



This Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Sea of Tranquility" by NASA. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

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## EDITORIAL

Like a neurotic teenager, Schlock! Webzine is prone to moments of crisis. Back in the summer, we were offline (is that the expression?) for over a week after the mighty Google Corporation, our web hosts at the time, declared that we had violated the terms of use (without ever specifying why) and suspended the account. This time, due to a sudden upsurge in interest in the webzine, we exceeded our bandwidth and spent several days off line. Apologies to anyone who was unable to access Schlock! during the week.

This week we see the penultimate episode of Ray Cummings' space opera *Brigands of the Moon*. This tale of sci-fi skullduggery has been going almost as long as *Varney the Vampyre*, and it will be a different publication without it. Hence the cover, which incorporates an image from an Ace Books edition of the novel.

C. Priest Brumley's *Slicer Chronicles* continue this week. As mentioned last week, the Slicer Chronicles are set in a shared universe, details of which can be found under [The Slicer Chronicles Manifesto](#). Submissions from other writers using this setting will be welcome, and this week we have one from regular contributor Todd Nelsen.

We also have more social poetry from Nathan Rowark, with his *Dissertation On Dystopia*; the second chapter of the Bran Mak Morn tale *Kings of the Night*; another instalment in *Thieves from the Night*; and, with the transience of human endeavour very firmly in mind, more Norse mythology in the tale of the doomed Kingdom of the Skjoldungs: the king who drowned in a vat of mead, how the sea became salt and Beowulf's fight with Grendel are only some of the mythical tales contained within.

-Gavin Chappell

C Priest Brumley's THE SLICER CHRONICLES - Special Report No. 24 by Todd Nelsen -  
... *Unidentified Flying Object crash-lands five miles west of Mendoza, Argentina. With permission of the Argentine government, the United States Air Force retrieves. UFO and Case 4 are transported to an undisclosed, military facility in Western Colorado. Both are subjected to study and strict observation.*

*Dr. Yang Peng heads...*

“What do you see?”

“Stars, thousands of them --”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in a ship, traveling through space. It’s so *big*, and it’s *cold*. I’m cold.” He began to shiver.

“His temp’s too low. Give me a negative feedback, Sarah. Let’s keep him as comfortable as possible, okay?” He turned back to the table. “Jacob, describe the interior of the ship to me.”

“There’s a control panel. I’m working the dials.” Jacob swallowed. “My hands are bleeding.”

“Why are they bleeding?”

“I don’t know.” He began to shiver, this time not from cold. “There’s something here, something that’s not supposed to be --”

“Sarah, continue regulating heart rate and respiratory functions manually. I don’t trust these machines. Jacob, I want you to listen to me now, okay?”

“Okay,” Jacob replied, but suddenly he bolted upright from the surface of the table, his eyes open and blind. “What was that?” he asked.

“Jacob, you need to focus,” the doctor said, attempting to calm him. “You’re not on a

ship. You're in an observatory, here on Earth. You have a family. You have a little girl named Julie and a wife named Maria. Do you understand?"

Jacob nodded. "I think so."

"Good. Why are you working the dials?"

Jacob swallowed again. "Something went wrong. I've been pulled out of SA."

"SA?" The doctor was puzzled. "Do you mean suspended animation?"

Jacob nodded.

Jesus, how far had he traveled? "What woke you?" the doctor asked.

"Why do you keep asking me these questions? If I don't get this ship under control --" Jacob's head was turning from side to side, like the tail end of a fish out of water. He was frightened and growing hysterical. The doctor wished now the team had taken his advice and strapped him down. "There it is again! What the hell is that?"

"That's it. Ease him out, Sarah. *Slowly*. He's had enough."

Seconds passed, tense seconds.

"Sarah, what's going on up there? I need this man out."

The operator's voice, Sarah, flooded the room, sounding louder than usual. "He isn't responding, doctor."

Dr. Yang gaped up at the intercom like it was an animate thing, an animate thing he wouldn't mind in the least bit getting his hands on and strangling. Not responding. He didn't like what he was hearing. In moments, Jacob would be dead, or worse, he'd go insane. They were wasting time.

"Raise the glass," he said.

"But, Doctor --"

"Raise it. Now, Sarah. That's an order." He didn't have the authority to give this kind of order, but he said it just the same.

“But it’s against USAF protocol to --”

“Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

The doctor snatched up the only modicum of comfort in the room, a steel stool, and approached the barrier, wielding it like a baseball bat. He may not have been a USAF soldier, like most of the staff, but he trained six days a week. He could bench press 330 pounds and squat almost twice that amount. He was also an expert in Wing Chun, a martial art said to date as far back as the 17th century; he was confident he’d make short work of it.

“If you persist, I’ll be forced to contact security, Dr. Yang,” the intercom sounded again.

He had little doubt she already had.

He swung, putting his broad back into it, his large frame firm, yet flexible, absorbing the impact. Knowing it would take more than one or two tries, he braced for another.

Jacob began to shout then, in pain, and the doctor immediately understood what was happening. Whatever was on that ship was with him now, and it was killing him from the inside out.

How long had it been since Argentina? Five years? Six? He couldn’t recall, and it didn’t much matter to him now. Case 4 was alive and hooked up to the prototype of what promised to be his greatest achievement, the neural implant, a device also causing intense pain to Jacob.

As Jacob continued to shout, Dr. Yang made progress. A slight crack appeared across the surface of the glass. Why they bothered to use the protective barrier in the first place was anyone’s guess. Most of the staff, including the doctor, had already had their fair share of exposure. Whatever biohazards Case 4 presented them, the staff believed nonexistent. Further, Case 4 may have been alive but was hardly cognizant. He suspected the alien was well out of it long before its ship entered the atmosphere. Dr. Yang doubted if it had ever



been aware it was on Earth.

“So it’s like a coma?”

“Yes, and see these patterns?” He pointed to the monitor and its changing fluctuations.

“I see them, doctor. What do they mean?”

“Dreams, General. The patterns you’re seeing are dreams.”

And what sights Case 4’s dreams had provided them.

Participants, like Jacob, spoke of environments, strange and so very different from our own, extrasolar worlds well beyond our present experience: massive volcanoes, dwarfing Olympus Mons of Mars, belting multi-colored ash and magma on hot, barren wastelands; far off moons of thick, crystalline ice and subsurface oceans; Earth-like worlds teeming with alien life and vegetation; rocky planets three times the size of our greatest gas giant.

Some of the scientists wondered how such marvels could exist or if they were even possible; others, in complete disbelief, doubted their existence entirely.

“They’re dreams, Yang Peng. *Dreams*. Do you take your own dreams this seriously?”

Actually, the doctor did, he replied, and this wasn’t just another trip through the looking glass, he said. These were memories they were seeing. Real memories.

What puzzled him most was how Case 4 relayed the information back to them. Human dreams are often random, without sense or order. Case 4, however, appeared to be dreaming in linear fashion. Dr. Yang believed they were witnessing the entire breath of the alien’s life pass before them, one step at a time, retelling the events that had brought it across the far reaches of space. Judging by the readings, he also believed Case 4 was starting to wind down, slowly, like an old timepiece fixing to die.

If this were true, it was likely Jacob was reliving Case 4’s final moments.

If we die in our dreams, do we die in real life? It was a question a frightened child would ask its mother.

It was a question Dr. Yang didn't want answered.

Determined, he spread his feet to shoulder length, like a power hitter, and readied himself for another swing, ready to pound the barrier before him with the same clinical precision and impact he would any obstacle in his path, with 100% accuracy and efficiency.

When the doctor set his mind to a task, he seldom missed his mark.

“Stand down.”

At first, he didn't hear it, so intent was he on Jacob and the obstacle before him.

“Don't force us to come in there, Dr. Yang.”

It was General Gerring, and he didn't sound pleased.

Jacob gasped, the air tightening in his throat. The sight was peculiar. His eyes remained open, as before, and now his hands were at his own neck, pulling at an unseen force and inadvertently choking himself in the process. The hard, armored, segmented limbs of an insect? The muscular, hydrostatic suckers of an octopus? It could have been anything out there, in the vast depths of space. This explained the marks on Case 4's neck, at least, he thought. Whatever had attacked Case 4, and was now attacking Jacob, had attempted to choke the alien to death in the cockpit of its own ship. It hadn't succeeded, of course, otherwise Case 4 wouldn't still be alive. Still, he doubted Jacob would be able to withstand the mental, and now physical, strain of what was happening to it.

“You have a man down, General,” he said, his back to the intercom. “I suggest you let me take care of it.”

“Lower the chair and back away, doctor. That's an order.”

“I'm a civilian. You can't order me.” Dr. Yang turned his attention back to the glass, intent on continuing what he started.



“You don’t want us to come to *you*, do you? You wouldn’t last a second against my men,” Gerring said.

“Care to test this theory of yours?” he asked. “Come on down, General. We’ll try it out.”

Though armed, he knew Gerring’s men wouldn’t fire their weapons, couldn’t. They couldn’t risk damaging Case 4 or the equipment around him. He knew he’d be through the glass, and at Jacob’s side, long before Gerring’s goons reached him. Let them try it, he thought. He’d crack a few heads, if need be.

“Don’t think I won’t go public, either,” he added. “I’m sure the public would be pleased to hear you’ve got an extraterrestrial strapped to a table in Western Colorado.”

The intercom went silent, then, and for a brief moment, he entertained the thought he’d succeeded in convincing him. What Gerring said next, however, stopped the doctor dead in his tracks; it removed any hope he had of saving Jacob. Gerring’s voice was surprisingly calm:

“Think of your family, Dr. Yang. How far along is she? She’s got to be near term by now. I would hate to see your beautiful wife fall victim to accident.” His voice was callous, cold. “Things can happen, doctor. *Bad* things. Things that wouldn’t be good for her *or* the child.”

Jacob continued to struggle on the table. Though he knew he couldn’t hear the exchange, Dr. Yang was certain he could see Jacob’s blind eyes pleading for a way out of the alien’s mind, any way out.

The man was dying.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but we would, Dr. Yang. We’re the United States government. We can do anything we want. Surely, you must know this by now.”

The doctor lowered his hands.

“Good,” Gerring said, pleased. “Good! Now back away, Yang Peng. We have plans for this prototype of yours --”

As the doctor did as he was told, he looked helplessly on, as Jacob, who sobbed once... began to scream.

My god, he thought. What have I done?

*... The neural implant is perfected. The NeuralNetwork goes live sixteen years following. Dr. Yang Peng, first innovator of the new technology, retires on his own volition. Case 4, and all related incidents, currently remains closed to the general public and under close observation...*

*... End of transmission.*

## KINGS OF THE NIGHT by Robert E Howard

### Chapter 1

*The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne--  
His iron legions came  
To break a king in a land unknown,  
And a race without a name.*  
--The Song of Bran

The dagger flashed downward. A sharp cry broke in a gasp. The form on the rough altar twitched convulsively and lay still. The jagged flint edge sawed at the crimsoned breast, and thin bony fingers, ghastly dyed, tore out the still-twitching heart. Under matted white brows, sharp eyes gleamed with a ferocious intensity.

Besides the slayer, four men stood about the crude pile of stones that formed the altar of the God of Shadows. One was of medium height, lithely built, scantily clad, whose black hair was confined by a narrow iron band in the center of which gleamed a single red jewel. Of the others, two were dark like the first. But where he was lithe, they were stocky and misshapen, with knotted limbs, and tangled hair falling over sloping brows. His face denoted intelligence and implacable will; theirs merely a beast-like ferocity. The fourth man had little in common with the rest. Nearly a head taller, though his hair was black as theirs, his skin was comparatively light and he was gray-eyed. He eyed the proceedings with little favor.

And, in truth, Cormac of Connacht was little at ease. The Druids of his own isle of Erin had strange dark rites of worship, but nothing like this. Dark trees shut in this grim scene, lit by a single torch. Through the branches moaned an eerie night-wind. Cormac was alone among men of a strange race and he had just seen the heart of a man ripped from his still pulsing body. Now the ancient priest, who looked scarcely human, was glaring at the throbbing thing. Cormac shuddered, glancing at him who wore the jewel. Did Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, believe that this white-bearded old butcher could foretell events by scanning a bleeding human heart? The dark eyes of the king were inscrutable. There were strange depths to the man that Cormac could not fathom, nor any other man.

"The portents are good!" exclaimed the priest wildly, speaking more to the two chieftains than to Bran. "Here from the pulsing heart of a captive Roman I read--defeat for the arms of Rome! Triumph for the sons of the heather!"

The two savages murmured beneath their breath, their fierce eyes smoldering.

"Go and prepare your clans for battle," said the king, and they lumbered away with the ape-like gait assumed by such stunted giants. Paying no more heed to the priest who was examining the ghastly ruin on the altar, Bran beckoned to Cormac. The Gael followed him with alacrity. Once out of that grim grove, under the starlight, he breathed more freely. They stood on an eminence, looking out over long swelling undulations of gently waving heather. Near at hand a few fires twinkled, their fewness giving scant evidence of the hordes of tribesmen who lay close by. Beyond these were more fires and beyond these still more, which last marked the camp of Cormac's own men, hard-riding, hard-fighting Gaels, who were of that band which was just beginning to get a foothold on the western coast of Caledonia--the nucleus of what was later to become the kingdom of Dalriadia. To the left of these, other fires gleamed.

And far away to the south were more fires--mere pinpoints of light. But even at that distance the Pictish king and his Celtic ally could see that these fires were laid out in regular order.

"The fires of the legions," muttered Bran. "The fires that have lit a path around the world. The men who light those fires have trampled the races under their iron heels. And now--we of the heather have our backs at the wall. What will fall on the morrow?"

"Victory for us, says the priest," answered Cormac.

Bran made an impatient gesture. "Moonlight on the ocean. Wind in the fir tops. Do you think that I put faith in such mummery? Or that I enjoyed the butchery of a captive legionary? I must hearten my people; it was for Gron and Bocah that I let old Gonar read the portents. The warriors will fight better."

"And Gonar?"

Bran laughed. "Gonar is too old to believe--anything. He was high priest of the Shadows a score of years before I was born. He claims direct descent from that Gonar who was a wizard in the days of Brule the Spear-slayer who was the first of my line. No man knows how old he is--sometimes I think he is the original Gonar himself!"

"At least," said a mocking voice, and Cormac started as a dim shape appeared at his side, "at least I have learned that in order to keep the faith and trust of the people, a wise man must appear to be a fool. I know secrets that would blast even your brain, Bran, should I speak them. But in order that the people may believe in me, I must descend to such things as they think proper magic--and prance and yell and rattle snakeskins, and dabble about in human blood and chicken livers."

Cormac looked at the ancient with new interest. The semi-madness of his appearance had vanished. He was no longer the charlatan, the spell-mumbling shaman. The starlight lent him a dignity which seemed to increase his very height, so that he stood like a white-bearded patriarch.

"Bran, your doubt lies there." The lean arm pointed to the fourth ring of fires.

"Aye," the king nodded gloomily. "Cormac--you know as well as I. Tomorrow's battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western horsemen, our success would be certain, but--surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! You know how I trapped that band--how they swore to fight for me against Rome! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan."

"Take heart, Bran," said Gonar. "Touch the jewel in your iron crown. Mayhap it will bring you aid."

Bran laughed bitterly. "Now you talk as the people think. I am no fool to twist with empty words. What of the gem? It is a strange one, truth, and has brought me luck ere now. But I need now no jewels, but the allegiance of three hundred fickle Northmen who are the only warriors among us who may stand the charge of the legions on foot."

"But the jewel, Bran, the jewel!" persisted Gonar.

"Well, the jewel!" cried Bran impatiently. "It is older than this world. It was old when Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the sea. It was given to Brule, the Spear-slayer, first of my line, by the Atlantean Kull, king of Valusia, in the days when the world was young. But shall that profit us now?"

"Who knows?" asked the wizard obliquely. "Time and space exist not. There was no past, and there shall be no future. NOW is all. All things that ever were, are, or ever will be, transpire *now*. Man is forever at the center of what we call time and space. I have gone into yesterday and tomorrow and both were as real as today--which is like the dreams of ghosts! But let me sleep and talk with Gonar. Mayhap he shall aid us."

"What means he?" asked Cormac, with a slight twitching of his shoulders, as the priest strode away in the shadows.

"He has ever said that the first Gonar comes to him in his dreams and talks with him," answered Bran. "I have seen him perform deeds that seemed beyond human ken. I know not. I am but an unknown king with an iron crown, trying to lift a race of savages out of the slime into which they have sunk. Let us look to the camps."

As they walked Cormac wondered. By what strange freak of fate had such a man risen among this race of savages, survivors of a darker, grimmer age? Surely he was an atavism, an original type of the days when the Picts ruled all Europe, before their primitive empire fell before the bronze swords of the Gauls. Cormac knew how Bran, rising by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon. But his rule was loose and much remained before the Pictish clans would forget their feuds and present a solid front to foreign foes. On the battle of the morrow, the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans, hinged the future of the rising Pictish kingdom.

Bran and his ally walked through the Pictish camp where the swart warriors lay sprawled about their small fires, sleeping or gnawing half-cooked food. Cormac was impressed by their silence. A thousand men camped here, yet the only sounds were occasional low guttural intonations. The silence of the Stone Age rested in the souls of these men.

They were all short--most of them crooked of limb. Giant dwarfs; Bran Mak Morn was a tall man among them. Only the older men were bearded and they scantily, but their black hair fell about their eyes so that they peered fiercely from under the tangle. They were barefoot and clad scantily in wolfskins. Their arms consisted in short barbed swords of iron, heavy black bows, arrows tipped with flint, iron and copper, and stone-headed mallets. Defensive armor they had none, save for a crude shield of hide-covered wood; many had worked bits of metal into their tangled manes as a slight protection against sword-cuts. Some few, sons of long lines of chiefs, were smooth-limbed and lithe like Bran, but in the eyes of all gleamed the unquenchable savagery of the primeval.

These men are fully savages, thought Cormac, worse than the Gauls, Britons and Germans. Can the old legends be true--that they reigned in a day when strange cities rose where now the sea rolls? And that they survived the flood that washed those gleaming empires under, sinking again into that savagery from which they once had risen?

Close to the encampment of the tribesmen were the fires of a group of Britons--members of fierce tribes who lived south of the Roman Wall but who dwelt in the hills and forests to the west and defied the power of Rome. Powerfully built men they were, with blazing blue eyes and shocks of tousled yellow hair, such men as had thronged the Ceanntish beaches when Caesar brought the Eagles into the Isles. These men, like the Picts, wore no armor, and were clad scantily in coarse-worked cloth and deerskin sandals. They bore small round bucklers of hard wood, braced with bronze, to be worn on the left arm, and long heavy bronze swords with blunt points. Some had bows, though the Britons were indifferent archers. Their bows were shorter than the Picts' and effective only at close range. But ranged close by their fires were the weapons that had made the name Briton a word of terror to Pict, Roman and Norse raider alike. Within the circle of firelight stood fifty bronze chariots with long cruel blades curving out from the sides. One of these blades could dismember half a dozen men at once. Tethered close by under the vigilant eyes of their guards grazed the chariot horses--big, rangy steeds, swift and powerful.

"Would that we had more of them!" mused Bran. "With a thousand chariots and my bowmen I could drive the legions into the sea."

"The free British tribes must eventually fall before Rome," said Cormac. "It would seem they would rush to join you in your war."

Bran made a helpless gesture. "The fickleness of the Celt. They can not forget old feuds. Our ancient men have told us how they would not even unite against Caesar when the Romans first came. They will not make head against a common foe together. These men came to me because of some dispute with their chief, but I can not depend on them when they are not actually fighting."

Cormac nodded. "I know; Caesar conquered Gaul by playing one tribe against another. My own people shift and change with the waxing and waning of the tides. But of all Celts, the Cymry are the most changeable, the least stable. Not many centuries ago my own Gaelic ancestors wrested Erin from the Cymric Danaans, because though they outnumbered us, they opposed us as separate tribes, rather than as a nation."

"And so these Cymric Britons face Rome," said Bran. "These will aid us on the morrow. Further I can not say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thousands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind."

A chorus of rough welcome greeted the two leaders as they entered the camp of Cormac's Gaels. Five hundred in number they were, tall rangy men, black-haired and gray-eyed mainly, with the bearing of men who lived by war alone. While there was nothing like close discipline among them, there was an air of more system and practical order than existed in the lines of the Picts and Britons. These men were of the last Celtic race to invade the Isles and their barbaric civilization was of much higher order than that of their Cymric kin. The ancestors of the Gaels had learned the arts of war on the vast plains of Scythia and at the courts of the Pharaohs where they had fought as mercenaries of Egypt, and much of what they learned they brought into Ireland with them. Excelling in metal work, they were armed, not with clumsy bronze swords, but with high-grade weapons of iron.

They were clad in well-woven kilts and leathern sandals. Each wore a light shirt of chain mail and a vizorless helmet, but this was all of their defensive armor. Celts, Gaelic or Brythonic, were prone to judge a man's valor by the amount of armor he wore. The Britons who faced Caesar deemed the Romans cowards because they cased themselves in metal, and many centuries later the Irish clans thought the same of the mail-clad Norman knights of Strongbow.

Cormac's warriors were horsemen. They neither knew nor esteemed the use of the bow. They bore the inevitable round, metal-braced buckler, dirks, long straight swords and light single-handed axes. Their tethered horses grazed not far away--big-boned animals, not so ponderous as those raised by the Britons, but swifter.

Bran's eyes lighted as the two strode through the camp. "These men are keen-beaked birds of war! See how they whet their axes and jest of the morrow! Would that the raiders in yon camp were as staunch as your men, Cormac! Then would I greet the legions with a laugh when they come up from the south tomorrow."

They were entering the circle of the Northmen fires. Three hundred men sat about gambling, whetting their weapons and drinking deep of the heather ale furnished them by their Pictish allies. These gazed upon Bran and Cormac with no great friendliness. It was striking to note the difference between them and the Picts and Celts--the difference in their cold eyes, their strong moody faces, their very bearing. Here was ferocity, and savagery, but not of the wild, upbursting fury of the Celt. Here was fierceness backed by grim determination and stolid stubbornness. The charge of the British clans was terrible, overwhelming. But they had no patience; let them be balked of immediate victory and they were likely to lose heart and scatter or fall to bickering among themselves. There was the patience of the cold blue North in these seafarers--a lasting determination that would keep them steadfast to the bitter end, once their face was set toward a definite goal.

As to personal stature, they were giants; massive yet rangy. That they did not share the ideas of the Celts regarding armor was shown by the fact that they were clad in heavy scale mail shirts that reached below mid-thigh, heavy horned helmets and hardened hide leggings, reinforced, as were their shoes, with plates of iron. Their shields were huge oval affairs of hard wood, hide and brass. As to weapons, they had long iron-headed spears, heavy iron axes, and daggers. Some had long wide-bladed swords.

Cormac scarcely felt at ease with the cold magnetic eyes of these flaxen-haired men fixed upon him. He and they were hereditary foes, even though they did chance to be fighting on the same side at present--but were they?

A man came forward, a tall gaunt warrior on whose scarred, wolfish face the flickering firelight reflected deep shadows. With his wolfskin mantle flung carelessly about his wide shoulders, and the great horns on his helmet adding to his height, he stood there in the swaying shadows, like some half-human thing, a brooding shape of the dark barbarism that was soon to engulf the world.

"Well, Wulfhere," said the Pictish king, "you have drunk the mead of council and have spoken about the fires--what is your decision?"

The Northman's eyes flashed in the gloom. "Give us a king of our own race to follow if you wish us to fight for you."

Bran flung out his hands. "Ask me to drag down the stars to gem your helmets! Will not your comrades follow you?"

"Not against the legions," answered Wulfhere sullenly. "A king led us on the Viking path--a king must lead us against the Romans. And Rognar is dead."

"I am a king," said Bran. "Will you fight for me if I stand at the tip of your fight wedge?"

"A king of our own race," said Wulfhere doggedly. "We are all picked men of the North. We fight for none but a king, and a king must lead us--against the legions."

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

"Here is a prince of Erin," said Bran. "Will you fight for the Westerner?"

"We fight under no Celt, West or East," growled the Viking, and a low rumble of approval rose from the onlookers. "It is enough to fight by their side."

The hot Gaelic blood rose in Cormac's brain and he pushed past Bran, his hand on his sword. "How mean you that, pirate?"

Before Wulfhere could reply Bran interposed: "Have done! Will you fools throw away the battle before it is fought, by your madness? What of your oath, Wulfhere?"

"We swore it under Rognar; when he died from a Roman arrow we were absolved of it. We will follow only a king--against the legions."

"But your comrades will follow you--against the heather people!" snapped Bran.

"Aye," the Northman's eyes met his brazenly. "Send us a king or we join the Romans tomorrow."

Bran snarled. In his rage he dominated the scene, dwarfing the huge men who towered over him.

"Traitors! Liars! I hold your lives in my hand! Aye, draw your swords if you will--Cormac, keep your blade in its sheath. These wolves will not bite a king! Wulfhere--I spared your lives when I could have taken them.

"You came to raid the countries of the South, sweeping down from the northern sea in your galleys. You ravaged the coasts and the smoke of burning villages hung like a cloud over the shores of Caledon. I trapped you all when you were pillaging and burning--with the blood of my people on your hands. I burned your long ships and ambushed you when you followed. With thrice your number of bowmen who burned for your lives hidden in the heathered hills about you, I spared you when we could have shot you down like trapped wolves. Because I spared you, you swore to come and fight for me."

"And shall we die because the Picts fight Rome?" rumbled a bearded raider.

"Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhere



the Dissension-breeder, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates--the breaking of the sworn word."

"We break no oath," snarled the Viking, and the king sensed the basic Germanic stubbornness, far harder to combat than the fickleness of the fiery Celts. "Give us a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, and we will die for you. If not--then we will fight tomorrow for the greatest of all kings--the emperor of Rome!"

For a moment Cormac thought that the Pictish king, in his black rage, would draw and strike the Northman dead. The concentrated fury that blazed in Bran's dark eyes caused Wulphere to recoil and drop a hand to his belt.

"Fool!" said Mak Morn in a low voice that vibrated with passion. "I could sweep you from the earth before the Romans are near enough to hear your death howls. Choose--fight for me on the morrow--or die tonight under a black cloud of arrows, a red storm of swords, a dark wave of chariots!"

At the mention of the chariots, the only arm of war that had ever broken the Norse shield-wall, Wulphere changed expression, but he held his ground.

"War be it," he said doggedly. "Or a king to lead us!"

The Northmen responded with a short deep roar and a clash of swords on shields. Bran, eyes blazing, was about to speak again when a white shape glided silently into the ring of firelight.

"Soft words, soft words," said old Gonar tranquilly. "King, say no more. Wulphere, you and your fellows will fight for us if you have a king to lead you?"

"We have sworn."

"Then be at ease," quoth the wizard; "for ere battle joins on the morrow I will send you such a king as no man on earth has followed for a hundred thousand years! A king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, but one to whom the emperor of Rome is as but a village headman!"

While they stood undecided, Gonar took the arms of Cormac and Bran. "Come. And you, Northmen, remember your vow, and my promise which I have never broken. Sleep now, nor think to steal away in the darkness to the Roman camp, for if you escaped our shafts you would not escape either my curse or the suspicions of the legionaries."

So the three walked away and Cormac, looking back, saw Wulphere standing by the fire, fingering his golden beard, with a look of puzzled anger on his lean evil face.

The three walked silently through the waving heather under the faraway stars while the weird night wind whispered ghostly secrets about them.

"Ages ago," said the wizard suddenly, "in the days when the world was young, great lands rose where now the ocean roars. On these lands thronged mighty nations and kingdoms. Greatest of all these was Valusia--Land of Enchantment. Rome is as a village compared to the splendor of the cities of Valusia. And the greatest king was Kull, who came from the land of Atlantis to wrest the crown of Valusia from a degenerate dynasty. The Picts who dwelt in the isles which now form the mountain peaks of a strange land upon the Western Ocean, were allies of Valusia, and the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs was Brule the Spear-slayer, first of the line men call Mak Morn.

"Kull gave to Brule the jewel which you now wear in your iron crown, oh king, after a strange battle in a dim land, and down the long ages it has come to us, ever a sign of the Mak Morn, a symbol of former greatness. When at last the sea rose and swallowed Valusia, Atlantis and Lemuria, only the Picts survived and they were scattered and few. Yet they began again the slow climb upward, and though many of the arts of civilization were lost in the great flood, yet they progressed. The art of metalworking was lost, so they excelled in the working of flint. And they ruled all the new lands flung up by the sea and now called Europe, until down from the north came younger tribes who had scarce risen from the ape when Valusia reigned in her glory, and who, dwelling in the icy lands about the Pole, knew naught of the lost splendor of the Seven Empires and little of the flood that had swept away half a world.

“And still they have come--Aryans, Celts, Germans, swarming down from the great cradle of their race which lies near the Pole. So again was the growth of the Pictish nation checked and the race hurled into savagery. Erased from the earth, on the fringe of the world with our backs to the wall we fight. Here in Caledon is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon.”

“True, true,” said the king impatiently, “but what has that to do--”

“Kull, king of Valusia,” said the wizard imperturbably, “was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule, your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour ago.”

“You talked with his ghost--”

“Or he with mine? Did I go back a hundred thousand years, or did he come forward? If he came to me out of the past, it is not I who talked with a dead man, but he who talked with a man unborn. Past, present and future are one to a wise man. I talked to Gonar while he was alive; likewise was I alive. In a timeless, spaceless land we met and he told me many things.”

The land was growing light with the birth of dawn. The heather waved and bent in long rows before the dawn wind as bowing in worship of the rising sun.

“The jewel in your crown is a magnet that draws down the eons,” said Gonar. “The sun is rising--and who comes out of the sunrise?”

Cormac and the king started. The sun was just lifting a red orb above the eastern hills. And full in the glow, etched boldly against the golden rim, a man suddenly appeared. They had not seen him come. Against the golden birth of day he loomed colossal; a gigantic god from the dawn of creation. Now as he strode toward them the waking hosts saw him and sent up a sudden shout of wonder.

“Who--or what is it?” exclaimed Bran.

“Let us go to meet him, Bran,” answered the wizard. “He is the king Gonar has sent to save the people of Brule.”

## AYAME'S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

### Prologue

This myth's about a village without pain  
where dialogue is soft touch of lovers  
and victory is not considered gain  
if it is to make pain for another.  
Where beauty is internal and remains  
and nobody is jealously smothered:  
Words are not cast to be uttered again  
by peaceful minds with no need to covet.  
Loving with the monogamy of swans:  
passivity and interest keep them strong.  
There nothing cause faces to blush red  
but for the blazing sun warm overhead.  
The legend spread from traders who travelled  
Enough to need the bleak world's impact dulled.

1.

The skilled crafters and artists had little  
cause to remain in one place and indeed  
it was poor economics to settle  
as even the large towns had slender needs.  
Nomadic groups of artisans travelled  
as friends, partners, teachers and families.  
Uniting with each step that they ambled:  
Gaining and sharing wealth communally.

But pleasantness is not a stable state  
in any land where survival needs gain.  
Those with no skill except brutality  
trade with the concept of mortality.  
What it takes many thoughts and hours to make  
needs just a few strong violent men to take.

The bandits ran like sheepdogs round the group  
fifteen strong sets of arms and fifteen spears  
struck blood until it ran as thick as soup  
turning muscle and bone to meat and fear.  
Till none were left except a frightened few  
children whose eyes were salt blinded with tears.  
Screaming in agony but only bruised  
of ransacked cut corpses and joyful cheers  
Five out of fifty and all under ten  
bequeathed only horrors by fifteen men  
who rode off on horses with everything  
leaving just wet flesh and desolate wind  
with three boys and two girls aging and scared  
and older with each tear that fell unheard

No words were spoke by the five that were left  
lying like broken dolls, limbs comatose  
too shocked to notice their minds were bereft  
four clung to parents like blankets as though  
the bodies would warm them even in death  
lull them to sleep like a story well told  
The fifth child that lay had no comfort blessed  
her parents long since leaving her alone

she sat up waiting for the rest to rise  
a silent vigil that lasted the night  
As morning came so followed the crows  
she watched them far too filled with sorrow  
to scatter the birds that pulled at the flesh  
tenderly held by her four sleeping friends

DISSERTATION ON DYSTOPIA by Nathan J.D.L Rowark

*Dissertation on dystopia and the fall of our utopia, in pages do reveal a hidden rule;  
That asks that we confide, in tricks the devil can't abide and teach their unholy lessons in our  
school.*

*I'm not talking on your god, or approval rating to give nod to a plan we have no  
understanding hence;  
For they'll keep you safe within, then take your life on financial whim, if you don't subscribe  
and sit upon the fence.*

*It's that mythical filled room, where your future could be soon, as the men in suits lay down a  
darker story;*

*Told with others flesh as the vessels to their mesh, upon the spider's web that keeps their  
greater glory.*

*Puppeteer movement from another hands entombment, while our habits are all traced before  
our eyes.*

*They know now who you trust and message often as a must, through the mapping of your  
social network ties.*

*Watching all the money you bring in to them is funny, as the tax we pay is freedom over coin,  
That signifies our realm, as its people under whelm in child thousands batch, conceived from  
desperate loin.*

*Legion of the lost are born for monetary cost; while cliffs of grey estate cram in the many.  
I see battery hens through this human voyeur's lens, imprisoned in their hopes and won't see  
any.*

*So I'm writing to expose, in the hopes these words disclose the truth of world that fell so long  
ago.*

*But was it ever there or dare I dissertate in despair, of our master's dreams well never really know.*



## HROLF KRAKI by Gavin Chappell

### 1. Frodi and his Mill

Odin's son Skjold ruled over the Danes, and the family that descended from him was called the Skjoldung dynasty. Skjold's son Fridleif succeeded to the throne, and in turn was succeeded by his own son Frodi.

A man named Hengkjopt gave Frodi a hand-mill named Grotti whose millstones were so huge no one could grind them, although it was known that they would grind anything the miller wanted. At that time, Fjolnir, son of Frey, ruled Sweden. There was great friendship between the two kings and they often visited each other.

Fjolnir had invited Frodi to a feast, and while he was there Frodi bought two huge bondmaids named Fenja and Menja, whom he took home with him and set to work the mill Grotti, grinding out peace and prosperity. He would not let them stop milling but forced them to work. Due to this, there was peace throughout the North during Frodi's reign, so no man fought another and a gold ring could lie upon the ground at Jelling Heath without being stolen. Because of this, he was called Frid-Frodi, Peace-Frodi.

Another time Fjolnir visited Frodi in Denmark and there was a great feast. Frodi's house was large, and in it he had a great barrel many feet high, standing in a lower room. Above the great barrel was a loft, which contained an opening through which mead was poured into the vessel. That night, Fjolnir and his retinue were taken to sleep in the loft nearby. During the night, Fjolnir felt the need to ease himself in the privy and he went outside to the gallery that led there. He was sleepy and had had much to drink. On the way back, he mistakenly went into the wrong loft, fell into the mead, and drowned.

As Fenja and Menja continued to work at the mill, they revealed themselves to be kin to the giant Thjazi who the gods killed. In revenge for Frodi's treatment of them, they began to grind out war, and prophesied grim times for the Danes. That night a Viking named Mysing came and attacked the Danes, killing Frodi and taking much plunder, including Fenja and Menja and the mill Grotti. He set them to grind salt. When midnight came, and they were off the shore, they asked him if he was not tired of salt, but he commanded them to continue their work. Shortly after, the ship sank, and where the sea poured into the centre of the mill there is now a whirlpool called the Maelstrom. That is how the sea became salt.

### 2. Frodi the Brave

Halfdan was the son of Frodi who took the Danish throne after his father's death. He had several children, including a daughter, Signy, who married Saevil, and important earl in his kingdom, and two sons, Hroar and Helgi, who were fostered by a man named Regin.

A man named Frodi the Brave ruled the Heathobards. He gathered a large group of warriors and sailed for the Danes. On reaching the kingdom in the middle of the night, he laid waste to everything he could find. Halfdan he took prisoner and killed, but some of the king's men escaped. Regin helped Helgi and Hroar get away, and took them to stay with a wizard named Vifil, an old friend of Halfdan's, who lived alone on an island.

Meanwhile, Frodi lorded it over the kingdom, but he could not enjoy his conquest because Hroar and Helgi had vanished, and he feared their revenge. His spies searched for them throughout the kingdom and he offered a reward for information about them. Then he commanded spawives and wizards to find them, and they suggested that the boys might be on Vifil's island. Frodi sent his men to search the place.

Vifil foretold the coming of Frodi's men and he hid the two boys before they came to the island. They searched as hard as they could but they found no sign of the boys. When the men returned to the king, he told them that Vifil had hidden the boys with his magic and he sent them back again. Once more, Vifil foretold their coming and hid the boys so Frodi's men could not find them. When they returned to King Frodi, he decided that he would search the place himself.

He came to Vifil's island the next day and Vifil met the king on the shore while he was herding his sheep. The king demanded he give up the boys but with his usual cunning Vifil ensured that the boys were not found and Frodi left, defeated. Now Vifil sent the boys to stay with Earl Saevil, their sister's husband.

Although Hroar was eldest, Helgi was the bravest of the brothers. Now they left Vifil's island, going under the names Ham and Hrani. They came to Earl Saevil's lands, and after a week asked the earl for permission to remain. He agreed to give them food although he expected little in return from them. They wore hooded cloaks and some men mocked them, saying they had scurvy. They stayed there three years, mocked and ignored.

King Frodi invited Earl Saevil to a feast. He thought the earl might be hiding the boys, and when Earl Saevil started out, he refused to bring Ham and Hrani along with him. However, they followed on unbroken colts, with Ham (Helgi) riding backwards. They spoke to their sister in riddles from which she learnt their true nature, and she communicated it to Earl Saevil, who was delighted but said they should keep out of sight.

At Frodi's hall, a seeress named Heid spoke concerning the boys. When she tried to tell Frodi where they were, Signy gave her a gold ring to buy her silence. Frodi demanded Heid speak or be tortured and finally, she gave the boys away, whereupon they fled from the hall. Regin had recognised them. Frodi ordered his men to pursue the boys, but Regin extinguished the lights in the hall. The king realised that men had been plotting against him.

Meanwhile the boys hid in the woods. Regin rode out and found them but did not speak to them, riding back to the hall. He did not want to violate his oaths to the king. They followed him, and heard him say that if he wanted vengeance against the king he would burn down the king's trees. Then Earl Saevil emerged with all his men and decided to help the boys by burning the hall down around Frodi's ears.

King Frodi awoke after ominous dreams and found the hall burning. He went to the doors and discovered that Helgi and Hroar had lit the fire. When they turned down his proposals for a truce, Frodi tried to escape through an underground passage but found Regin guarding it. Then he returned to the hall, where he was burnt to death. His son Ingeld became king of the Heathobards.

### 3. Helgi

Hroar and Helgi now took over the kingdom, Hroar ruling the land and Helgi being a sea king. Hroar established Roskilde and married a woman from Britain named Ogn. Helgi heard of Thora, queen of Thorey, a beautiful but cruel and arrogant woman, and decided to make her his wife. Landing his ship on the coast of her island, he went to her hall before she had time to gather her forces. She prepared a feast in his honour during which Helgi proposed to her. Queen Thora seemed agreeably, but she ensured he grew very drunk and when they retired to her bower, he fell asleep. Now she shaved off all his hair and covered him in tar, then had him taken down to his ship.

The next morning she awoke his men telling him that their king was already down at his ship, and they departed. Meanwhile Thora gathered her forces. When Helgi's men found their king and he awoke, they went to gain vengeance but found themselves outnumbered, and instead Helgi had to sail away, dishonoured and shamed.

Helgi was determined to take revenge. Some time later, he sailed his fleet back to Thorey and anchored them in a secluded inlet. He went inland dressed as a beggar but carrying two chests filled with gold and silver, which he hid in the woods. Then he made his way to the queen's hall. On the way, he met one of the queen's slaves. He told the slave of a treasure he had

found and bribed the slave to convince the queen to accompany him to the woods in search of the treasure.

When the queen did so, she found Helgi, who forced her to admit she had ill-treated him. Then he had his way with her, and they parted, Thora returning abashed to her hall and Helgi returning to the sea.

Nine months later Thora gave birth to a girl who she named Yrsa after a dog she had. The queen had this girl brought up in the family of a herder. When she was thirteen, King Helgi returned to Thorey, once again disguised as a beggar. As he was passing through the woods he found a girl with a herd, and she seemed lovely to the king. She said she was a poor man's daughter, and Helgi took her back to his ships and sailed away. They married and later had a son named Hrolf.

When Thora heard this, and heard that Helgi had married Yrsa, she was overjoyed. She sent word to Yrsa, and the two queens met, but at the meeting Yrsa learnt the terrible truth, that Thora was her mother and Helgi, her husband, was also her father. Yrsa told Helgi, and she departed from him, first staying with her mother and then going to marry Adils, the king of the Swedes. When Helgi heard of this, he took to living in a small hut, away from anyone else.

One winter, at Yule Eve, a beggar woman came to Helgi's hut seeking shelter. He did as she asked, and even let her sleep in his own bed after she had begged him. When he did as she asked, he was amazed to see her turn into a beautiful elf-woman. She had been under a curse laid on her by her stepmother, to wander the land until she found a king who would let her share his bed. Now she had accomplished this, she was free. But Helgi insisted she pay him back by spending the night with him. That morning she told him that they would have a child, and that he should wait for her down at his boatsheds next winter.

Helgi forgot about this until three years later when three riders came to him, one being the elf who carried a girl child. She said that because Helgi had not kept the agreement, his kin would suffer. She left the girl, whose name was Skuld, to stay with her father.

Helgi returned to the life of a sea king, leaving Hrolf and Skuld behind in Hroar's care. One year Helgi sailed to Sweden, where King Adils reigned with Yrsa as his queen. Adils invited Helgi and his men to a feast, and Helgi accepted, arriving with a hundred of his warriors. When Helgi saw Yrsa again, he was so happy he thought of nothing else. The queen herself hoped to make peace between her husband and her father. But meanwhile Adils was plotting with twelve berserks to ambush Helgi on his way back to his ships.

After the banquet Helgi parted company with Yrsa and her husband, and he and his men headed back to where they had laid anchor. But then Adils' men attacked from one side and his berserks from the other, and Helgi and his men were caught between the hammer and the anvil, and they fell there, and Adils took all Helgi's wealth and treasure. Queen Yrsa knew nothing of this until her father was dead. The rest of Helgi's men returned to the Danes with the news.

#### 4. Hroar's Hall

While Helgi was living as a sea king, Hroar had been ruling the land. He built for himself a great hall, which was named Hart, a great building with which he hoped to celebrate his power. But the first morning after it had been built, when Hroar's bodyguard had spent the night in it, morning showed a grisly scene. All thirty-two men had vanished and all that remained to explain their disappearance were giant bloodstained footsteps that led from the hall to the waters of a mere on the nearby moor.

It became known that the killer of the warriors was Grendel, a monstrous troll who lived in the mere with his ancient mother. Hroar said that he would reward any man who could free the kingdom of this scourge but none could until Beowulf came, the nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats. He came to Hroar with fourteen men and offered to kill the monster. He had already become famous for his heroic deeds, killing giants and sea monsters. Hroar welcomed him and that night Beowulf and his men spent the night in the hall. Again, Grendel came to the hall in the middle of the night but although he killed Hondscio, one of Beowulf's men, Beowulf himself sprang up and seized him by the arm, and tore it from its roots. Grendel fled from the hall mortally wounded.

That morning Hroar and his people were amazed by the sight of the monster's arm, which Beowulf hung from the roof of the hall. That night there was a feast and again the warriors slept in the hall but Hroar and his men joined them. Then Grendel's mother came to the hall and she bore off Grendel's claw and the head of Hroar's counsellor Aeschere. In the morning, the bloody work was revealed, and Hroar realised the truth. Beowulf offered to hunt down Grendel's mother and he and Hroar and their men followed the blood trail down to the mere, where they found Aeschere's head lying beside the water.

Beowulf dived into the mere and found a cave in which he saw Grendel's corpse and a giant sword. Then Grendel's mother attacked him and they fought. At last, Beowulf triumphed and he cut off the monstrous woman's head with the giant sword. He cut off Grendel's head with the sword and took it away as a trophy, although the blood melted the blade as if it was ice.

Hroar had seen the blood of the two monsters in the mere's water and he led his men away, despairing for Beowulf's life. Only Beowulf's own loyal retainers remained, but they despaired. At last, however, Beowulf reappeared, and together they all went back to Hroar's hall, where the king gave the hero many gifts before he departed for his own kingdom.

## 5. Ingeld

Frodi had a son named Ingeld, who became king of the Heathobards after his father was killed. In order to strengthen the uneasy peace between the Danes and the Heathobards, Hroar proposed a marriage between his daughter Freyvar and Ingeld. All went well until the wedding feast when Starkad the Old, who had been one of Frodi's warriors, expressed his anger at Ingeld welcoming the killers of his own father. His words resulted in a fight between Danes and Heathobards, after which Hroar took Freyvar back to the Danes and war broke out afresh between the two nations. After two previous battles, the Heathobards reached Hroar's hall where Hroar and his nephew Hrolf fought them. In the fight, the hall burned to the ground and Hroar was killed, but Ingeld was also slain and Hrolf defeated the Heathobards. Hrolf became king of the Danes.

## 6. Hrolf Kraki

Hrolf soon gained a reputation for modesty and generosity. One day a boy named Vogg came to Hrolf's hall at Lejre and looked at the king. Hrolf asked him what he wanted to say. Vogg said he had heard that King Hrolf was the greatest man in the North, but now he had seen him he saw that he was nothing more than a pole – a *kraki*. King Hrolf said that now Vogg had given him a nickname he should give the boy a gift, since that was customary, and he took a gold ring from his arm and handed it to Vogg. Vogg was amazed by the king's generosity. He solemnly vowed to avenge Hrolf Kraki if anyone killed him.

A group of twelve berserks joined Hrolf's court and they soon became troublesome. As the years went by, other warriors came to Hrolf, including Svipdag and his brothers, Beigad and Hvitserk. They came from Sweden and had formerly been at the court of Adils, where Svipdag had made a name for himself. When Svipdag first joined Hrolf's court the berserks tried to pick a fight with him but Hrolf made peace between them.

Hrolf's sister Skuld had married King Hjorvard, a mighty king who Hrolf made his under-king by a trick. When Hjorvard came to Lejre for a feast, they were standing outside, Hrolf took off his sword belt, and he handed Hjorvard his sword to hold while he did so. It was the custom that a man who submitted to another would hold his sword as token of fealty. Hrolf said that this meant that Hjorvard was now his subordinate. Hjorvard was angry but he accepted grudgingly.

## 7. Bodvar Bjarki

The next famous warrior to join Hrolf's warband was Bodvar Bjarki, who came from the Uppdales in Norway. A witch cursed his father Bjorn to take on the form of a bear and his eldest sons were Frodi, who had the hooves of an elk, and Thorir, who had the feet of a dog. Bodvar came to the Danes after adventures in Norway and Sweden, and was close to Lejre he stayed the night with a peasant and his wife. They told him of their son Hott, who was at Lejre where Hrolf's berserks used to ill-treat and torment him. They asked Bodvar to do something about it.

Bodvar went to Lejre where he found Hott in a pile of bones, which he said was his shield wall against the bones the berserks threw at him. Bodvar dragged the boy from his bone pile and washed him in a nearby lake. Then they returned to the hall and Hott sat nervously next to Bodvar. When Hrolf's men returned that evening, they saw where Hott was sitting and they began throwing bones at Hott and Bodvar. Bodvar acted as if nothing was happening until he seized a large knucklebone and flung it back at the man who had thrown it, killing him outright.

There was an uproar about this, and Bodvar was dragged before King Hrolf who demanded to know what had happened. Hrolf had spoken to his men repeatedly about their ways but they had not listened to him. Now he asked Bodvar how he would compensate him for this killing, and offered to take him on as a replacement for the man he had killed. Bodvar agreed, but insisted Hott join him as well. Hrolf saw little honour in the boy but said he would not grudge him food.

Bodvar went to find a seat for him and Hott. Rather than sit where the man he had killed had sat, he dragged three men off a bench and sat himself and Hott down there.

As it came close to Yule, Bodvar noticed people seeming unhappy. He discovered that a dragon had been terrorising the hall for the last two years, devouring cattle and killing men, and they were afraid it would come back. After losing several champions, Hrolf forbade his men to go against the creature.

Bodvar went out into the night, taking with him an unwilling Hott. When the creature appeared, Bodvar tried to draw his sword but it stuck in the scabbard. Finally, he managed to draw it and he thrust it into the scaly hide of the creature.

Now that he had killed it, he forced Hott to drink the creature's blood. When he did so, a change came over Hott and he became strong and brave, and he wrestled with Bodvar for a long time. Then they raised the creature up so it seemed to be still alive, and went away again.



Next morning Hrolf asked if anyone knew if the beast had visited in the night. His men told them that the cattle were safe and secure in their shippens. He sent some men out to scout the area, and they returned hastily, saying they had seen the creature out on the plain, heading straight for the hall.

The king went to look at it and commented that the creature was not moving. He asked his men who would go against it. To everyone's surprise, Bodvar suggested Hott attack it. Hott agreed, and asked the king to give him the sword Gullinhjalti. The king did so uncertainly, and Hott went and struck down the beast. Hrolf said thought that Bodvar was behind this, but he let Hott keep the sword, and said from now on he would be called Hjalti.

Winter passed, and it was soon time for Hrolf's berserks to return from their travels. Hjalti told Bodvar that it was their habit to demand of each man who they thought was bravest in Hrolf's retinue, and no one was brave enough to say anything other than that the berserks were. Bodvar was unimpressed by this. When the berserks came back to Hrolf's hall, Bodvar asked Hjalti if he was willing to take them on. Hjalti said he would fight no more than one of them.

A berserk came up to Bodvar and asked him whom they thought the bravest in Hrolf's retinue. Bodvar insulted the man and knocked him down. Hjalti did the same with another. King Hrolf tried to calm things down. He persuaded the berserks to sit down, and told them to be less haughty in future, since he had greater champions than they did. Now Bodvar and Hjalti, and Svipdag and his brothers, became Hrolf's greatest champions, and with them was Hromund the Hard and Hrolf the Swift-handed, Haklang, Hardrefil, Haki the Bold, Vott the Mighty and Starolf. Bodvar performed such deeds that Hrolf gave him his sister's hand in marriage.

## 8. King Adils

Now Hrolf put thought to his father's death at the hands of King Adils. He held a banquet and invited all his men. When they were all assembled, he commented on what strength he commanded and he asked Bodvar if he knew of another king with such warriors. Bodvar said he didn't, but one thing diminished Hrolf's standing – the fact that he had not gone to Uppsala to gain his inheritance. Hrolf said it would be hard to get since King Adils was a treacherous man, but Bodvar was insistent and Hrolf agreed.

Hrolf and his men set out as if going to a feast, bringing with them their hawks and hounds, and they travelled across Skane towards Adils' kingdom. On the way, they came to a farm, where a one-eyed man named Hrani invited them to stay with him for the night. Hrolf

accepted, and after a meal, they slept, although Hrolf's warriors thought it was cold. In the morning, Hrani asked them how they had been, and said he thought the men had felt the cold. He advised Hrolf to leave them behind and the king did so.

They rode on another day at the end they came to the same farm. Hrolf thought this odd. The farmer greeted them and gave them the same hospitality. During the night, many men felt thirsty and drank water from a vat. The next morning Hrani suggested Hrolf leave those men behind. Hrolf agreed and went on, accompanied by his champions and his hawk, Habrok and his hound, Gram.

Again, they came to Hrani's hall after a day of snow. This time Hrani made a fire for them, but it was too hot for Hrolf's men, apart from his champions. The next day Hrani suggested the king not bring those men with him.

Then they rode on and came eventually to Adils' hall in Uppsala. All the people in the stronghold lined the streets to see King Hrolf and his champions, but they fled as the warriors spurred their horses and galloped up to Adils' hall. Here the king's men greeted them and took their horses to the stables. Bodvar Bjarki told them to take good care of their steeds, but Adils gave secret orders for the beasts to be mutilated.

The men escorted Hrolf and his warriors into the hall but they saw no sign of the king. Svipdag, who had had dealings with Adils before, led the way, and told them not to let on which of them was Hrolf. Now the men who had escorted them had vanished. As they crossed the hall, they met many obstacles but Svipdag guided them through them and at last, they could see the high seat where Adils sat. The king recognised Svipdag and jeered at him.

Svipdag demanded safe conduct, and Adils granted it and urged them to come closer. Darkness lay on the hall but the Danes thought they could see pit traps and warriors concealed behind wall hangings. They leapt across the pits nevertheless and fought off the armed men when they rushed from out of cover.

Adils was angry when he saw Hrolf's champions cutting his men down, but urged everyone to sit down and act peaceably. Hrolf and his men did so, and Adils taunted the king – who he did not yet recognise – for coming with so small a retinue.

He had the hall cleared of corpses and great fires built up for the guests. Adils and his men sat on one side, Hrolf and his champions on the other. Now Adils tried to find out which one of them was king and he had his slaves build up the fires until the heat was unbearable, knowing Hrolf had sworn never to flee fire or iron.

Bodvar, Svipdag, and Hjalti each seized one of Adils' slaves and flung them into the fire. Then Hrolf and his men leapt over the flame, intending to take Adils prisoner, but Adils escaped using his magic.

He went to Queen Yrsa's chamber and told her all that had happened, but she spoke disdainfully to him and said that she would help Hrolf rather than him. Now Queen Yrsa went to serve Hrolf and his champions and she sent for a man to attend them during their stay. The man warned them that Adils would do everything in his power to overcoming them. After that, they slept in the house allotted to them.

They were awakened by a commotion from outside. The attendant told them that it was King Adils' sacred boar, come to kill them. The boar burst into the house, but Bodvar set Hrolf's hound Gram on the beast and it chased the boar off.

But before they could celebrate the dog's victory, Adils and his men came and set fire to the hall. As the thatch burned and the flames licked around the doors, Bodvar suggested they ram the walls until they can break their way out. They did this, although the walls were strong, and they broke out into the street beyond, which was filled with men in mail. Hrolf and his champions cut their way through these warriors. As they did so, Hrolf's hawk Habrok appeared from Adils' fortress and landed on Hrolf's shoulder, having slain all Adils' hawks.

Now Adils vanished from among his men, and his men began to surrender to the Danes. Hrolf and his men went into Adils' hall and sat upon the high seat. Then Hjalti went to check the horses and found they had been mutilated. Yrsa came to the hall and warned Hrolf that Adils was mustering his troops from all over the kingdom. She gave him a silver horn and the ring Sviagris, and a great deal of other treasure, far more than that which belonged to Helgi. She also provided them with splendid horses: all red except for Hrolf's, which was white, and armour and shields and fine clothes. Then they parted.

Hrolf and his champions rode across the Fyris Wolds, where the king saw a gold ring lying in their path. He would not stop to pick it up, since he suspected a trap, but instead he flung down another ring to join it. Then they heard a blare of horns from all around and saw a vast army riding after them. Hrolf and his men continued to ride at the same pace.

Now Hrolf began to cast gold behind him, flinging away treasure as the Danes rode onwards. As the pursuing Swedes saw that, they began to leap down off their horses and grab up handfuls of gold, their eyes glinting with greed. When Adils saw this he was angry and he shouted at them, saying they should go after the greatest prize, which they were allowing to escape. He rode ahead, and his men followed grudgingly.

When Hrolf saw Adils coming, he flung the ring Sviagris down in his path, and Adils got down and grubbed in the dirt for it. Then Hrolf cut him across the buttocks with his sword Skofnung and revealed his identity. Adils was close to fainting from loss of blood and he staggered homewards while Hrolf took back Sviagris, while his men fought off the closest attackers. When Adils turned back, the entire army retreated to Uppsala.

On the return journey, Hrolf and his men come to Hrani's farm where the farmer greets them and says that matters turned out much as he predicted. Then he offers the king a sword, shield, and mailcoat of apparently inferior work. Hrolf refuses them and Hrani is angry. The Danes ride on, leaving Hrani behind them, until Bodvar realises that the farmer must have been Odin in disguise. They ride back hastily but find that Hrani and his farm have both vanished. Now they realise they have lost Odin's favour. They return to Hrolf's kingdom, but Bodvar felt a foreboding that grave news will be quick to reach them.

## 9. Skuld's Battle

Despite Bodvar's premonition, peace lay over Hrolf's kingdom for a long while. Meanwhile, Skuld was growing discontent with her lot, and she began to egg her husband on to rise up against Hrolf in revolt. Although Hjorvard was unwilling to cross his overlord, Skuld began her plot by sending word to Hrolf asking to defer payment for tribute for three years. Meanwhile she began to gather a following of robbers and murderers, and cast spells so she was surrounded by evil elves and norns.

Meanwhile Hrolf and his men were living in luxury. A lavish feast was prepared for Yule, but as the champions ate, drank, and embraced their mistresses Skuld's army advanced through the night to pitch tents outside Hrolf's stronghold.

Hjalti was going to the house of his mistress when he saw the tents of the enemy. He could see this did not mean good for Hrolf and his folk, but he went to lie with his mistress all the same. Then he asked her which she would rather, an old man of eighty or two men of twenty. When his mistress said she preferred two men of twenty, he drew his sword, struck off her nose, and asked her whom she thought would fight over her now.

Now he took his arms and armour and went to awaken Hrolf and his men. By now Skuld and Hjorvard's army surrounded the stronghold. Hrolf and his champions sprang awake and prepared for battle, but the king sent a message to his sister that they would drink until they were merry before they fought.

That done, Hrolf and his men all went out, except Bodvar Bjarki, and no one could see any sign of him. Hrolf and his champions poured out of the stronghold and set upon Hjorvard's warriors, Hrolf laying about him with his sword Skofnung and slaying many men. Then a

bear appeared, fighting at Hrolf's side, slaughtering the enemy. But Hjalti missed his old comrade Bodvar Bjarki, and he went back to the king's hall and found the warrior sitting there without moving. Hjalti urged him to rise and join the battle, and finally he did so, but he said that now their chances of winning had been diminished. When they returned to the battle, the bear had vanished and now the tide turned against Hrolf and his warriors.

A huge boar raced out of Hjorvard's ranks and Bodvar Bjarki fought this, cutting it apart and fighting his way through the ranks. But now the dead began to rise up and fight him, reanimated by Skuld's sorcery. Hjalti said he thought he would be sitting in Valhalla that evening, but Bodvar Bjarki said he had seen no sign of Odin on the field.

Now Hrolf's champions began to fall before the barrage of magic, until only Hrolf still stood, but he died soon after in a ring of the slain.

Now Skuld and Hjorvard seized Hrolf's kingdom but they held it only a short time. Some say that Bodvar Bjarki's brother Elk-Frodi avenged his brother's death, and other say that Vogg led an army against Skuld and defeated her, and had her tortured to death. Another story says that Vogg was the only one of Hrolf's company to survive the battle, and then when he was found he was brought before Hjorvard, who offered to take him on as a warrior. Vogg said that he would swear to serve him faithfully, but only if he could swear in the way he had sworn fealty to Hrolf – upon the hilt of a sword. Hjorvard allowed him to and Vogg snatched the sword from him and slew the king, before the king's men cut him down.

But King Hrolf and his champions were buried in barrows, and Hrolf had his sword Skofnung placed beside him. There it remained until the Icelander Skeggi of Midfjord looted the barrows. He took Skofnung, Hjalti's axe and tried to take Bodvar Bjarki's sword Laufi. But Hrolf's champion rose from the dead and fought Skeggi until Hrolf came to his aid and Skeggi fled.

## THIEVES FROM THE STARS

### 6 The Light Elves

As he did so, he heard a loud crash from elsewhere in the tunnel complex. Shouts and reedy screams echoed down the metal passages, and more lightning bolts could be heard sizzling through the foggy air. The dark elves in the doorway paused, looking over their shoulders uncertainly, paying Theodric no attention.

Korrakh tugged at Theodric's ankle. The Saxon glanced down.

'What's happening?' the dwarf demanded. Theodric crouched down beside him.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Sounds like the dark elves are under attack themselves.'

Together, they peered over the insectoid corpse. The dark elves in the doorway were staring with trepidation down the corridor outside, as the sounds of battle grew closer. Suddenly lightning bolts were frying the air beyond the arch. The dark elves lifted their own weapons and retaliated. For a whole minute, the chamber reverberated with the roar of battle, as the dark elves alternately fired into the fog and fell to their unseen assailants.

'Looks like the attackers are winning,' murmured Theodric, as the remaining dark elves staggered into the chamber, firing as they retreated. Another fell, lanced by a beam of energy that shot out of the mist. Only three dark elves were left.

'Come on, Korrakh!' shouted Theodric, seeing his chance. He leapt over the insectoid corpse and charged.

The demoralised dark elves were clearly not expecting his rush, and one fell to his first slash, spouting ichor across the metal floor. Another turned to train his weapon on him, but Korrakh knocked it from the elf's hand and Theodric followed this with a thrust to the heart. He wrenched the sword and turned... to see the third elf about to shoot.

Another crackle of energy spat out of the mist and dropped the elf in his tracks.

Five figures stepped from the mist. All of them were about seven feet high, muscular, dressed in silvery suits – and with almost human faces, made unearthly only by their statuesque perfection. Their hair was blond, their eyes were blue... Theodric gasped. These were the exact counterparts of the dark figures who had been harrying them.

‘Light elves?’ he murmured. He turned to Korrahh.

The dwarf shrugged.

‘Must be,’ he replied. ‘They’re enemies of the dark elves.’

Then one of the light elves spoke.

‘Release the specimens,’ he said in a voice that was firm yet gentle. Two of his men nodded.

‘And these?’ one asked.

‘We will take them with us,’ the light elf chieftain said. Theodric stepped forward.

‘May I offer my thanks for your actions,’ he said courteously. ‘My friend and I were attempting to free the dark elves’ prisoners ourselves, but we... had not the art.’

The elf regarded him curiously.

‘You have come down from the world of the light elves, I take it?’ asked Theodric. ‘Even here, in the middle world, we have heard of your wars with the dark elves...’

‘We landed our ship near the entrance to this complex,’ the light elf replied suddenly. Theodric frowned, confused.

‘Ship?’ he asked. ‘We’re not near the sea, are we?’ He hadn’t realised he had gone so far. That meant they must be near Cair Leil...



‘We’re five miles inland here,’ said KorraKh.

‘But our ship travels across the void between the worlds, not across the sea,’ the elf replied. Theodric raised his eyebrows. He had dismissed tales of the ship the gods used to travel from world to world as the product of a bard’s overheated imagination. Like so many things...

‘Again, I must thank you for saving us,’ he said. ‘We shall repay you in any way you see fit...’ The other elves had detached the undamaged sarcophagi from the wall and were wheeling them across the chamber.

‘I should add that my friend here is betrothed to one of the dwarves,’ Theodric added uncertainly, as the light elves paid him no attention. ‘And the other dwarves come from the caves nearby. If you could revive them, I’m sure they could make their own way back...’

The light elf chieftain was betraying signs of irritation.

‘Silence, chattering ape,’ he said, levelling his weapon on the Saxon and his dwarfish companion. ‘You too will return to our ship, and we shall take what we need from you as well.’

Theodric frowned. KorraKh gasped.

‘But you’re light elves!’ he cried. ‘The forces of good! It’s the dark elves who prey upon us...’

The light elf looked back impassionately. ‘Your information is inaccurate. Both races you call elves live on dying worlds. In order to survive the chilling winters and blazing heat of summer, we need that which we can extract only from the blood of inhabitants of worlds such as your own. You will come with us.’

‘We’ll fight you first!’ snarled KorraKh. He raised his stone axe. The elves all started, and aimed their weapons at him.

‘No!’ shouted Theodric. ‘No – we’ll come with you to your ship. KorraKh – put down your weapon.’

The dwarf stared at him in amazement.

‘Turned craven, have you?’ he demanded. ‘What was all that about going to Valhalla with steel in your hand and a smile upon your lips? Coward!’

‘Drop your axe,’ Theodric said sternly. He reached forward, and wrested it from Korra-kh’s fingers, and flung it away. Ignoring Korra-kh’s accusing gaze, he turned to the light elf chieftain.

‘We will come with you,’ he said.

The elves marched them through the empty corridors, passing the corpses of elves both dark and light, before finally they came to a large hole torn in one metal wall. Beyond it was a shaft of slowly cooling rock. Korra-kh stared at it as the elves hustled them through. It seemed to have been burned through...

It led them straight up through the rock. They came out into the light of day. The shaft had been bored into the cliff not far from the natural cave entrance that led to his own caves, and the dwarf gazed longingly in that direction. But the elves hustled them onwards, on a forced march through the trees.

As they set out, Theodric did a strange thing. He took a cow’s horn from his belt and set it to his lips. He blew, and a note belled out, throbbing through the woods around.

‘Why do you do that?’ demanded the light elf chieftain.

‘It is an ancient custom of my people to blow the horn when we are to end our lives,’ Theodric replied blandly. ‘It is to tell the gods that we will soon be with them. Does it offend you?’

The elf shrugged.

‘Do as you will,’ he replied.

‘Gods?’ asked another elf.

‘He must mean the Elohim,’ said the chieftain. ‘Primitives worship them.’

The elves urged them onwards, and they proceeded at speed through the woods, with Theodric giving his horn a mournful blow now and then. But finally they passed out from under the forest fence, and found themselves at the edge of a field. At the centre of it was a vast metallic oval object, towards which the elves directed them.

With sinking heart, Korrakh trudged as they bade. At least if he was to die, he was to die with Pitu, he reflected, as he had done throughout the march. But why was he to die such an ignoble death? He shot Theodric a vicious look.

The Saxon was staring about him. He seemed concerned! Well he might be, since he had willingly allowed these elves to drag them off to certain death! Korrakh could not believe it. Everything had suggested that Theodric was a true warrior, fearing nothing. But now, he had simply given up. And why did he keep blowing that horn? He was doing it now, to Korrakh’s irritation.

‘Come on, come on,’ Korrakh heard him mutter.

‘What’s that?’ demanded one of the elves. ‘Listen!’

They paused to listen. A thunderous pounding of feet came to them on the breeze. The chieftain looked around him. His eyes widened.

‘There!’ he cried.

Charging towards them from the lea of the forest, was a host of warriors, all dressed like Theodric. The elves tore out their weapons and started firing. Warriors fell in the charge, but the rest kept coming.

‘Is this your doing?’ demanded the chieftain, turning on Theodric. But before he could do anything, the Saxons were upon them.

As the warriors crashed into his elves, the chieftain leapt for Theodric, grappling with him. Theodric caught him in a wrestling lock, but the elf was immensely strong, and struggled free. They tumbled into the dirt and tussled together. Suddenly, the elf heaved himself out of Theodric's hold and grabbed a piece of rock from nearby. He forced the man down, and raised the rock above his head...

And slumped, his crown split open, weeping blood and brains. KorraKh stood over the corpse, cast a length of wood away, and glared down at Theodric.

'Who are these men?' he demanded, glaring round at the Saxons who had slaughtered the elves.

'They're my men,' Theodric replied. 'The ones I got split off from when the woses caught me. By the way, thanks for saving me again.' He got up, and turned towards the Saxons.

Boia stepped forward.

'Theodric!' he cried. 'We thought those wild men had carried you off!'

'They did,' replied Theodric, 'but this dwarf here saved me.'

The dwarf in question was glaring about him. 'Why did you let the elves take us prisoner?'

'I guessed that some of my men must have survived the wood-wose attack,' Theodric replied. 'But there was no way I'd be able to call them to me while we were in the hollow hills. So I let the elves take us away, and began to call my men to me as we passed through the forest. Sorry to have deceived you, but it was necessary.'

KorraKh glared down at his feet.

'I must apologise for my words in the hills,' he muttered. 'But Pitu!' Suddenly, he turned, and scuttled over to the sarcophagi.

Theodric followed him, to find him staring down through the glass at her still face.

‘How could I revive her?’ the dwarf demanded. Theodric stepped forward.

‘While we were being marched here by the elves,’ he said, ‘i took a good look at the sarcophagi.’ He leant over. ‘There is a button here. Perhaps that will break the spell.’

‘Or perhaps it will kill her!’ objected KorraKh.

‘There’s only one way to find out,’ Theodric said. And before KorraKh could say another word, he pressed the button.

For a second, nothing happened. Then they heard a gurgling sound, and the liquid began to drain away. Pitu’s body sank to the bottom of the tank.

KorraKh threw open the glass door, and lifted her limp body out. He stared in anger at Theodric.

‘She has not recovered!’ he snarled hysterically.

‘Look, KorraKh,’ Theodric murmured. The dwarf looked down. Pitu was beginning to stir. Slowly, her eyes cleared, and she gazed upward.

‘KorraKh?’ she murmured. ‘Is that you?’

Theodric looked away as they kissed, to find Boia standing beside him.

‘What now, Theodric?’ he asked.

Theodric shook his yellow mane. ‘Now that the little people are reunited,’ he said wryly, ‘now that the lovers are together, there is only one thing to be done. To find Oeric – and vengeance!’

The warriors raised their spears.

‘Vengeance!’ they cried.

But KorraKh and Pitu paid them no attention.

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LI.

THE ATTACK UPON THE VAMPYRE'S HOUSE.—THE STORY OF THE ATTACK.—  
THE FORCING OF THE DOORS, AND THE STRUGGLE.

A council of war was now called among the belligerents, who were somewhat taken aback by the steady refusal of the servant to admit them, and their apparent determination to resist all endeavours on the part of the mob to get into and obtain possession of the house. It argued that they were prepared to resist all attempts, and it would cost some few lives to get into the vampyre's house. This passed through the minds of many as they retired behind the angle of the wall where the council was to be held.

Here they looked in each others' face, as if to gather from that the general tone of the feelings of their companions; but here they saw nothing that intimated the least idea of going back as they came.

"It's all very well, mates, to take care of ourselves, you know," began one tall, brawny fellow; "but, if we bean't to be sucked to death by a vampyre, why we must have the life out of him."

"Ay, so we must."

"Jack Hodge is right; we must kill him, and there's no sin in it, for he has no right to it; he's robbed some poor fellow of his life to prolong his own."

"Ay, ay, that's the way he does; bring him out, I say, then see what we will do with him."

"Yes, catch him first," said one, "and then we can dispose of him afterwards, I say, neighbours, don't you think it would be as well to catch him first?"

"Haven't we come on purpose?"

"Yes, but do it."

"Ain't we trying it?"

"You will presently, when we come to get into the house."

"Well, what's to be done?" said one; "here we are in a fix, I think, and I can't see our way out very clearly."

"I wish we could get in."

"But how is a question I don't very well see," said a large specimen of humanity.

"The best thing that can be done will be to go round and look over the whole house, and then we may come upon some part where it is far easier to get in at than by the front door."

"But it won't do for us all to go round that way," said one; "a small party only should go, else they will have all their people stationed at one point, and if we can divide them, we shall beat them because they have not enough to defend more than one point at a time; now we are numerous enough to make several attacks."

"Oh! that's the way to bother them all round; they'll give in, and then the place is our own."

"No, no," said the big countryman, "I like to make a good rush and drive all afore us; you know what ye have to do then, and you do it, ye know."

"If you can."

"Ay, to be sure, if we can, as you say; but can't we? that's what I want to know."

"To be sure we can."

"Then we'll do it, mate—that's my mind; we'll do it. Come on, and let's have another look at the street-door."



The big countryman left the main body, and resolutely walked up to the main avenue, and approached the door, accompanied by about a dozen or less of the mob. When they came to the door, they commenced knocking and kicking most violently, and assailing it with all kinds of things they could lay their hands upon.

They continued at this violent exercise for some time—perhaps for five minutes, when the little square hole in the door was again opened, and a voice was heard to say,—

"You had better cease that kind of annoyance."

"We want to get in."

"It will cost you more lives to do so than you can afford to spare. We are well armed, and are prepared to resist any effort you can make."

"Oh! it's all very well; but, an you won't open, why we'll make you; that's all about it."

This was said as the big countryman and his companions were leaving the avenue towards the rest of the body.

"Then, take this, as an earnest of what is to follow," said the man, and he discharged the contents of a blunderbuss through the small opening, and its report sounded to the rest of the mob like the report of a field-piece.

Fortunately for the party retiring the man couldn't take any aim, else it is questionable how many of the party would have got off unwounded. As it was, several of them found stray slugs were lodged in various parts of their persons, and accelerated their retreat from the house of the vampyre.

"What luck?" inquired one of the mob to the others, as they came back; "I'm afraid you had all the honour."

"Ay, ay, we have, and all the lead too," replied a man, as he placed his hand upon a sore part of his person, which bled in consequence of a wound.

"Well, what's to be done?"

"Danged if I know," said one.

"Give it up," said another.

"No, no; have him out. I'll never give in while I can use a stick. They are in earnest, and so are we. Don't let us be frightened because they have a gun or two—they can't have many; and besides, if they have, we are too many for them. Besides, we shall all die in our beds."

"Hurrah! down with the vampyre!"

"So say I, lads. I don't want to be sucked to death when I'm a-bed. Better die like a man than such a dog's death as that, and you have no revenge then."

"No, no; he has the better of us then. We'll have him out—we'll burn him—that's the way we'll do it."

"Ay, so we will; only let us get in."

At that moment a chosen party returned who had been round the house to make a reconnaissance.

"Well, well," inquired the mob, "what can be done now—where can we get in?"

"In several places."

"All right; come along then; the place is our own."

"Stop a minute; they are armed at all points, and we must make an attack on all points, else we may fail. A party must go round to the front-door, and attempt to beat it in; there are plenty of poles and things that could be used for such a purpose."

"There is, besides, a garden-door, that opens into the house—a kind of parlour; a kitchen-door; a window in the flower-garden, and an entrance into a store-room; this place appears strong, and is therefore unguarded."

"The very point to make an attack."

"Not quite."

"Why not?"

"Because it can easily be defended, and rendered useless to us. We must make an attack upon all places but that, and, while they are being at those points, we can then enter at that place, and then you will find them desert the other places when they see us inside."

"Hurrah! down with the vampyre!" said the mob, as they listened to this advice, and appreciated the plan.

"Down with the vampyre!"

"Now, then, lads, divide, and make the attack; never mind their guns, they have but very few, and if you rush in upon them, you will soon have the guns yourselves."

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the mob.

The mob now moved away in different bodies, each strong enough to carry the house. They seized upon a variety of poles and stones, and then made for the various doors and windows that were pointed out by those who had made the discovery. Each one of those who had formed the party of observation, formed a leader to the others, and at once proceeded to the post assigned him.

The attack was so sudden and so simultaneous that the servants were unprepared; and though they ran to the doors, and fired away, still they did but little good, for the doors were soon forced open by the enraged rioters, who proceeded in a much more systematic operation,

using long heavy pieces of timber which were carried on the shoulders of several men, and driven with the force of battering-rams—which, in fact, they were—against the door.

Bang went the battering-ram, crash went the door, and the whole party rushed headlong in, carried forward by their own momentum and fell prostrate, engine and all, into the passage.

"Now, then, we have them," exclaimed the servants, who began to belabour the whole party with blows, with every weapon they could secure.

Loudly did the fallen men shout for assistance, and but for their fellows who came rushing in behind, they would have had but a sorry time of it.

"Hurrah!" shouted the mob; "the house is our own."

"Not yet," shouted the servants.

"We'll try," said the mob; and they rushed forward to drive the servants back, but they met with a stout resistance, and as some of them had choppers and swords, there were a few wounds given, and presently bang went the blunderbuss.

Two or three of the mob reeled and fell.

This produced a momentary panic, and the servants then had the whole of the victory to themselves, and were about to charge, and clear the passage of their enemies, when a shout behind attracted their attention.

That shout was caused by an entrance being gained in another quarter, whence the servants were flying, and all was disorder.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the mob.

The servants retreated to the stairs, and here united, they made a stand, and resolved to resist the whole force of the rioters, and they succeeded in doing so, too, for some minutes. Blows were given and taken of a desperate character.

Somehow, there were no deadly blows received by the servants; they were being forced and beaten, but they lost no life; this may be accounted for by the fact that the mob used no more deadly weapons than sticks.

The servants of Sir Francis Varney, on the contrary, were mostly armed with deadly weapons, which, however, they did not use unnecessarily. They stood upon the hall steps—the grand staircase, with long poles or sticks, about the size of quarter-staves, and with these they belaboured those below most unmercifully.

Certainly, the mob were by no means cowards, for the struggle to close with their enemies was as great as ever, and as firm as could well be. Indeed, they rushed on with a desperation truly characteristic of John Bull, and defied the heaviest blows; for as fast as one was stricken down another occupied his place, and they insensibly pressed their close and compact front upon the servants, who were becoming fatigued and harassed.

"Fire, again," exclaimed a voice from among the servants.

The mob made no retrograde movement, but still continued to press onwards, and in another moment a loud report rang through the house, and a smoke hung over the heads of the mob.

A long groan or two escaped some of the men who had been wounded, and a still louder from those who had not been wounded, and a cry arose of,—

"Down with the vampyre—pull down—destroy and burn the whole place—down with them all."

A rush succeeded, and a few more discharges took place, when a shout above attracted the attention of both parties engaged in this fierce struggle. They paused by mutual consent, to look and see what was the cause of that shout.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXXVII

With puny fists I pounded the panel. A small pane in it was transparent. Within the lock I could see the blurred figures of Anita and her captor—and it seemed, another figure there. The lock was some ten feet square, with a low ceiling. It glowed with a dim tube-light.

I strained at it with futile, silent effort. The mechanism was here to open this manual; but it was now clasped from within so would not operate.

A few seconds, while I stood there in a panic of confusion, raging to get in. This disaster had come so suddenly. I did not plan: I had no thought save to batter my way in and rescue Anita. I recall that I finally beat on the glassite pane with my bullet projector until the weapon was bent and useless. And I flung it with a wild despairing rage at my feet.

They were letting the ship's air-pressure into this lock. Soon they would open the inner panel, step into the secondary chamber—and in a moment more would be within the ship's hull corridor. Anita, lost to me!

The outer panel suddenly opened! I had lunged against it with my shoulder; the giant figure inside slid it. It was taken by surprise! I half fell forward.

Huge arms went around me. The goggled face of the helmet peered into mine.

"So it is you, Haljan! I thought I recognized that little device over your helmet bracket. And here is my little Anita, come back to me again!"

Miko!

This was he. His great bloated arms encircling me, bending me backward, holding me helpless. I saw over his shoulder that Anita was clutched in the grip of another helmeted figure. No giant, but tall for an Earth man—almost as tall as myself. Then the tube light in the room illumined the visor. I saw the face, recognized it. Moa!

I gasped, "So—I've got you—Miko—"

"Got me! You're a fool to the last, Haljan! A fool to the last! But you were always a fool."

I could scarcely move in his grip. My arms were pinned. As he slowly bent me backward, I wound my legs around one of his: it was as unyielding as a steel pillar. He had closed the outer panel; the air pressure in the lock was rising. I could feel it against my suit.

My helmeted head was being forced backward; Miko's left arm held me. In his gloved right hand as it came slowly up over my throat I saw a knife blade, its naked, sharpened metal glistening blue-white in the light from overhead.

I seized his wrist. But my puny strength could not hold him. The knife, against all of my efforts, came slowly down.

A moment of this slow, deadly combat—the end of everything for me.

I was aware of the helmeted figure of Moa casting off Anita—and then the two girls leaping upon Miko. It threw him off his balance, and my hanging weight made him topple forward. He took a step to recover himself; his hand with the knife was flung up with an instinctive, involuntary balancing gesture. And as it came down again, I forced the knife-blade to graze his throat. Its point caught in the fabric of his suit.

His startled oath jangled in my ears. The girls were clawing at him; we were all four scrambling, swaying. With despairing strength I twisted at his wrist. The knife went into his throat. I plunged it deeper.

His suit went flabby. He crumpled over me and fell, knocking me to the floor. His voice, with the horrible gurgling rasp of death in it, rattled my ear-grids.

"Not such a fool—are you, Haljan—"

Moa's helmeted head was close over us. I saw that she had seized the knife, jerked it from her brother's throat. She leaped backward, waving it.

I twisted from beneath Miko's lifeless, inert body. As I got to my feet, Anita flung herself to shield me. Moa was across the lock, back up against the wall. The knife in her hand went up. She stood for the briefest instant regarding Anita and me, holding each other. I thought that she was about to leap upon us. But before I could move, the knife came down and plunged into her breast. She fell forward, her grotesque helmet striking the grid-floor almost at my feet.

"Gregg!"

"She's dead."

"No! She moved! Get her helmet off! There's enough air here."

My helmet pressure indicator was faintly buzzing to show that a safe pressure was in the room. I shut off Moa's Erentz motors, unfastened her helmet and raised it off. We gently turned her body. She lay with closed eyes, her pallid face blue. With our own helmets off, we knelt over her.

"Oh, Gregg—is she dead?"

"No. Not quite—but dying."

"Gregg, I don't want her to die! She was trying to help you there at the last."

She opened her eyes. The film of death was glazing them. But she saw me, recognized me.

"Gregg—"

"Yes, Moa. I'm here."

Her vivid lips were faintly drawn in a smile. "I'm—so glad—you took the helmets off, Gregg. I'm—going—you know."

"No!"



"Going—back to Mars—to rest with the fire-makers—where I came from. I was thinking—maybe you would kiss me, Gregg?"

Anita gently pushed me down. I pressed the white, faintly smiling lips with mine. She sighed, and it ended with a rattle in her throat.

"Thank you—Gregg—closer—I can't talk so loudly—"

One of her gloved hands struggled to touch me, but she had no strength and it fell back. Her words were the faintest of whispers:

"There was no use living—without your love. But I want you to see—now—that a Martian girl can die with a smile—"

Her eyelids fluttered down; it seemed that she sighed and then was not breathing. But on her livid face the faint smile still lingered, to show me how a Martian girl could die.

We had forgotten for the moment where we were. As I glanced up I saw through the inner panel, past the secondary lock, that the hull's corridor was visible. And along its length a group of Martians was advancing! They saw us, and came running.

"Anita! Look! We've got to get out of here!"

The secondary lock was open to the corridor. We jammed on our helmets. The unhelmeted brigands by then were fumbling at the inner panel. I pulled at the lever of the outer panel. The brigands were hurrying, thinking that they could be in time to stop me. One of the more cautious fumbled with a helmet.

"Anita, run! Try and keep your feet."

I slid the outer panel and pushed at Anita. Simultaneously the brigands opened the inner port.

The air came with a tempestuous rush. A blast through the inner port—through the small pressure lock—a wild rush, out to the airless Moon. All the air in the ship madly rushing to escape....

Like feathers, we were blown with it. I recall an impression of the hurtling brigand figures and swift flying rocks under me. A silent crash as I struck.

Then soundless, empty blackness.