, letting in daylight from the main section of the van. Behind the dark silhouetted figure, the main van door stood open.

Tarrant glowered down at him. He seized Will by the collar.

'I was waiting for a more secluded location,' he said. Will heard more gunfire outside, saw figures rushing past. Tarrant dragged him out onto the gangway. 'But this will have to do.' He produced a gun from a shoulder holster.

Will dragged himself free and flung himself towards the open doors. Tarrant fired. Will fell half out onto the road, pain shooting through his body from his left leg. Sobbing, he dragged

himself forward and his legs fell down onto the tarmac. Gunfire was cracking out on either side of him and the air stank of cordite.

He heard Tarrant move. Groaning, he rolled over. The security man stood in the van door, gun aimed directly at him. Will was too exhausted, too much in pain to move. He closed his eyes.

A shot rang out.

Will flinched. He heard someone groan, looked up to see Tarrant toppling backward into the van.

He looked round to see several figures, some wearing army uniforms, others in civvies, gathered on the road beside the van. They all carried guns. Beyond them was a jeep.

A big man hurried forward and helped Will to his feet. It was Mercer.

As Will limped forward to join the others, he saw that Tarrant's security men lay dead on the tarmac to either side of the van. Geoff stepped forward and seized Will's hand.

'We'll have them take a look at that wound,' he said, indicating Will's calf. 'Looks like he didn't get anything serious. Then it's time we went to Oxford.'

Will stared at him in confusion, allowed him to lead him to the back of the first jeep. Anna was there, looking tenderly at him, and he saw Mr and Mrs Towers beside her, Mr Towers clutching a submachine gun with a grin on his seamed old face. Then Mercer again, with the same orderly who had seen to him in the command post.

'But I thought you'd lost all faith in me,' he mumbled.

'What?' said Geoff. 'All that bullshit the spook came out with? About you trying to assassinate the home secretary? Come off it, Will. You're not a political assassin, you're the man with the plan, with Quigley's Manifesto.' He shrugged. 'Anyway, you're family.'

The orderly cleaned and bound the graze where Tarrant's bullet had skimmed Will's flesh. Will wanted to go back and find what had happened to Tarrant. Was he dead? If so, was that a good thing? Another death.

But Geoff kept on telling him about some mutiny. He'd led a mutiny. He seemed quite excited about it.

'Mutiny?' Will asked, confused. 'What's that going to do for your career prospects?' Geoff laughed uproariously. They were driving now.

'Doesn't matter,' he said. 'I'm joining the other side. The right side, Will, and well you know it. And I'll be bringing them the one man who can save the country.'

Will rubbed his eyes wearily. Were they still going on about that?

‘You do have the Manifesto?’ Geoff asked suddenly.

Will nodded, irritable. ‘Of course I have,’ he snapped. ‘What now? How are you going to get us across the warzone?’

‘We contacted the so-called rebels,’ Geoff explained. ‘We’re going to cross no-man’s-land – High Wycombe town centre, as was – and meet up with them on the edge of their lines. They’ve got orders to let us through; we only have to get past the loyalist lines. Then they’re going to take you to meet the Prime Minister. In Oxford. And they’re going to arrange for the publication of the professor’s manuscript. I’ve explained everything, you see.’

‘Oh, that thing.’ Will hunched against the cold as the jeep drove towards the war-torn centre of High Wycombe.

But as they passed the public library that had been Geoff’s command centre, soldiers raced out from behind another building across the road and opened fire. At the same time, more appeared from the library. One had a missile launcher. He fired it at the jeep.

The missile exploded in the road, sending the jeep careering across the roadway towards the first group of soldiers.

‘Open fire, men!’ Geoff bellowed. He produced a submachine gun and started shooting.

Mercer scrambled over to join Will.

‘You’ve got to get out of here!’ he bellowed over the roar of gunfire. ‘You’ve got to get across no-man’s-land.’

‘How!’ Will shouted back. ‘With all these soldiers!’

‘We’ll keep them at bay,’ Mercer shouted back. ‘You keep going!’ He leaned over to talk with the driver, who nodded, rose, and went to join the gunfight.

Mercer indicated the driving seat, then jumped down after the driver. Will was alone in the jeep.

‘Get moving!’ Mercer bellowed, gave him a wave, then turned, and opened fire on the advancing loyalists.

Will clambered over the seat and sat at the wheel. He looked over his shoulder. There was Mercer... Geoff... Anna, and the Towers! All firing at the loyalists. Buying him time to get away. Then Will saw Mr Towers go down, Mrs Towers kneeling at his side. Mercer turned, saw Will sitting there, and shouted something, pointing towards the roundabout.

Will sighed, turned the key in the ignition, and drove off across no-man's-land.

He felt like an utter traitor, abandoning his comrades to fight while he drove off into the sunset. He turned a corner. Seeing the scene of devastation he wondered if he hadn't taken the wrong turn somewhere.

Most of the town centre was rubble now, across which tanks rumbled. Ground troops were firing from cover; loyalists, judging by their position. Shaking with terror, Will rammed down the accelerator and drove across the rubble-littered tarmac.

More soldiers appeared from the ruins of Staples and fired at the loyalists. They were giving him covering fire! He swerved round the roundabout, gunfire lacing the grim skies above. Then he was screeching up the A40, on the road to Oxford.

He braked as he turned a corner to find a roadblock ahead of him. Soldiers swarmed out. An officer approached.

'Will Youds?' he asked.

Will nodded. The officer helped him out of the jeep. 'We've got a chopper waiting for you in the nearby field,' he said and Will's heart sang an aria.

He sat in the backseat of the helicopter as it rose above the trees and houses. The battle was visible from here, explosions spreading out across High Wycombe, but getting smaller and smaller as the pilot ascended. Will had wanted to know if the man had any connections with Daws Hill, and might know what had happened to Anna's boyfriend, but the man had shaken his head, said 'Army,' and taken off. After some puzzled thought, Will realised this was an Army helicopter, not RAF.

They flew high above the fields. The Chilterns fell away beneath them. To the left, the Thames wound through the countryside. After what seemed like no time, Will saw a town he realised must be Oxford; his goal for so long. He was almost there.

A noise from behind him made him look over his shoulder. Planes were screaming through the skies far behind them. Loyalists? They seemed to be coming from RAF Daws Hill. He brought them to the pilot's attention.

The man nodded.

'Soon be down, sir,' he said.

Then they were dropping, descending towards a park beside the Thames, the Isis as they called it this far upstream. He could see a small crowd gathered near an impromptu 'H' in the turf.

The chopper landed almost directly on the 'H.' The pilot flung open the door. Will jumped down and made his way across the turf towards the waiting group.

'Will!'

Daisy rushed forward to greet him. Will returned her hug, amazed to see her again. He had hoped they'd meet in Oxford, but he had hardly expected her to be in such elevated company. He frowned, seeing Rex standing sternly nearby, struck by a sudden thought. Had he known that Tarrant was running him? Was he to be trusted?

'You made it!' Daisy was jubilant. 'I thought we'd lost you.'

'Yes,' said Rex. 'We thought you'd thrown your life away, going back into London.'

'We didn't know why you'd gone,' Daisy said. 'Rex thought it was something to do with the Professor...'

'You've got Quigley's Manifesto?' Rex asked.

Will heard a cough from behind him. He turned to see a middle aged man in a suit, with dark, slicked back hair and the easy smile of a used car salesman.

He gaped. This was a face he'd seen so many times on the telly. 'But...' he managed. 'You're...'

'Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, yes,' the man said. 'Although some sections of the press now refer to me rather romantically as "the rebel leader." I'm glad you could make it, Mr Youds. I've heard a lot about you. It seems like you're the only person who can save this country from descending into civil war.'

Will looked around him in amazement. He recognised other people; cabinet ministers, senior civil servants, army officers.

'You don't think the war's begun?' he asked wildly, gesturing in the general direction of the Chilterns.

The Prime Minister shook his head. 'That? Just a little sabre-rattling,' he began, then broke off.

Will looked up as the sky began to roar with plane engines.

'Prime Minister,' he exclaimed. 'I saw them on my way. The loyalists have despatched bombers. They're heading straight towards Oxford.'

'Then we've not a moment to lose,' the Prime Minister said levelly. 'Field Marshal,' he said, addressing one of the army men, 'organise the defence of the town. Miss Rae, Mr Mundy;

take your friend to the publishers at once. I wish I had more time to thank you and congratulate you, Mr Youds. But I'm a little pressed for time....'

Daisy and Rex led Will away to a car parked in the street. The dreaming spires of Oxford towered above them as they drove through the streets, which were deserted except for a few army patrols.

Will sat in the back. Slowly, he eased the pendrive out of his sock. He gazed at it in silence. Finally, he'd made it. It was for this that he had fought his way across the country. He'd abandoned Daisy and Rex for it in London. He'd deserted the friends he had made on his long journey for the sake of this, Quigley's Manifesto. Had it been worth it? Only the future could tell.

The bombs began to fall on Oxford.

CHOICE HILL FARM by Paul Melhuish

Part One

Dandelion seeds, loosed by the May breeze, chased each other across the green sloping meadow like white fairies or little white parachutes. Cows grazed under a tree by the stream and the wind made a rushing sound through the branches of the wood beyond the meadow, and it still wasn't good enough. Jack stood behind Sarah. She was tense and tetchy, standing at the kitchen sink and looking out onto this view. He thought it would be perfect for her, an old house in the country, miles from anywhere. A single-track road to access the property with the occasional tractor passing or horse rider. Winter spent nights by an open fire.

The squat house was called Choice Hill Farm. Obviously it was no longer a working farm. The cow sheds and stables surrounding the farmhouse were empty. He'd considered converting them, adding value to the property, but really Jack didn't care where he lived. All his mental capacity was used just running the firm, balancing the books, making and keeping new contacts and contracts. He was far too busy to enjoy any of this.

A rural idyll and still she wasn't happy.

'You know what your therapist said, hunny.' He kissed her forehead. 'Not every idea works at first. You've got to give it time. Will you give it time?'

She forced a smile. 'Of course I will.' Sarah broke away from him and went to the spacious lounge and flicked on the widescreen. She'd be in front of the TV for hours now. Jack took this as his cue to go upstairs to the study and sort out Monday's presentation. He left her and shut himself in his room, assembled some papers and then slid into his chair before paying attention to the laptop waiting on the desk. Jack didn't understand depression. He'd never been depressed in his life but for Sarah it was her life. She'd been off work for two years now. They'd not had sex in all that time; pretty handy really when he'd picked up thrush from Caroline last summer. At least he hadn't given it to Sarah. Urban living had been getting her down, she'd said, so they'd moved out here for her sake. Still, this house was prime real estate and even with the fluctuating property market he was set to make a bomb out of it when he came to sell, despite the fact that he'd paid a lot for it. This was an up and coming area, tipped to be the next property hot spot. The nearest town, Whichford, was being developed rapidly and due to have a rail link in the next few years. No, he didn't understand Sarah's depression and, if he was honest with himself, he didn't really care.

Across the field, among the trees something caught his eye. A figure, a flickering of light, briefly skipped through the forest. He peered again but it was gone.

He'd relocated the offices to Milton Keynes, which was a half an hour drive away. Jack enjoyed blasting through the country lanes in the BMW. That was one advantage of living here. The other was that you could own a gun. He'd said he'd needed it for hunting but really

it was self-defence, for peace of mind. He'd taken it out into the fields one Sunday afternoon and let off a few rounds. However, living in the country had its down sides too. Caroline lived in London and had called the affair off. She wanted to give it another go with David and wasn't happy that his visits to see her in London had lessened. He'd have to find another mistress in the new city. The new sales girl, Jenny, looked promising but she talked too much.

When he arrived back at the farm house Sarah was distressed. Not just down like she normally was or crying uncontrollably but genuinely frightened.

'This place, this house, is haunted!' His wife was standing in the hallway breathing hard. 'I was in the living room and I thought someone was trying to break in. I heard scraping at the front door. I looked out of the upstairs window and there was no one there. Then I heard laughing, a woman laughing. Oh, Jack, I was so scared!'

He examined the front door and took a look around the house. Sarah swallowed a diazepam and went to bed. Upstairs in his study he watched the dandelion seeds blow across the field, white drifting clouds playing in the wind. He looked up periodically from compiling his report to watch them filter the rays of the dying sun.

'Jack! Jack! Wake up, there's someone outside. They're watching the house!' She shook him awake, into consciousness, then her words sunk in. Jack sprang out of bed. Someone was robbing the house. He knew this would happen. Rich businessman in the sticks; easy target for opportunistic scum. That's why he'd bought the gun.

'Where? Where are they?'

'In the field. They're watching the house from the field.'

Pulling on his trousers and slipping his feet into a pair of slippers, he ran downstairs and grabbed the shotgun then sprang into the night. He could feel the lawn beneath his feet. Armed, the homeowner took his position at the fence, looking out into the dark field. No one was there. He let off two rounds that exploded into the night then reluctantly went back inside. As he returned and went upstairs he figured that whoever had been watching the house had already fled by the time he'd got outside. Either that, or Sarah was imagining things.

'I got up for a pee in the night, I couldn't sleep anyway. I looked out of your study window and there he was, just standing there. It's not the first time I've seen odd things in this place.'

He bit into his toast, keeping an eye on the time.

'What things?'

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Tell me.’

‘I saw. I saw something in the woods. Someone dancing. Fairies dancing.’

‘Fine.’ He stood up and slipped on his jacket.

‘Jack. You can’t leave me. You can’t leave me here on my own. Take the day off, please.’

‘Impossible.’ He strode out to the BMW and she followed him. She began begging him to stay, holding onto his arm. This was unusual behaviour even for her. He shrugged her off and skidded away in the car leaving her sobbing in the driveway.

He took Jenny out for a drink in one of the bars in Milton Keynes when the working day was over. Afterwards she’d fellated him in his car. He’d reflected that, whereas Caroline had been ten years older than him, Jenny was ten years younger. She was more likely to become emotional and want to form a relationship. If that happened he’d just sack her but for now he’d found a new mistress and that’s all that mattered. The only downer to his day was that he’d have to face Sarah when he got back. He’d managed to put her right out of his mind.

When he did get back, she was clutching the shotgun and sitting on the doorstep, outside, in the dark. Sarah dropped the gun and embraced him when he approached her. The weeping began.

‘Look, look what they’ve done Jack.’ She led him out to the lawn behind the house.
‘What were you doing with the gun? You hate guns, what....’

The security light flickered on and he looked at the grass. Parts of it had died. The dead, yellowing grass spelt out:

GOODBYE SARAH

He frowned at her knowing she’d really flipped this time. This was one attention seeking stunt too many.

The situation was wearing him down. He drove back to Choice Hill Farm slowly wondering what insanity waited him when he got there. This was new; Sarah had taken her mental illness to another level.

Jack reflected on what an inhuman, unfeeling bastard he'd become. He used to love Sarah. When he'd met her she'd been imaginative and ambitious. She could see round corners that he couldn't. She had been a design print manager who'd painted in her spare time. He never had much time for the art stuff but her business sense was spot on. Jack had admired her for that. They'd dated and married, because that's what you did when you were a certain age. He could cope with the vegetarianism and the shockingly small amount she drank but when the depression started he switched off, logged out. He did everything he could for her, including buying this fucking house, but it was no good. Jack shocked himself with his next thought; perhaps she'd kill herself then he'd be free. The house could be put on the market before the slump proper began. No, no, no! That was an awful thing to think. He had to protect her from that. He had to love her, but couldn't.

She was drugged and dazed when he got home. She looked at him with blank eyes and stated, as if it was the end of her world:

'I saw them today. They surrounded the house and she was standing in the field looking over the fence. They were all there, her and all the lost souls.'

'Who were?'

'The Fairies!'

The Stuttgart contract came up and Jack decided a week away from the house was just what he needed. (He would, of course, take Jenny along and they'd fuck themselves sore). However, Sarah disagreed strongly. He casually mentioned it over lunch, some horrible vegetarian risotto she'd managed to make, on one of the rare Sundays he didn't work.

'A week? A whole week?'

'I have to. The Stuttgart contract is up for tenure. We have to present ourselves or we'll lose it and that's fifty K a month down the pan.'

She laid down her spoon. 'You cannot leave me here for a week, alone, with them. Jack, you don't understand.' She lowered her voice. 'They're going to make a move soon. You being here is the only thing that stops them. You have to *protect* me!'

'I'm not discussing it. I'm going and that's final. Go to your mother's if you're that bothered.'

'That's just it, you see? I can't. I can't leave this house. If I leave this house I get the most terrible headaches. If I just step outside I get a migraine. I tried to walk up the road yesterday, I was going to leave, just go anywhere but here, but the further I got, the more intense the pain became; I had to turn back. When I did, the headache stopped. *They* want me to stay. They want me here.'

He played along with her, 'And why do they want you here?'

'They want to kill me. If you leave me here on my own they'll kill me.'

'Okay, I'll send Jenny to Stuttgart. Jenny'll have to deal with it.'

He slipped a couple of diazepam in her drink. Diazepam always made her sleep. When she was snoring he packed his bags and slipped into his study to pick up his laptop. As he did so, he thought he saw a figure in the field watching the house. He looked again but saw no one. Jack crept quietly downstairs and loaded the BMW. The car slid out of the drive and into the night, its headlights cutting a way through the darkness, illuminating the cow parsley and dandelion stalks that encroached upon the road. Jack stopped at the 24 hour garage and bought three packs of condoms. He picked Jenny up from her modest Milton Keynes bed-sit and she couldn't keep her hands off him all the way down the M1. The flight was just a blur as he slept though most of it but by the time they'd reached Germany he was awake. They booked into the hotel and by midday they'd used all the condoms. In the afternoon, as Jenny was taking a shower, he rang Choice Hill Farm. The phone rang and rang. There was no reply.

* * *

Sarah stood with her back to the cooker gripping the steak knife. The field beyond the window was empty now. Dandelion seeds blew across the still, green corn and the sun shone intermittently through the billowing clouds above. They'd entered the house. They were no longer in the field. The black-eyed fairy had been standing at the living room window. Now she was padding down the hallway singing her childish, mocking song. Her wings fluttered. She'd stopped singing now and was laughing. Sarah was acutely aware that she was in the middle of nowhere with this entity stalking her. The black-eyed fairy took position in the kitchen doorway, smiling.

'What do you *want*?' Sarah screamed

Still grinning, she stepped lightly into the kitchen.

'*What do you want?*' Sarah screamed again.

GUINEA PIG GOTHIC by John Campbell

Part One

The small dorm was cool and smelled of rain, the only window open just enough to let in a breeze that shook the blinds, the white slats lit by occasional flashes of lightning. The thunder had yet to arrive. Ivy covering the outside brick walls rustled like whispers.

Jason Carpenter sat in the dead man's room, staring at a laptop screen.

To be fair, it was his room too, even more so now. Half the room was bare, a dozen cardboard boxes piled on the opposite, stripped mattress. Each had the name TERRY scrawled on it in black Sharpie. The other small desk was empty as well, except for a desk lamp that looked old enough to have been original issue when the college was built over a hundred years ago.

On screen, a blank Word document stared back, the cursor winking like an accusation. Jason leaned back, sipped a Red Bull and stretched, his cast thumping against the desk leg, making him hiss and wince. Mid-thigh all the way down to wrap around his right foot, the cast was only a little over twenty-four hours old and he was a long way from getting used to it. His crutches leaned against the wall between the desk and the window.

A glance at his digital clock told him he was more than nine hours overdue for his Percocet, a fact his leg had been reminding him of for just that long. Jason looked over his shoulder at the shelf hung above the foot of his bed – the shelf where Sylvester lived – and saw the orange prescription bottle with the white cap right where he had left it beside Sylvester's cage. He wanted one badly.

He looked away. He wanted to live more.

A bolt of pain from his tibia – broken neatly in two places – shot up into his hip as a challenge to his medicinal abstinence, and he clenched his fists, digging his fingernails into his palms. He opened his eyes and gasped, leaning forward and gripping the cast. That was when his right ankle – also a double fracture, not to be outdone – abruptly reminded him what happened when he moved too quickly. Jason groaned, and tears leaked from the corners of both eyes. He sagged back into the hard wooden desk chair.

I'm right here, dumbass, called the Percocet. *Take two, and in twenty minutes, you'll be right as rain.*

Jason looked back at the pills. In the cage beside them, obese Sylvester squeezed his furry ass onto his wheel and went for a spin. Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Right as rain, Jason thought, looking at the window. He could hear the rain now, pattering on the ivy like a typewriter, rushing through the building's green copper gutters, sluicing off the

eaves of the four-story building, gaining momentum as the storm built. The blinds floated into the room in the strengthening breeze.

He pushed back from the desk, leaned to get his crutches and levered himself up with a groan, swaying, clenching the grips, fearing he was going over, and then stabilizing. Not bad, he thought. Didn't even puke. Yet. While he still had the courage, he crutched across the small floor space and snatched the prescription bottle off the shelf. The rattle of pills made the bloated guinea pig stop and stare wide-eyed for a moment, whiskers quivering, before plodding onward once more.

Jason shoved the bottle into the front pocket of his Penn State hoody jacket, managing not to drop a crutch in the process, and took the last painful steps to the door. He checked the lock and the deadbolt – again – and put an eye to the peephole.

Empty hallway. Cheap, worn carpet and dull, tan walls. Fluorescents behind frosted plastic panels and at the end a red fire exit sign.

Thunder rumbled behind him and the blinds banged against the window frame, making him jump and grimace. The leg throbbed, and Jason got back to his chair as quickly as he could, hoping he wouldn't fall down before he got there. He didn't, but he nearly tipped over backwards as he dropped into it, right leg fully extended. The crutches he just dropped to the floor.

Winded and squinting from the pain, he stared at the only two signatures on his cast. One was from the nurse who wheeled him out of the hospital to Bree's car, the other from Bree herself. Under her big, loopy, girly signature was a red lipstick mark.

"I'll come back and check on you tonight," she'd promised after driving him back to campus and helping him to his room. But she hadn't. Her cell phone went straight to voicemail, and she wasn't responding to texts. Jason hadn't gone so far as to call her roommate and see where she was, that might have been too clingy, and they hadn't been going out long enough for that kind of checking-up call.

Rain drummed against the glass, and the wood floor beneath the window was getting wet, but Jason wasn't about to get up to close it. The lightning was coming faster now, each ripple of white followed closely by a boom.

The lights flickered.

Jason stared at the blank page on the laptop. His English Comp professor, Mr. Billings, had been one of the few people to visit him in the hospital. Billings knew Jason's parents not only lived in Arizona, but were farther away still, on an anniversary cruise of the Mediterranean. The prof was cool. He had taken a liking to Jason early in the year, said he enjoyed his writing style and creative slant, and had sort of adopted him.

Billings had gone with him to the hospital to identify Terry's body.

Afterwards the two of them went to a local pub, and the prof bought him a beer, even though Jason was only twenty.

“I can’t tell you what you should be feeling,” Billings had said. “It’s a lot to take in, and losing a friend...especially like this...can leave a hole in you.”

Jason got that. There was an empty spot in his chest, as well as his room.

“Try writing about it. Get it down in words, how you’re feeling, what you’re thinking. Don’t worry about structure.”

“Why?”

Billings sipped his beer. “Because you’ll forget.” He held up a hand to stop Jason’s protest. “Not forget about what happened, I mean forget the intensity. Time will numb this for you, make it easier to handle, and that’s a good thing. But you’ll never be closer to really articulating the grief and pain and feeling as you are right after something like this happens.”

Jason had the impression that Mr. Billings was speaking from some kind of personal experience, but knew it would be wrong to ask.

“And it could be cathartic for you.” He shrugged. “Years from now, when you’re not hurting and the memories have faded, you’ll read what you’ve written and be amazed at how time can heal you.”

He promised that it *would* fade, that in time Terry’s death would become more distant, no less sad, but a memory without such sharp edges. There in that dim pub it was meant to be comforting, safe advice. It came from someone who wouldn’t be on the bike path, who wouldn’t see what Jason was soon to see.

The thunder had Sylvester agitated, and the chubby rodent was hauling ass around his little metal wheel. *Squeak, squeak, squeak!* Jason’s leg was sending out pain pulses in time with his heartbeat, and he reached into his pocket to close his hand around the bottle of Percocet, rubbing it like an Irish worry stone. Relief could be twenty minutes away.

It occurred to him for the countless time how stupid it was to be alone in this dorm room. But then where was he supposed to go? Even if he could manage to crutch anywhere – and the idea of even getting out the building without collapsing, vomiting or both was laughable – everything on campus was closed. He didn’t really have any friends in the dorm, at least none close enough to come babysit him, and Bree was who knew where? His best friend was dead.

He’d spoken to his parents from the hospital. They were very concerned, but still three days out from arriving back in the States, and Jason wouldn’t hear of them cutting their anniversary trip short and spending a small fortune on a last minute flight from Greece to

Pennsylvania. He said he'd see them when they got back, he wasn't going anywhere. They were happy that Billings was there to keep an eye on him.

He wondered if Billings would mind a call at ten o'clock at night. *Uh, Mr. Billings? I'm alone in my room and there's a storm and I'm hurt and scared and feeling sorry for myself and gee, I guess I sound like a little girl but could you come and get me, and...?*

Jason shook his head and snorted in disgust.

Then he picked up his Blackberry and dialed Billings anyway.

"Hi, you've reached Charles Billings. Please leave a message."

Jason tossed the phone back on the desk, and as it landed, a cannon crack of thunder shook the building. Brilliant lightning – *close* lightning – turned the blinds a painful white. Jason's leg screamed, and so did he. God, he felt like crying.

Three nights ago, Mr. Billings had come knocking. It was around 9:30, and Jason had been reclining on his bed playing Xbox instead of doing his required reading on the robber barons and the rise of the steel empire. Billings told him Terry had been in some kind of accident, and took him downstairs to where a campus police car was waiting. A paunchy, middle-aged cop sat behind the wheel, and said nothing as they made the short drive to the hospital. When Jason peppered his professor with questions, Billings had only shrugged and said, "I'm sure we'll find out."

The patrol car dropped them off under the emergency room canopy, where a county deputy was waiting, a woman a little older than Jason who fit into her khaki uniform quite well. Who was he kidding, she had been completely hot.

"Terry Edwards was murdered tonight," she said by way of introduction, guiding them into the hospital. "We can't get in touch with any relatives yet, and since you're his roommate I'm going to ask you to identify him."

He'd gone numb, and followed her down to the hospital lower level without a word, Billings trailing. In a small, sterile room, a man in scrubs led them to a stainless steel table with a sheet-draped body. Part of Jason was surprised. On TV, there was always some sort of window between the body and the people doing the identification. Nope, up close and personal, complete with the smell of a fresh corpse. And no warning, either. No, "Prepare yourself, this may be disturbing." Scrub Guy simply snapped back the sheet like some morbid bullfighter, and there was Terry, marble white, stiff, bloodless. His eyes were open and staring at the ceiling. His mouth was open, as if he'd been screaming. And his throat was open as well, torn away as if by a beast. The ragged wound was bloodless, too, and strangely, that made it a little easier to take. Billings rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Is this Terry Edwards?" the deputy asked.

On TV, this was the point where the family member sobbed and turned away, whimpering that it was indeed their loved one. But Jason couldn't take his eyes off the corpse.

"Yuh," he grunted.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Yuh...yuh huh."

"That's a yes," Mr. Billings told her.

"Good enough," she said, nodding at Scrub Guy and motioning for Jason and Billings to follow her.

Jason blinked, still staring. "What...what happened to him?"

Scrub Guy snapped the sheet back over Terry's face. *Ole*'. "Cause of death was massive trauma to the airways and jugular, accompanied by near complete exsanguination."

Jason looked at him. "Ex... san...?"

"He bled out," Scrub Guy explained, turning away. "Though I understand very little was found at the scene."

Billings and the deputy collected Jason and led him out, but halfway to the elevator he stopped. "Wait. How did...what *happened* to him?"

The deputy looked tired. "Someone found him in the parking lot behind Ricky's Fastlane a couple of hours ago. You know the place?"

He did. It was a popular destination for the college crowd. He and Terry had been there many times, sometimes with dates, sometimes just to hang out.

"He was like you saw him. His wallet was missing, so we're guessing a robbery. Haven't found the weapon. Don't have any witnesses yet." Then her eyes softened. "I'm sorry about your friend." Jason knew she meant it, and for some reason that helped a little.

But a robbery? he thought as he followed her out. People got stabbed, shot...who robs someone by ripping their throat out? She'd taken them to her own squad car, where there followed a predictable line of questions and note taking. How long have you known him? Did he say where he was going tonight? Who were his friends? Drug use? Drug sales? Any recent confrontations or enemies?

Jason told her everything he could. Terry was a really nice guy, popular, a couple of casual girlfriends, decent grades, no serious drugs, mild partying. No fighting, no attitude, certainly

nothing to provoke something like this. She'd seemed satisfied and dropped them off at the dorm. Then Billings had suggested a beer.

The dorm lights flickered again, and he knew it was only a matter of time before they went out and stayed out. This old building was sketchy, with unpredictable plumbing and even more unreliable power. The lights went out in good weather. In this storm, it was a guarantee.

And a few minutes later, they did go out. No flickering, just a muffled thud followed by darkness. The mini fridge in the corner under the TV whined to a stop, and from somewhere beyond the door came a couple of distant groans and protests.

Now there was only the glow of his laptop screen running on battery, and the intermittent flashes of lightning. Thunder crashed, and the wind had the blinds twisting as they flapped. Rain poured in through the open window. Jason just sat and watched the door, rubbing the bottle in his pocket. Normally a power outage was a signal it was time for bed, but he had recently decided that sleep could become a permanent condition.

Someone walked past his room, footsteps soft on the carpeting. There was no glow of a flashlight from under the door. A moment later, he heard a door close in the hallway.

Yesterday he'd spoken to Terry's mom, who was right now driving in from Oregon with Terry's younger brother. He'd never met her, and the conversation was uncomfortable, filled with silent gaps. He had agreed to pack up Terry's things for her. He didn't know what she was going to do about the body, and didn't ask. Ship it home, he guessed. Did FedEx have some kind of special rate for that?

After putting everything in boxes, he'd taken his bike over to the Student Union where he'd met Bree. They went to an early movie, then sat in her car and made out for a while. It was kind of strange at first, what with his best friend brutally murdered only a day earlier and his stuff stacked on his bed in little cardboard coffins, but he got past it. They seemed to really like each other, Bree was a definite hottie, and she'd been dropping hints that he was going to get lucky. Jason decided that turning into a monk wasn't going to bring Terry back.

It was when he was biking back to the dorm after dark, cruising along a paved path lined with old-fashioned lampposts, that he'd seen Terry. He had just happened to glance to the right, and there he was. His roommate was standing in the shadows of a small grove of trees beside the path, dressed in jeans and a Hard Rock t-shirt. White, bloodless, he'd raised a hand in greeting, and when he spoke, Jason had seen the fangs.

"Hey, dude," Terry said.

Jason had driven his bike right into a lamppost.

When he came around there were several concerned-looking students standing over him, and his right leg felt like a bag of broken glass. He'd looked around, still dazed, but there was no sign of Terry.

In the hospital – the same ER he'd passed through only a few short days ago – the doctor told him how lucky he'd been not to have broken his neck. He suggested a bike helmet in the future, and gave him a pamphlet on the perils of spinal injury. Mr. Billings had brought him a couple of magazines and managed to contact Jason's parents aboard their ship so they could talk to their son. Bree had shown up, concerned but uncomfortable, either with the surroundings or with the question of how much concern she should be showing at this early stage of their relationship. Jason told none of them about seeing Terry.

And now, in the dark with a storm raging outside, Jason wasn't even a little surprised when he heard the soft knock on the door, and the familiar voice. He'd known it was coming.

“Dude, open up,” said Terry.

THIEVES FROM THE STARS by Rex Mundy

3 The Hollow Hills

A bowstring hummed. Wind whistled as a flint-tipped arrow sped through the air to plunge into the wood-wose's back. The creature's eyes bulged, and it took one step forward, letting its cudgel slip from its nerveless fingers. Then it pitched forward into the dirt.

'Gu-gu-gu!' screamed another wose, dropping Theodric and rushing forward. It bent over the chieftain's arrow-transfixed corpse. Another humming bowstring heralded the arrival of a second arrow, between this wose's shoulders. With a strangled squawk, it collapsed beside its chief.

Suddenly, the entire wood-wose clan was on its feet, charging desperately towards source of the arrows, the trees beyond the cave mouth. Theodric forgotten, they poured screaming out into the morning sunlight, shrieking out primitive battle-cries.

Theodric got to his feet and crouched in the shadow of the cave. He saw the woses fall one by one in the shower of arrows that came from the trees around. A few struggled through the hail of death, but none reached their unseen assailants. Soon the clearing was piled thick with dead and dying furry bodies.

As the last of the woses fell, Theodric stared down at the chieftain's body. The arrow that transfixed it was a clumsy affair, a series of lengths of wood bound together with sinew. The flights were made of raven's feathers. He wrenched it from the corpse.

The arrowhead was made of flint. He frowned, and touched it. It was sharp, sharper than he would have expected from stone. He looked up to where the last wose was choking out its life at the far side of the clearing. No sign of the archers. What people would use stone to tip their arrows?

He stepped out of the cave. Instantly, he heard bowstrings hum, and he threw himself to the ground. A flight of stone-tipped arrows winged over him and disappeared into the cave.

Quickly, before they could shoot again, he leapt to his feet. 'Wait!' he shouted. 'I wish to thank you!'

Another volley came hissing out of the bushes. He flung himself down again. Perhaps if he tried the Welsh tongue, he thought to himself. He'd unconsciously hailed them in his own language. His kind were unpopular in Britannia.

He got up again, and repeated his words in Welsh.

There was a silence from the bushes. Encouraged, he tried again. 'I was a prisoner of the woses,' he called. 'They attacked my men, and bore me off to their den. They were about to

smash my brain open when you attacked. I don't know why you did so, but I am indebted to you.'

He paused, and stared around at the silent trees. 'Are you willing to talk with me?' he asked. 'I must get back to my men. Can you show me the way out of this forest?'

'Why do you wish to leave?' came a piping voice from down in the bushes.

Theodric frowned. 'I told you, I need to return to my men. But I am willing to make any repayment for your killing of these creatures.' He indicated the pathetic wose corpses that littered the clearing, the victims of superior technology.

There was a muttering from down in the bushes. Finally, a bush rustled, and a stunted figure advanced into the light of the clearing. Theodric stared in wonder at this inhabitant of the wild wood.

He was about three foot high, with black hair and sallow skin, black, beady eyes, and a strangely protuberant mouth. Swathed in furs, some of which looked like the hides of woses, he bore a short bow and had a quiver of arrows on his belt. Though perfectly formed, the dwarf only came up to Theodric's waist.

'Repayment?' the little man demanded.

Theodric gazed at him incredulously. 'Woden!' he hissed. 'A dwarf?' He fumbled for the Ðunær's hammer amulet round his neck.

The dwarf's face twisted angrily.

'What if I am?' he snarled.

He turned, and beckoned. The bushes all around Theodric rustled and more dwarves stepped out into the clearing, about twenty of them, all with arrows pointed at him.

Theodric realised that he had been ungracious.

'My apologies,' he told the dwarf. 'Until this day, I had believed dwarves, woses, and elves to be fables of the bards. Today I have met woses and dwarves in the space of a few hours. Surely you can understand my surprise?'

The dwarf grinned suddenly.

'And I've never seen one of your type before,' he replied. 'Except for those our greatest hunters have tracked and shot down. Few of your kind get this far into Coit Celidon and live to tell the tale.'

Theodric looked uneasily down at him.

‘You slew my enemies...’ he said slowly. Was this dwarf to be as great a threat as the woses?

‘All predators are our foes,’ the dwarf told him. ‘These woses’ – he kicked the nearest corpse – ‘your folk who stole our lands, the thieves who come from the stars and take our women and children...’ The dwarf’s face was a picture of sorrow.

Theodric shook his head. ‘I’m truly sorry to hear this,’ he said. ‘But I must find my men. I must be going...’

He turned to leave the clearing.

‘No!’ shouted another dwarf, a great fat creature. Suddenly the dwarves were all aiming their bows at him again. The fat dwarf turned to the one who had already spoken.

‘Korrakh! This great lummoX said he is willing to make any repayment for us saving him!’

Korrakh turned his miserable eyes toward the fat dwarf. ‘What of it, Bloneg?’ he demanded. ‘What kind of repayment can make good my loss?’

‘Think, Korrakh, think!’ Bloneg urged. ‘He can help us! He is stronger than us!’

Sudden realisation seemed to dawn on the young dwarf’s face.

‘Aye!’ he exclaimed. ‘Bloneg – you’re right!’ He turned to Theodric. ‘Come with us. We have a task for you. If you do what we ask of you, we will guide you to the edge of the forest, where you will be able to find your men.’

‘Very well,’ Theodric replied. He glanced around the corpse-littered glade. ‘It seems I owe you. And let no man – or dwarf – say I ever failed to repay a debt.’

The cliff rose high above the forest canopy, and seemed to bar their path. A quarter of an hour had passed since Theodric’s meeting with Korrakh and the dwarves, and he had been hustled through thick, impenetrable forest and evil-smelling swamps, over hills and through narrow gullies, along dwarf paths that were not made for a man of his size. Now, they had broken out of the trees to be confronted by a high ridge of rock. Theodric studied it as the dwarves milled around his feet.

‘How do we get over this?’ he asked Korrakh. ‘Or would it not be better if we went round it?’

Korrakh looked at him as if he was mad.

‘Neither,’ he snapped. ‘We go into it.’

He stumped over to the rock wall, and disappeared into a narrow crack that had escaped Theodric's attention. The rest of the little people streamed forward to follow.

Theodric gazed around at the silent forest. To think, a day ago he had been at the head of a band of highly-trained Saxon warriors, and here he was, following a group of dwarves into the bowels of the earth. He shook his head. Such were the ways of Wyrð.

He began to squeeze his bulk through the crack.

It wasn't long before the narrow tunnel beyond widened out, and Theodric could follow his tiny allies through the darkness with ease. As he did so, he became aware of the dwarves' eyes glinting around him in the darkness like fireflies. Evidently, they could see well enough in the darkness.

'Where are we going, Korrakh?' he asked as they entered the depths of the hills.

'To our lord and master, King Bukhan,' Korrakh replied from up ahead. Looking in that direction, Theodric caught a brief glimpse of light up ahead – not daylight, and yet not torchlight. Were they nearing their destination? But no. 'Now, silence!' Korrakh added. 'We are not far from the caverns of the dark elves...'

Dark elves, Theodric thought. What next? But they passed this danger with ease, and soon Korrakh was willing to speak again.

'The dark elves are the reason we want your services,' he told Theodric, as the Saxon warrior stumbled after him in the pitch blackness. Korrakh darted a glance up at Theodric. 'You're not good in the darkness,' he added, 'but that's not so bad. The dark elves insist on illuminating their caves. That was the reason for the glow you must have noticed before.'

'Dark elves don't like the dark?' questioned Theodric.

'They come from a dying world,' the dwarf replied. 'It is permanently in sunlight, and is rapidly becoming a desert. That is why they come to our world and prey upon our people.'

They hurried on, with Theodric trying desperately to understand this.

'Here we are!' hissed Korrakh. They had come to an archway in the tunnel. 'Beyond is the cave of the tribe of Bakh!'

Theodric followed his guides down a narrow set of steps, and turned a corner. Beyond him opened a vast cavern.

He stood at the edge of it, blinking in the glow from the five or six bonfires that were dotted around the wide expanse. The dwarves around him scurried forward, in the direction of a whole village of roundhouses dotted along the banks of an underground stream that snaked through the centre of the cavern. Korrakh tugged at Theodric's breeches.

‘Follow me, outsider,’ he told him.

Korrakh led him through the village, where Theodric was subjected to the gaze of many more of the little people. The dwarf hunting party spread out among them, and animated conversations broke out through the crowd. But Theodric paid them no heed. His attention was caught by the hut at the end of the street.

This was large enough for him to enter without bending, he could see even from here. But it was the skulls and rotting heads that surrounded its low, beehive shape that really drew his eye. Some of them were those of other dwarves, with those inhuman, coal-black eyes rolling in pale faces; others were hairy and subhuman, the heads of wood-woses. Others belonged to true animals. Some were even less human.

As Korrakh led Theodric to the entrance, the Saxon stared uneasily at the grey head that crowned the arch; something with an enormous brainpan and a shrunken face at the base of a tapering face. Two wide, slanted, almond, alien eyes stared glassily down at Theodric as he entered the hall.

‘Who’s this, Korrakh?’ wheezed a voice from the far side of the fire that smoked in the centre of the hut. Within, the hut seemed little different from those the Britons and Picts lived in; round walls and sloping, rounded roof. But everything was on a different scale, which disturbed Theodric in a slight, nagging manner. He peered through the smoke.

On the far side of the fire squatted a frail, white-haired old dwarf, who lounged in a high-backed chair and glared beadily down at Korrakh, as he flung himself down in obeisance before him.

‘O King Bukhan!’ said Korrakh in subservient tones, quite different from his habitual arrogance. ‘Here is one of our ancient enemies, come to aid us in our hour of need.’

King Bukhan squinted up through the smoke at Theodric.

‘He has the look of the Pretani, I’ll grant you.’ The king nodded. ‘And yet there is something different about him... What is your tribe, invader?’

Theodric coughed in the smoke.

‘I am no Pretani,’ he said. ‘I am a Saxon. My name is Theodric. Who are the Pretani?’

‘The Pretani are the fiends who invaded our lands and cast us out into the wilderness a thousand years ago or more,’ said King Bukhan. ‘Though some say they have a different name these days... Brythons?’

‘Britons?’ Theodric suggested. ‘No, I am not one of them. I am a Saxon. We live across the sea to the east, and in these days it is us who are the invaders, while we have the Britons on the run – or did have, until this soldier Arthur began to lead them.’

The king gurgled with sudden mirth.

‘So!’ he laughed unpleasantly. ‘The proud invaders, the golden strangers – they too bow to an invader from the east?’ He laughed again. ‘Tell me more!’

Theodric explained how, a few decades before, Vortigern, king of Britannia, had paid a small warband of Jutes to protect his kingdom from the Picts, savages who dwelt in the northern hills. Hengest, chieftain of the warband, had sent messengers over the seas to his own lands and to the overcrowded realms of their neighbours, the Angles and the Saxons, asking for reinforcements, reminding them of how the Romans always used to reward military service with grants of land. Theodric, a landless younger son of a Saxon chieftain from the Elbe, had joined Hengest’s army.

“But once we had defeated the Picts and begun to settle down,” Theodric went on, “it seemed that Vortigern was unable to support us, and that his people were unwilling to pay taxes to feed foreign warriors of a different faith. Famine struck, the Britons began to harass us in our new lands, and soon it seemed that there was only one solution – revolution!”

They had struck as soon as possible, slaughtered the British government, and went on to ravage the kingdom. Hengest lost his brother Horsa in the initial fighting, and he seemed to go mad, sacking cities, slaughtering peoples, becoming more of a threat to the Britons than the Picts had ever been. But finally, the Britons had recouped their forces, and risen against them, led by Arthur, the bastard half-brother of the king of a western realm called Dumnonia. Hengest had been slain, and now his son Oeric commanded the host. But the war was going badly. They had lost six battles in a row before Oeric betrayed Theodric and his men at the battle of Coit Celidon.

Bukhan followed this tale with glee, seeming saddened only when he heard that the Welsh were regaining ground. He shook his head, and muttered that his own folk had thrown off their conquerors’ yoke for a while, but it had not availed them in the end.

‘Sit down, stranger,’ he added. ‘Let me tell you the tale of our people – once proud rulers of Albion, now the prey of all, dwelling in holes in the ground, with nothing to cling to but the knowledge that once our ancestors were kings.’

And so the king launched into his own tale. How his people, who the Welsh called the Tylwyth Teg, the Little People, had once been men like any others, and had ruled the island in the age before the Age of Bronze, raising their mighty megaliths and dwelling in high-timbered halls. But they had fallen before the invasion of the Bronze-men, and the Iron-men, invader after invader – the ancestors of Theodric’s foes, the Britons. They had been forced into hiding; some beneath the earth; some in the high mountains of the west where their descendants were still seen alongside children of later invaders; to dwindle and die in

darkness and despair. He told Theodric how all men's hands were against them; how they had suffered the same fate as the woses, from whom they had wrested the land in the far-off aeons before the dawn of time; to come close to extinction, to be relegated to the stuff of legend...

'And even now, now that we lurk deep within these caves, ascending only to hunt and to battle our foes above-ground, even now we are not free from enemies, who envy us in our starveling existence, and raid us down in our dank caverns...' The king stared into the embers of the fire.

Theodric shifted uncomfortably, and looked over at Korrakh. But he too was staring abstractedly into the distance. Silence reigned, apart from the distant sounds of the underground village without.

Theodric could stand no more.

'Who is it who preys upon you, then?' he asked, breaking the silence.

King Bukhan looked up suddenly. His eyes glinted in the shadows of the hut.

'The thieves who have crept down from the stars to steal our children and to impregnate our women,' he hissed. 'The ones who come to reave us of the little that remains in our degradation.' He turned to stare directly at Theodric.

'The dark elves...'

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLIX.

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

The soldiery had been sent for from their principal station near the churchyard, and had advanced with some degree of reluctance to quell what they considered as nothing better nor worse than a drunken brawl at a public-house, which they really considered they ought not to be called to interfere with.

When, however, the party reached the spot, and heard what a confusion there was, and saw in what numbers the rioters were assembling, it became evident to them that the case was of a more serious complexion than they had at first imagined, and consequently they felt that their professional dignity was not so much compromised with their interference with the lawless proceedings.

Some of the constabulary of the town were there, and to them the soldiers promised they would hand what prisoners they took, at the same time that they made a distinct condition that they were not to be troubled with their custody, nor in any way further annoyed in the business beyond taking care that they did not absolutely escape, after being once secured.

This was all that the civil authorities of the town required, and, in fact, they hoped that, after making prisoners of a few of the ringleaders of the riotous proceedings, the rest would disperse, and prevent the necessity of capturing them.

Be it known, however, that both military and civil authorities were completely ignorant of the dreadful outrage against all common decency, which had been committed within the public-house.

The door was well guarded, and the question now was how the rioters were to be made to come down stairs, and be captured; and this was likely to remain a question, so long as no means were adopted to make them descend. So that, after a time, it was agreed that a couple of troopers should march up stairs with a constable, to enable him to secure any one who seemed a principal in the riot.

But this only had the effect of driving those who were in the second-floor, and saw the approach of the two soldiers, whom they thought were backed by the whole of their comrades, up a narrow staircase, to a third-floor, rather consisting of lofts than of actual rooms; but still, for the time, it was a refuge; and owing to the extreme narrowness of the approach to it, which consisted of nearly a perpendicular staircase, with any degree of tact or method, it might have been admirably defended.

In the hurry and scramble, all the lights were left behind; and when the two soldiers and constables entered the room where the corpse had lain, they became, for the first time, aware of what a horrible purpose had been carried out by the infuriated mob.

The sight was one of perfect horror, and hardened to scenes which might strike other people as being somewhat of the terrific as these soldiers might be supposed to be by their very profession, they actually sickened at the sight which the mutilated corpse presented, and turned aside with horror.

These feelings soon gave way to anger and animosity against the crowd who could be guilty of such an atrocious outrage; and, for the first time, a strong and interested vengeance against the mob pervaded the breasts of those who were brought to act against it.

One of the soldiers ran down stairs to the door, and reported the scene which was to be seen above. A determination was instantly come to, to capture as many as possible of those who had been concerned in so diabolical an outrage, and leaving a guard of five men at the door, the remainder of the party ascended the staircase, determined upon storming the last refuge of the rioters, and dragging them to justice.

The report, however, of these proceedings that were taking place at the inn, spread quickly over the whole town; and soon as large a mob of the disorderly and the idle as the place could at all afford was assembled outside the inn.

This mob appeared, for a time, inertly to watch the proceedings. It seemed rather a hazardous thing to interfere with the soldiers, whose carbines look formidable and troublesome weapons.

With true mob courage, therefore, they left the minority of their comrades, who were within the house, to their fate; and after a whispered conference from one to the other, they suddenly turned in a body, and began to make for the outskirts of the town.

They then separated, as if by common consent, and straggled out into the open country by twos and threes, consolidating again into a mass when they had got some distance off, and clear of any exertions that could be made by the soldiery to stay them.

The cry then rose of "Down with Sir Francis Varney—slay him—burn his house—death to all vampyres!" and, at a rapid pace, they proceeded in the direction of his mansion.

We will leave this mob, however, for the present, and turn our attention to those who are at the inn, and are certainly in a position of some jeopardy. Their numbers were not great, and they were unarmed; certainly, their best chance would have been to have surrendered at discretion; but that was a measure which, if the sober ones had felt inclined to, those who were infuriated and half maddened with drink would not have acceded to on any account.

A furious resistance was, therefore, fairly to be expected; and what means the soldiery were likely to use for the purpose of storming this last retreat was a matter of rather anxious conjecture.

In the case of a regular enemy, there would not, perhaps, have been much difficulty; but here the capture of certain persons, and not their destruction, was the object; and how that was to be accomplished by fair means, certainly was a question which nobody felt very competent to solve.

Determination, however, will do wonders; and although the rioters numbered over forty, notwithstanding all their desertions, and not above seventeen or eighteen soldiers marched into the inn, we shall perceive that they succeeded in accomplishing their object without any manoeuvring at all.

The space in which the rioters were confined was low, narrow, and inconvenient, as well as dark, for the lights on the staircase cast up that height but very insufficient rays.

Weapons of defence they found but very few, and yet there were some which, to do them but common credit, they used as effectually as possible.

These attics, or lofts, were used as lumber-rooms, and had been so for years, so that there was a collection of old boxes, broken pieces of furniture, and other matters, which will, in defiance of everything and everybody, collect in a house.

These were formidable means of defence, if not of offence, down a very narrow staircase, had they been used with judgment.

Some of the rioters, who were only just drunk enough to be fool-hardy, collected a few of these articles at the top of the staircase, and swore they would smash anybody who should attempt to come up to them, a threat easier uttered than executed.

And besides, after all, if their position had been ever so impregnable, they must come down eventually, or be starved out.

But the soldiers were not at liberty to adopt so slow a process of overcoming their enemy, and up the second-floor staircase they went, with a determination of making short work of the business.

They paused a moment, by word of command, on the landing, and then, after this slight pause, the word was given to advance.

Now when men will advance, in spite of anything and everything, it is no easy matter to stop them, and he who was foremost among the military would as soon thought of hesitating to ascend the narrow staircase before him, when ordered so to do, as paying the national debt. On he went, and down came a great chest, which, falling against his feet, knocked him down as he attempted to scramble over it.

"Fire," said the officer; and it appeared that he had made some arrangements as to how the order was to be obeyed, for the second man fired his carbine, and then scrambled over his

prostrate comrade; after which he stooped, and the third fired his carbine likewise, and then hurried forward in the same manner.

At the first sound of the fire arms the rioters were taken completely by surprise; they had not had the least notion of affairs getting to such a length. The smell of the powder, the loud report, and the sensation of positive danger that accompanied these phenomena, alarmed them most terrifically; so that, in point of fact, with the exception of the empty chest that was thrown down in the way of the first soldier, no further idea of defence seemed in any way to find a place in the hearts of the besieged.

They scrambled one over the other in their eagerness to get as far as possible from immediate danger, which, of course, they conceived existed in the most imminent degree the nearest to the door.

Such was the state of terror into which they were thrown, that each one at the moment believed himself shot, and the soldiers had overcome all the real difficulties in getting possession of what might thus be called the citadel of the inn, before those men who had been so valorous a short time since recovered from the tremendous fright into which they had been thrown.

We need hardly say that the carbines were loaded, but with blank cartridges, for there was neither a disposition nor a necessity for taking the lives of these misguided people.

If was the suddenness and the steadiness of the attack that had done all the mischief to their cause; and now, ere they recovered from the surprise of having their position so completely taken by storm, they were handed down stairs, one by one, from soldier to soldier, and into the custody of the civil authorities.

In order to secure the safe keeping of large a body of prisoners, the constables, who were in a great minority, placed handcuffs upon some of the most capable of resistance; so what with those who were thus secured, and those who were terrified into submission, there was not a man of all the lot who had taken refuge in the attics of the public-house but was a prisoner.

At the sound of fire-arms, the women who were outside the inn had, of course, raised a most prodigious clamour.

They believed directly that every bullet must have done some most serious mischief to the townspeople, and it was only upon one of the soldiers, a non-commissioned officer, who was below, assuring them of the innoxious nature of the proceeding which restored anything like equanimity.

"Silence!" he cried: "what are you howling about? Do you fancy that we've nothing better to do than to shoot a parcel of fellows that are not worth the bullets that would be lodged in their confounded carcasses?"

"But we heard the gun," said a woman.

"Of course you did; it's the powder that makes the noise, not the bullet. You'll see them all brought out safe wind and limb."

This assurance satisfied the women to a certain extent, and such had been their fear that they should have had to look upon the spectacle of death, or of grievous wounds, that they were comparatively quite satisfied when they saw husbands, fathers, and brothers, only in the custody of the town officers.

And very sheepish some of the fellows looked, when they were handed down and handcuffed, and the more especially when they had been routed only by a few blank cartridges—that sixpenny worth of powder had defeated them.

They were marched off to the town gaol, guarded by the military, who now probably fancied that their night's work was over, and that the most turbulent and troublesome spirits in the town had been secured.

Such, however, was not the case, for no sooner had comparative order been restored, than common observation pointed to a dull red glare in the southern sky.

In a few more minutes there came in stragglers from the open country, shouting "Fire! fire!" with all their might.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXXIV

It seemed, with that first shot from the enemy, that a great relief came to us—an apprehension fallen away. We had anticipated this moment for so long, dreaded it. I think all our men felt it. A shout went up:

"Harmless!"

It was not that. But our building withstood it better than I had feared. It was a flash from a large electronic projector mounted on the deck of the brigand ship. It stabbed up from the shadows across the valley at the foot of the opposite crater wall, a beam of vaguely fluorescent light. Simultaneously the searchlight vanished.

The stream of electrons caught the front face of our main building in a six foot circle. It held a few seconds, vanished, then stabbed again, and still again. Three bolts. A total, I suppose, of nine or ten seconds.

I was standing with Grantline at a front window. We had rigged an oblong of insulated fabric like a curtain; we stood peering, holding the curtain cautiously aside. The ray struck some twenty feet away from us.

"Harmless!" The men shouted it with derision.

But Grantline swung on them: "Don't get that idea!"

An interior signal panel was beside Grantline. He called the duty men in the instrument room.

"It's over. What are your readings?"

The bombarding electrons had passed through the outer shell of the building's double wall, and been absorbed in the rarefied, magnetized aircurrent of the Erentz circulation. Like poison in a man's veins, reaching his heart, the free alien electrons had disturbed the motors. They accelerated, then retarded. Pulsed unevenly, and drew added power from the reserve tanks. But they had normalized at once when the shot was past. The duty man's voice sounded from the grid in answer to Grantline's question:

"Five degrees colder in your building. Can't you feel it?"

The disturbed, weakened Erentz system had allowed the outer cold to radiate through a trifle. The walls had had a trifle extra explosive pressure from the air. A strain—but that was all.

"It's probably their most powerful single weapon, Gregg," said Grantline.

I nodded, "Yes, I think so."

I had smashed the real giant, with its ten mile range. The ship was only two miles from us, but it seemed as though this projector were exerted to its distance limit. I had noticed on the deck only one of this type. The others, paralyzing rays and heat rays, were less deadly.

Grantline commented: "We can withstand a lot of that bombardment. If we stay inside—"

That ray, striking a man outside, would penetrate his Erentz suit within a few seconds, we could not doubt. We had, however, no intention of going out unless for dire necessity.

"Even so," said Grantline, "a hand shield would hold it off for a certain length of time."

We had an opportunity a moment later to test our insulated shields. The bolt came again. It darted along the front face of the building, caught our window, and clung. The double window shelves were our weakest points. The sheet of flashing Erentz current was transparent; we could see through it as though it were glass. It moved faster, but was thinner at the windows than the walls. We feared the bombarding electrons might cross it, penetrate the inner shell and, like a lightning bolt, enter the room.

We dropped the curtain corner. The radiance of the bolt was dimly visible. A few seconds, then it vanished again, and behind the shield we had not felt a tingle.

"Harmless!"

But our power had been drained nearly an aeron, to neutralize the shock to the Erentz current. Grantline said:

"If they kept that up, it would be a question of whose power supply would last longer. And it would not be ours.... You saw our lights fade when the bolt was striking?"

But the brigands did not know we were short of power. And to fire the projector with a continuous bolt would, in thirty minutes, perhaps, have exhausted their own power reserve.

"I won't answer them," Grantline declared. "Our game is to sit defensive. Conserve everything. Let them make the leading moves."

We waited half an hour; but no other shot came. The valley floor was patched with Earthlight and shadow. We could see the vague outline of the brigand ship backed up at the foot of the opposite crater wall. The form of its dome over the illuminated deck was visible, and the line of its tiny hull ovals.

On the rocks near the ship, helmet lights of prowling brigands occasionally showed.

Whatever activity was going on down there we could not see with the naked eye. Grantline did not use our telescope at first. To connect it, even for local range, drew on our precious ammunition of power. Some of the men urged that we search the sky with the telescope. Was

our rescue ship from Earth coming? But Grantline refused. We were in no trouble yet. And every delay was to our advantage.

"Commander, where shall I put these helmets?"

A man came wheeling a pile of helmets on a small truck.

"At the manual port—in the other building."

Our weapons and outside equipment were massed at the main exit locks of the large building. But we might want to go out through smaller locks too. Grantline sent helmets there; suits were not needed, as most of us were garbed in them now.

Snap was still in the workshop. I went there during this first half-hour of the attack. Ten of our men were busy there with the little flying platforms and the fabric shields.

"How goes it, Snap?"

"Almost all ready."

He had six of the platforms, including the one we had already used, and more than a dozen hand shields. At a squeeze, all of us could ride on these six little vehicles. We might have to ride them! We planned that, in event of disaster to the buildings, we could at least escape in this fashion. Food supplies and water were now being placed at the ports.

Depressing preparations! Our buildings uninhabitable, a rush out and away, abandoning the treasure.... Grantline had never mentioned such a contingency, but I noticed, nevertheless, that preparations were being made.

Snap's voice was raised over the clang of the workmen bolting the gravity plates of the last platform:

"Only that one projector, Gregg?"

"They gave us four blasts; but just the one projector. Their strongest."

He grinned. He wore no Erentz suit as yet. He stood in torn grimy work trousers and a bedraggled shirt, with the inevitable red eyeshade holding back his unruly hair. Around his waist was the weighted belt, and there were weights on his shoes for gravity stability.

"Didn't hurt us much."

"No."

"When I get the tube panels in this thing I'll be finished. It'll take another half-hour. Then I'll join you. Where are you stationed?"

I shrugged. "I was at a front window with Johnny. Nothing to do as yet."

Snap went back to his work. "Well, the longer they delay, the better for us. If only your signal got through, Gregg, we'll have a rescue ship here in a few hours more!"

Ah, that if!

I turned away. "Can't help you, Snap?"

"No.... Take those shields," he added to one of the men.

"Take them where?"

"To Grantline. He'll tell you where to put them."

The shields were wheeled away on a little cart. I followed it. Grantline sent it to the back exit.

"No other move from them yet, Johnny?"

"No. All quiet."

"Snap's almost finished."

The brigands presently made another play. A giant heat-ray beam came across the valley. It clung to our front wall for nearly a minute.

Grantline got the report from the instrument room. He laughed.

"That helped rather than hurt us. Heated the outer wall. Franck took advantage of it and eased up the motors."

We wondered if Miko knew that. Doubtless he did, for the heat-ray was not used again.

Then came a zed-ray. I stood at the window, watching it, faint sheen of beam in the dimness; it crept with sinister deliberation along our front wall, clung momentarily to our shielded windows, and pried with its revealing glow into Snap's workshop.

"Looking us over," Grantline commented. "I hope they like what they see."

I knew that he did not feel the bravado that was in his tone. We had nothing but small hand weapons: heat-rays, electronic projectors, and bullet projectors. All for very short range fighting. If Miko had not known that before, he could at least make a good guess at it after the careful zed-ray inspection. With his ship down there two miles away, we were powerless to reach him. It seemed that Miko was now testing all his mechanisms. A light flare went up from the dome peak of the ship. It rose in a slow arc over the valley, and burst. For a few

seconds the two mile circle of crags was brilliantly illumined. I stared, but I had to shield my eyes against the dazzling actinic glare, and I could see nothing. Was Miko making a zed-ray photograph of our interiors? We had no way of knowing.

He was testing his short range projectors now. With my eyes again accustomed to the normal Earthlight in the valley, I could see the stabs of electronic beams, the Martian paralyzing rays and heat beams. They darted out like flashing swords from the rocks near the ship.

Then the whole ship and the crater wall behind it seemed to shift sidewise as a Benson curve light spread its glow about the ship, with a projector curve beam coming up and touching the window through which I was peering.

"Haljan, come look at these damn girls! Commander—shall I stop them? They'll kill themselves, or kill us—or smash something!"

We followed the man into the building's broad central corridor. Anita and Venza were riding a midget platform! Anita, in her boyish black garb; Venza, with a flowing white Venus-robe. They lay on the tiny six foot long oblong of metal, one manipulating its side shields, the other at the controls. As we arrived, the platform came sliding down the narrow confines of the corridor, lurching, barely missing a door projection. Up to the low vaulted ceiling, then down to the floor.

It sailed over our heads, rising over us as we ducked. Anita waved her hand. Grantline gasped, "By the infernal!"

I shouted, "Anita, stop!"

But they only waved at us, skimming down the length of the corridor, seeming to avoid a smash a dozen times by the smallest margin of chance, stopping miraculously at the further end, hanging poised in mid-air, wheeling, coming back, undulating up and down.

Grantline clung to me. "By the gods of the airways!"

In spite of my astonished horror, I could not but share Grantline's admiration. Three or four other men were watching. The girls were amazingly skillful, no doubt of that. There was not a man among us who could have handled that gravity platform indoors, not one who would have had the brash temerity to try it.

The platform landed with the grace of a humming bird at our feet, the girls dexterously balancing so that it came to rest swiftly, without the least bump.

I confronted them. "Anita, what are you doing?"

She stood up, flushed and smiling. "Practicing."

"What for?"

Venza's roguish eyes twinkled at me. Her hands went to her slim hips with a gesture of defiance.

She asked, "Are you speaking for yourself or the Commander?"

I ignored her. "What for?"

"Because we're good at it," Anita retorted. "Better than any of you men. If you should need us, we're ready...."

"We won't!" I said shortly.

"But if you should...."

Venza put in, "If Snap and I hadn't come for you, you wouldn't be here, Gregg Haljan. I didn't notice you were so horrified to see me holding that shield up over you!"

It silenced me.

She added, "Commander, let us alone. We won't smash anything."

Grantline laughed. "I hope you won't!"

A warning call took us back to the front window. The brigands' searchlight was again being used. It swept slowly along the length of the cliff. Its circle went down the cliff steps to the valley floor, and came sweeping up again. Then it went up to the observatory platform at the summit above us, then over to the ore sheds.

We had no men outside, if that was what the brigands wanted to determine. The searchbeam presently vanished. It was replaced immediately by a zed-ray, which darted at once to our treasure sheds and clung.

That stung Grantline into his first action. We flung our own zed-ray down across the valley. It reached the brigand ship and the blurred interior of the cabins.

"Try the searchbeam, Franck."

The zed-ray went off. We gazed down our searchlight which clung to the dome of the distant enemy vessel. We could see movement there.

"The telescope," Grantline ordered.

The dynamos hummed. The telescope finder glowed and clarified. On the deck of the ship we saw the brigands working with the assembling of tiny ore carts. A deck landing port was open. The ore carts were being carried out through a port lock and down a landing incline.

And on the rock outside, we saw several of the carts, tiny rail sections and the section of an ore chute.

Miko was unloading his mining apparatus! He was making ready to come up for the treasure!

The discovery, startling as it was, nevertheless, was far overshadowed by an imperative danger alarm from our main building. Brigands were outside on our ledge! Miko's searchbeam, sweeping the ledge a moment before, had carefully avoided revealing them. It had been done just for that purpose, no doubt—to make us feel sure the ledge was unoccupied and thus to guard against our own light making the search.

But there was a brigand group close outside our walls! By the merest chance the radiating glow from our searchray had shown the helmeted figures scurrying for shelter.

Grantline leaped to his feet.

We rushed from the rear port exit which was nearest us. The giant bloated figures had been seen running along the outside of the connecting corridor, in this direction. But before we ever got there, a new alarm came. A brigand was crouching at a front corner of the main building!

His hydrogen heat torch had already opened a rift in the wall!