

THE NEW WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

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This Week's Featured Story:

THE VAMPIERE ASSASSIN

By Michael Kazlo II

Also Featuring:

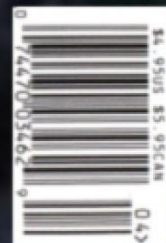
LOCAL SAFARI

By Sergio Palumbo

THE KNIFE

By Todd Nelsen

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is a screen shot from "The Vampire Assassin" by Archangel Productions. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

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Local Safari by Sergio Palumbo - "Did you get tired of going on exciting adventures and so decide to visit a dull, valueless technician?" SCIENCE FICTION

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A Picture from Harriett - Part Two by John L Campbell - Doc Fulcrum sets time of death at approximately one p.m.... HORROR

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Three Wise Men by Nathan Rowark - "Is this the way?" the coven asks... POETRY

The House of Skulls - Part Five by Gavin Chappell - Into the desert... FANTASY/HORROR

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: After London - Part Four by Richard Jefferies - The invaders... SCIENCE FICTION

EDITORIAL

Hello and welcome to the latest issue of *Schlock!*

This week's featured story is *The Vampire Assassin* by Michael Kazlo II, independent filmmaker and director of the film of the same title, of which this is an adaptation. To download the 'tame' version of the film or to order a not-so-tame DVD, visit [Archangel Productions](#).

This week we also see the publication of the complete *Days of High Adventure*, the Robert E Howard anthology that has been serialised in part in previous editions. It is now available as a paperback and an eBook from Schlock! Publications.

Also in this edition is the story *Local Safari*, written by Italian writer Sergio Palumbo, and edited by American writer Michele Dutcher. Signor Palumbo has previously been published on *Aphelion Webzine*, *Weird Year Webzine*, *Yester Year Fiction*, *Another Realm Magazine*, *Alien Skin Magazine*, *Antipodean SF*, *Orion's Child Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *Kalkion Science Fiction and Fantasy Web Magazine*, *Digital Dragon Magazine* and will appear soon on *Farther Stars Than These*.

We also have the continuation of *Ayame's Love*, the second part of John L Campbell's three-parter *A Picture from Harriett*; comic writing from Todd Nelsen; and more of Nathan Rowark's poetry. In *The House of the Skulls*, Yeduza travels into the dread deserts of the North; meanwhile our classic serials *Varney the Vampyre* and *After London* continue.

A month until our anniversary edition: now accepting submissions!

-Gavin Chappell

THE VAMPIRE ASSASSIN by Michael Kazlo II

‘Loneliness is a vise that crushes the heart.’

That is what the young woman felt. Lonely. She had hoped that the one night she would stop feeling that way was when she met the couple she befriended online.

O’Bee, as her coworkers called her, she was one of two O’Briens in her office, was 35 and wanted to feel younger. Her last boyfriend kept making comments about the small cellulite dimples on her buttocks and thighs. It bothered O’Bee to no end. She was proud of her figure and he didn’t start picking apart her physical attributes until just two weeks before he told O’Bee he had been seeing his nineteen year old administrative assistant and dumped her.

O’Bee was devastated. Just three days after changing her profile status online from “In a Relationship” to “Single,” Tad and Min requested her as a friend.

She was enthralled with their easygoing, free loving lifestyle. Something she was definitely not used to and not supposed to want to experience. But she knew she wanted to. She needed to experience it.

O’Bee was particularly interested in the fact that Min had told her they were practicing vampires. They actually drank each others blood!

O’Bee thought to herself, ‘This is so not me!’

She tingled all over with a shiver after she clicked SEND to confirm when and where she would meet Tad and Min for drinks.

The night of the meeting came. After spending six hours trying to decide on an outfit to wear, she finally chose a silky black cocktail dress and a pair of black wedges.

O’Bee had been to this bar before. There was nothing special about it. Like every other bar on that strip it had the requisite beer logo neon lights, gambling video game machine at one end of the bar and a skanky twenty-two year old bartender with the two sizes too small tank top that barely held her C cups.

Tad and Min noticed O’Bee first. Min caught O’Bee’s attention with a quick upward motion of her head and a half smile. As O’Bee approached the bar, Tad made the same head motion to the bartender who came to him immediately with a vodka sour. O’Bee’s favorite.

They exchanged pleasantries. A simple, “Hi” from O’Bee as she sipped her drink through the red stirring straw. Tad and Min did most of the talking. Nothing that was overly important or memorable. O’Bee just nodded her head and answered in one or two word sentences. Most of which consisted of “Cool” and “Oh really?”

They told her about their clan, about how the different clans came from different regions of the world. How they had several “human” friends who meet them and minister to their blood needs. O’Bee listened with fascination and amusement.

‘Wow,’ she thought. ‘They have a whole world dreamt up and live this way everyday!’

She was nervous. Tad noticed O’Bee’s slender fingers shaking as she stirred the ice with her straw. Min could smell O’Bee’s anxiety and hear her rapid heartbeat.

It wasn’t out of fear, it was anticipation. The type a teenager has when they are on a first date and are waiting to see how far they can go.

Min lifted a corner of her mouth into another half smile. O’Bee smiled back, sheepishly. The sheep smiled back. Her eyes began drooping lazily. What O’Bee didn’t notice was the horse tranquilizer Tad slipped into her drink as the bartender handed it to him.

“Come on. Let’s go back to our place,” Min said.

O’Bee fell heavily into the back of the cab as Tad and Min pushed her hard up against the opposite door.

“I think I need to go home,” she told them. “I don’t think I feel very good.”

Min howled with laughter at O’Bee’s mispronunciation.

“Don’t worry sweetie. We’ll take care of you. You can sleep it off at our place.”

With that O’Bee’s eyes rolled to the back of her head and she fell across her new protectors’ laps.

O’Bee regained consciousness momentarily. Through her haze she heard voices: “She’s waking up.” “I’m just about done.” “Pump her with some more tranquilizer!” She also felt pain. Pin pricks on her arms and legs. She was then enveloped in darkness.

O’Bee woke again. This time she felt cold, weak and numb. She glanced around. Her brain registered that she was in a basement or in the middle of a decrepit house. ‘Oh no,’ she thought. ‘I’m in a crack house!’

She looked to one side. A man was asleep against a white graffiti covered wall. Next to him was a doorway with a green beaded curtain.

O’Bee glanced down at herself. Her cocktail dress had been torn down her front and her body was exposed. She tried gathering the tattered material on either side of her to cover her nakedness.

Shooting pain on her upper arms and wrists stopped her. O’Bee blinked to clear her vision. What she saw horrified her. There was plastic tubing surgically attached to the major arteries in her arms, legs and neck. She managed to reach up, through the pain, and felt her neck. A pair of tubes were implanted into her jugulars.

“She’s waken,” O’Bee heard to her left.

O’Bee was in a ‘blood den’ and she had been made into ‘blood cattle.’ The practice of taking humans and implanting tubes or straws into their arteries has been a vampiric practice for

millennia. The Nosferati clan, of what is now Russia and central Asia, pioneered the practice. It was then mastered by the Takichis of China, the Nomekop clan of Japan and vampires in the Roman Empire.

Roman blood dens were appropriately decadent for the time and place they were in. Sometimes dozens of human slaves or unfortunate citizens of all ages would be in a room, writhing in pain which was numbed with some sort of exotic anesthetic. Hollow reeds were cut into arteries and used to drain the human of life like wine from a cup.

Dazed and pleading weakly, O'Bee cried, "Please stop. Please? This isn't what I wanted."

Tad and Min used O'Bee like a water pipe, taking turns sucking blood from the tubes. The young vampires turned to each other and kissed passionately. O'Bee's blood poured from the sides of their mouths and down their chins.

O'Bee heard a set of footsteps nearing. Another person came through the beaded curtain. Craning her neck, painfully, backward she could see it was someone clad in black boots, dark leather pants, jacket and shirt and wore a black ski balaclava with rounded goggles.

This person took a quick glance around the room before locking eyes with O'Bee. O'Bee quickly turned away from this person. The person noticed the Sleeping Vampire on the floor next to them.

They took a metal tipped stake from its sheath behind them and stabbed the Sleeping Vampire in the head without looking. The Sleeping Vampire woke and screeched in pain as the stake was twisted and scrambled its brains.

Tad stopped kissing Min to turn and roar at the stranger, flashing his long, ivory upper canines, then lunged. The stranger pulled a large knife from behind them and forced it into Tad's forehead and twisted.

Min screamed a horrific sound as she turned to crawl away. The stranger shot their arm inside their leather jacket and whipped out a small angular handgun and fired a bullet into the back of Min's head, causing her face to explode. Blood splashed all over a spray painted stone wall.

The vampire fell in a heap onto the floor. What was left of her face smacked the cement with a sickly crack.

The stranger surveyed the vampire carcasses. O'Bee was still in the middle of the room shivering with fear and coldness. The stranger knelt beside her and looked her up and down, studying the handiwork of the tube implants.

The stranger then straddled O'Bee and gathered the pair of tubes coming from her neck then yanked the human woman closer.

O'Bee could only whimper, "Please, I don't want to die."

The stranger opened their mouth, exposing elongated, pointed canines, then told O'Bee, "If you open your mouth and tell anyone about this, I will hunt you down and rip your throat

out... with my teeth.”

O’Bee, the lonely human who just wanted a thrill and some companionship, got to her bare feet and ran out through the beaded curtain. She did her best to cover her exposed body as she fled the building.

The stranger dropped a backpack on the filthy floor and removed three plastic explosive blocks with a cell phone strapped to each. The explosives were placed on each vampire corpse and powered on.

When finished, the backpack was zipped up and the stranger strode through the beaded curtain, back to their SUV waiting outside.

From a pocket inside their jacket, the stranger took out a cell phone and dialed a number with their thumb. When the SEND button was pressed the blood den exploded in a triplet of fireballs. A car alarm in the distance could be heard. The stranger ended the nonexistent call and tossed it on the seat beside them then tore off the balaclava and goggles.

Veronica’s long, dark red hair fell down to her shoulders. A strip of dyed blonde at the front framed her face. Veronica watched the burning building a few seconds more before turning her vehicle on and pulling away.

‘If I wasn’t cleaning up the messes of other vampires I’d be a mess myself. Ostracized by my clan, living on the street or, if I was lucky, in a blood den feeding off human blood cattle.’

Veronica entered her apartment carrying a zip locked bag of blood. She placed it and her keys on a small table next to her door as she shut and locked it then took the bag to the kitchen. As she crossed the room she peeled off her coat, gun holster and shirt, wearing only her black bra and leather pants.

‘Most of my life I was a spoiled little brat. The child of a noble line of pureblood vampires belonging to the Dragul clan. My parents were vampires as their parents were before them.’

Veronica opened the freezer and put the blood inside. Exhausted, she took a bottle of absinthe off the top of the fridge, a spoon from a drawer then a sugar cube which she clenched between her teeth. From a cabinet she reached for a box of wooden matches and a tumbler glass. She made her way over to the kitchen table and dropped into a seat with a heavy sigh.

‘Like most spoiled rich kids discipline was not something I embraced. During my, what humans would consider teen years, I and a few friends would terrorize the Eastern European countryside slaughtering dozens of innocent villagers and travelers unlucky enough to be traveling the roads when we were.’

Veronica poured the absinthe into the glass and placed the sugar cube onto the spoon. She dipped the spoon slightly into the light green liquid causing the sugar cube to soak it up. She lifted the spoon out of the liquor and balanced it on the rim of the glass. A match was struck and ignited the alcohol infused sugar.

‘As I grew older I traveled Europe extensively, living a bohemian lifestyle. For a time I was

a frequent visitor of the Moulin Rouge where I chased the green fairy with the elite of Paris. All wanted me, both as a muse and a lover. None could have me. It was the only place to be in all Europe.’

Dozens of men would approach Veronica during a night at the Moulin, propositioning her from one extreme of just the pleasure of a dance to the other, a quick ‘romp’ in a back alley. Most she turned away, laughing at the ridiculousness of their pleas for her company. It was usually the back ally ‘rompers’ who were found along the Seine with their necks torn to ragged shreds the next morning.

Veronica watched the blue flame with tired eyes as it melted the sugar. When the flame extinguished, Veronica turned the spoon over and poured the syrup into the drink. She then took a small glass of water and poured it in slowly until the absinthe turned a beautiful green fog.

A ritual she learned in Prague.

‘I stayed in Paris until the clouds of war started brewing. The time of the Great Exodus. Many Draguls sensed that there would be decades of war and strife at the beginning of the twentieth century, so in the interest of our people’s survival the majority of my clan made the trek across the sea to the New World to join our North American brethren. Some stayed to keep the Clootis contained in the British Isles. I went to Cuba for a few years then settled in Upstate New York.’

Veronica had come upon two loggers with a freshly felled tree. They were cutting the limbs off as she approached. Not having seen a woman so attractive or young in weeks, she instantly drew their attention. The youngest one was drawn to her. He dropped his axe and started for her while the older man stood back.

‘The mountains of the Adirondacks reminded me of home. They are beautiful, yet haunting. I traveled all over the region, feeding on the loggers at times, settling in places like Lake Placid and Montreal.’

Veronica held her arms out, beckoning the young man who stopped when he was within arms length. The young logger looked up and down the length of Veronica’s body. When their eyes locked he could see hers were now an eerie shade of light blue. She seemed more animalistic, which made him want her more.

Veronica could not hold back any more. Damn her self control. She grabbed the young logger’s head and forced him to kiss her. Her mouth opened wider to overlap his lips for her to bite down on them, hard. He squealed like an injured small animal. No amount of pushing or pounding would cause Veronica to let go of her prey.

She did let go momentarily to swallow the mouthful of blood she had and take in a breath. The older logger saw Veronica’s bloody mouth and fangs just as they came down and plunged into the young logger’s throat. The old man shook off the disgust and shock and ran as fast as his corpulent body could at Veronica, double edged axe ready to swing.

Veronica tossed the young man to the ground as the axe came down on her. She caught the axe with one hand and wrenched it from the older logger’s meaty hands. Veronica tossed the

axe in the air, caught the end of the handle and swung it down, slicing the old logger's right leg off above the knee.

The aged human fell on his face and rolled down a hill. Veronica followed the howling man who was desperately trying to stop tumbling. At the bottom of the hill he came to a stop and reached down to his new bloody stump. He could not stop screaming in pain and fear.

Veronica hefted the man off the ground and carried him up into a nearby tree. She looked down at the stump which was filthy with leaves, sticks and pine needles.

"It's dirty," Veronica noted, then dropped the man, making sure his profusely bleeding leg slammed onto a branch as he fell to the forest floor.

The logger maneuvered around weakly to try and see where this horrific woman was. Off in the distance he could hear the woman's voice echo, "I'm hungry!" He glanced in all directions, trying to locate Veronica.

From nowhere she appeared and fell heavily on the logger's chest, knocking the breath out of him.

"Now feed me!"

That was the last thing the old logger heard before Veronica crushed his windpipe with her teeth and tore it out to get to his arteries.

'The culture of Montreal enthralled me. It reminded me of home. It was a magnet for European vampires at that time. Whole blocks were owned by vampires with housing occupied by vampires and businesses run and frequented by vampires. For a time I owned a flat in the Old Montreal section.'

'During the Great War and World War II a number of vampires went back home when it was learned how devastating these wars were. I stayed. But I needed a change. I needed to grow. To stop being the care free child who would kill and devour five lovers in a night. But I couldn't. Centuries of undisciplined, unbridled murder was engrained in my spoiled little mind. I had to lose the desire to gorge myself. It sickened me in more ways than one.'

Veronica loved her local discotechs. The late 1970s reminded her of her time a hundred years before in Paris at the Moulin Rouge. The depravity of the dancers with their drugs and alcohol consumption made it easier for her to feast.

One night, in 1981, she had just brought a young man to her apartment. She wanted something extra from this one. Something physical. After they drained a bottle of wine she retreated into her bedroom then emerged wearing only a white gauze-like sheet around her waist.

The young man stirred a bit uncomfortably as he sat on the couch. They said nothing to each other. Veronica straddled him and they made love on the sofa. She insisted on being on top. After a bit they made their way into the kitchen where she wanted another go at it. Just as they were both finishing a second time she could not restrain herself. Her canines unsheathed and she claimed her latest victim, he standing up, leaning against the kitchen counter and she

with her legs wrapped around his waist.

Veronica feasted on this young man for the rest of the night into the morning. She poured filled glass after glass of his warm blood into her mouth. She tore an arm off, bit into it and sucked it dry. Veronica took another glass of her lover's blood and poured it into her mouth. The blood spilled down her chin, over her pale torso and down her stomach, staining the white sheet.

She put the glass down and smiled, content. The smile disappeared when a wave of nausea enveloped her. She leaped to her feet and bolted to the bathroom.

Veronica threw herself over the tub and vomited. Pints of chunky flesh and blood spewed from her mouth. When it subsided she turned, sat on the floor and wept with her head in her hands. She calmed herself before rising and faced the mirror over the sink. The sheet dropped to the floor around her ankles as she unloaded another vomit volley into the sink.

Veronica looked up at herself in the mirror and did not like the naked, pathetic creature staring back at her. She tried wiping the blood from her face but it only smeared. She got angrier at the futile effort her hands were doing. Finally, she became enraged and punched the mirror.

'I was getting sloppy. My actions were starting to draw the attention of the humans.'

Veronica was called before the high elders of her clan. She reported dutifully late one night to the gleaming white building the elders were headquartered. She entered a room through doors higher than she had ever seen. The sound of them closing reverberated through the dark cavernous board room.

A lone bright light shone in her face, halting her. Veronica stood at the end of a long conference table. At the other end sat a group of middle aged elders clad in business attire. She had never met any of them before. She recognized most through pictures and paintings. One she had seen before in person. Someone her parents had known. The head elder, Julius.

He was unmistakable. Not the oldest vampire but close to it. His hair was shoulder length and as white as Carpathian snow.

Veronica could only stand there and hang her head in shame as she was spoken to like a scolded child.

"You have drawn too much attention to our people," Julius bellowed. "For far too long we have turned a blind eye to your disregard for our most sacred Laws of Non-Exposure."

Another, thinner elder chimed in, "No amount of clout you think your family may wield can protect you. The seriousness of your actions warrants punishment."

Julius pointed a meaty finger at Veronica as he uttered the most horrible thing that could be said to a vampire, "You will be outcast."

Veronica did a double take as she heard that last unmentionable word.

“No member of this clan will acknowledge your existence,” Julius continued.

The thin vampire elder interjected, ”You will be dead to us. Unless you pay a price.”

Julius took his turn, “There is a growing number of humans who have been converted to vampirism, feasting in full sight of other humans.”

“And it is causing a problem,” the thin elder said. “The humans are starting to believe we exist. We have decided that you will take care of this problem.”

Julius told Veronica, “In three days a package will be delivered to you with instructions. Accept it and you will earn your way back into our graces. Reject it...”

Veronica nodded. She understood, turned and exited.

From the shadows a tall balding man with glasses stepped forward. Behind him stood a younger woman with long dark hair with bangs as straight as a razor’s edge.

“I cannot believe you are allowing her to kill members of our own clan,” Mr. V said angrily.

The thin elder sputtered, “If we don't then the millennia we have spent in anonymity would have been for nothing.”

Mr. V turned to Julius, “Tell me again, Julius, why we must remain anonymous.”

Julius did not like to be questioned about his decisions concerning his people.

“Don't patronize me! You know we would be slaughtered to extinction.”

Mr. V replied, “Which is why I must insist we maintain the population numbers of our people and the other allied clans. I have reports that the Cloutis are-.”

Julius pounded a fist on the table. “I know about your reports. I may be old but I am not blind. Never doubt my loyalties to our species.”

Veronica’s shoulders slumped low as she walked the city streets. It took her three hours before she felt well enough to drive home.

‘My ultimatum: Stop massacring the humans, assimilate into their cultures and become a mature member of the clan. If I refused I would be outcast which meant I was dead to all Dragul. Being outcast from a clan was actually a punishment worse than death. For to be shunned was to have absolutely no contact with other vampires. Your only friends were the humans you hunt. Most outcasts did not even socialize with each other.’

‘So I did what was told of me. I became a law abiding citizen. I gave up my bohemian lifestyle, for the most part, and dressed as they did... most of the time.’

Veronica started dressing in dark, Gothic outfits and would admire herself in the mirror as she listened to bands such as The Cure.

‘Despite all this, I still had cravings. To get me back into their graces the elders gave me a job. I needed to correct a problem. There are two types of vampires: pure bloods and converts. Converts are humans who were bitten and have become vampires. Converts are usually accidental. Victims who didn't die from a feeding pure blood. They're also humans who have a mistaken belief in the romantic mystique of what a vampire actually is. They usually befriend a pure blood who wants to use them as blood cattle but somehow escapes.’

‘The problem was that most converts are undisciplined, attracting attention to themselves. Attacking, mauling, even feasting on their victims in plain sight of the public.’

‘The media started having a feeding frenzy... no pun intended. When they referred to the attackers as psychotics we didn't take much notice. When the media and victims started using labels like zombie and werewolf it got our attention. When they started using the word vampire, the elders became concerned. My job was to clean up the mess.’

Veronica was sleeping on her futon when the knock at the door woke her. She got up wearing a man's dress shirt, black bra and panties and went to the door. Before she opened it she put on a pair of sunglasses she kept on the table next to the door.

Standing on the other side of the door Veronica recognized one of the elders servants, a Driver. He was a vampire who swore fierce allegiance to the Dragul clan and his master to the extent that his tongue was ceremoniously removed so that, should he be captured and tortured by a rival clan, he could not reveal any secrets.

The Driver handed Veronica a box.

“What's this?”

The Driver just smiled and walked away. Veronica shut the door and sat, cross legged, in the middle of her living room. She opened the box and poured the contents onto the rug. A Walther P-22 and an envelope sealed with wax.

Veronica picked up the gun and studied it then opened the envelope. It was from Julius. The letter inside read: ‘It is time to begin your redemption. Start your new life. In the package you will find your first instrument. Remember, only head shots. Enclosed you will find a photo of your first target. I trust you will have no problem locating him.’

Veronica held the envelope upside down. A photo dropped into her bare lap. It was a picture of Veronica and a male friend, one of her converts. They were hugging. Smiling. Happy.

“No,” she whispered to herself.

Veronica was in sheer disbelief. They wanted her to kill her best friend.

The gun rested alone in the middle of the room for the next few hours as Veronica stared at it from different points in the room. Afraid to touch it as if it were toxic.

Finally, Veronica reached down and picked it up.

Veronica had known her friend since the early 1990s. He was a human who wanted to live the vampire life when he found out about their existence through a different vampire. Veronica and the friend immediately hit it off. Veronica actually liked her human. He was her friend. A confidant. Someone she had similar likes and tastes in music and other interests with. He would lure humans back to her place or to an abandoned warehouse where Veronica would attack and feast on them.

It was easier for humans to take the fall for a vampire attack if they were ever discovered. Usually the vampire would be able to get the human out of jail with their influence or, if the human wasn't worth it, leave them to face the courts and the eventual death penalty or life in prison spewing nonsense about how a vampire made them kill someone.

It was New Year's Eve 1999. Her friend was on his way back from bringing Veronica her seventh victim of the evening, the night was still young and it was the millennium. They were in the middle of celebrating when he and the next victim were both hit crossing a street by a drunk driver.

At the hospital, Veronica found her friend a bloody mess of broken bones and lacerations. She did not know if it was the love she felt for him as a friend or selfishness of not wanting to be alone but she knew she could not lose him.

In the busy emergency room, she drew the curtain around the bed, lowered her head down to his and pierced her sharpened teeth into his neck.

Two days later he checked himself out. A miraculous recovery. "Too bad," he said with a smile on his way out, "about those two missing nurses you have."

This night the friend was waiting outside his apartment building as Veronica pulled up in her black SUV. He got in and hugged her. Veronica loved his hugs.

"Hey," Veronica said. "How've you been?"

"Good," the friend replied. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

The friend could hardly contain his excitement. "Man, am I ready tonight!"

"Oh yeah?"

"I want to go for a record tonight. Not five, not ten. I'm gonna try and go for a personal best of twenty five kills tonight."

"Twenty-five? Don't you think that's a bit much," Veronica asked.

"Nah, it's a challenge."

"So where do you want to go?"

The friend pointed forward as he replied, "Let's try the north end and make our way south."

“Sounds good.”

“You know, I've been thinking,” the friend said. “I'm sort of interested in getting a blood servant. Convert a human for myself. Not as blood cattle, really, but someone to do things I don't feel like at the moment. Like shopping, doing some laundry, cleaning the apartment. I was what, fifteen, sixteen, when I was bitten? I think I could find a young-.”

The friend turned back to face Veronica. Veronica had her gun, her ‘gift’ from the elders, her ‘instrument,’ stuck in her friend's face and pulled the trigger before he could say anything.

The back of his head exploded all over the passenger side window. Some blood splattered on Veronica's pale face and hair. She slowly lowered the gun.

Veronica kept staring at her friend's corpse- and not the road. The car started pulling to one side, crossing lanes. She slowly turned her attention back to the road and at the tree coming at her.

Despite her reflexes there was no time to turn as the front of her SUV wrapped itself around the tree. When she came to, Veronica pulled herself from the wreckage and found her friend's body had been launched through the windshield and landed seventy feet away. She picked it up and carried it, limping, to the top of a nearby hill.

Veronica pushed the body down the hill to the river below.

‘I disposed of the body in a nearby river then called a few friends to have my car towed to their shop. Yes, there are vampire tow truck operators out there.’

Veronica entered her apartment. Exhaustion weighed heavy on her body. She tossed the gun on the futon as she passed it.

Veronica shuffled into the kitchen and stopped. She cried out in anguish as she collapsed to all fours.

‘Pain's a bitch. It especially hurts when your heart is broken and you're nursing two broken ribs.’

Veronica calmed herself with a sniff then lifted her shirt and gingerly touched the large black, blue and yellow bruise over the right side of her rib cage. She coughed up a gob of bright red blood that landed on the floor.

‘And a punctured lung. I just murdered my friend because he was a nuisance to the clan elders... and I needed to suck up to them. The hell with it. I can't complain. It's a job. A source of income and, as a perk, a source of food.’

Her latest target was a geeky vampire she had been trailing for three days. He was walking down a sidewalk in the city with Veronica in tow a few dozen feet behind. He wasn't too hard to follow as he had a penchant for wearing loud Hawaiian shirts. Tonight he was wearing his blue and white ocean scene shirt.

The Geek turned and entered a sleazy video store. Veronica makes her way across the street and enters the video store.

The place is empty except for the rotund and balding video store owner who sits behind the counter, enthralled with the movie playing on the TV.

Veronica scans the store and makes her way to the comedy section. The Video Store Owner glances up and follows the two with his eyes.

A patron wearing a trench coat and dark glasses exits a back room with ADULT XXX over the top of the doorway. He carries a brown paper bag under his arm as he leaves the store.

Veronica stares over the videos at the Geek who is browsing his selections nonchalantly. She is careful to keep an aisle between her and the Geek.

The Geek senses something and turns. Nothing is there. Veronica stands and watches the Geek over the top of a row of videos. She slowly draws her handgun. She does not take her eyes off the Geek as she walks around the shelving into the open. She glances quickly to the Video Store Owner, who is still looking at the movie, then back to the Geek.

Veronica steps up behind the Geek and raises her gun to shoot. The Geek spins and fires a round from a pistol at Veronica.

Veronica dives out of the way, dodging the ill aimed bullet. She rolls on the floor and crouches behind a shelf of videos.

The Geek shoots around the corner of his shelf with eyes closed, obviously never having been in a shootout before.

The Video Store Owner drops to the floor behind the counter.

Veronica fires off a few shots at the Geek then crosses the store to get a better position. Both exchange more gunfire. Veronica crouches and fires through the rows of movie cases, hoping to get one into the Geek. The Geek holds his hands up to his head as the cases fall around him.

Veronica's gun empties. As she changes her gun clip, the Geek takes an opportunity to fire at her but his is empty too. He throws his revolver at her like a little girl before sprinting out the door. Veronica leaps up and follows.

She chases the Geek down the empty sidewalk a few blocks. Much more physically fit than the Geek, she catches up and leaps on his back. Before Geek has a chance to fall to the ground Veronica wraps her arms around his head, twists and pulls, tearing the Geek's head off.

Blood spews from Geek's severed neck like a fountain as his decapitated body collapses in a heap. Veronica drops the severed head next to the body. She could take it with her as proof the job was complete but felt like the elders will have to deal with it.

'The problem with this assignment is that there are to be no witnesses... most of the time.'

As Veronica walks past the video store, the Owner is standing outside on the front step. Veronica walks up to the Owner and shoots him in the face nonchalantly. The Owner drops like a heavy sack as Veronica continues on.

‘I vowed to never look back and never regret what I had done. It was for the best. It was for the clan. I had to prepare my heart for a life of loneliness.’

LOCAL SAFARI... by Sergio “ente per ente” PALUMBO *Edited by Michele DUTCHER*

The alien technician called Bl-lb-bl was studying the last of the videos coming from research spots in Africa - as their starship was over one of the many countries that formed the southern part of that huge continent. She was focused on examining and comprehending many of the TV shows and local advertisements that the human's channels usually broadcasted. Actually, she was becoming interested in some of the movies made by the Earthmen - even though, in comparison to her high-tech entertainments, such ancient art forms might have seemed as dull and predictable as some old prehistoric statues and artifacts would seem to modern humans. She liked the stories best which featured plots that were really noteworthy, very well portrayed, and amusing - notwithstanding the fact that they were so different from their own way of life and general knowledge, of course.

As a bureaucrat, she was used to collecting data, examining videos, trying to predict the possible outcomes, making an electronic report, but nothing else. Bl-lb-bl really wished she could be able to operate outside the control center, away from all those screens which were always operating. She wished that she could do some fieldwork on the sites on the surface that she was ordered to only look at from afar - but no permission had been given yet for her to do that yet, in spite of all the many requests she had forwarded to the officers who ranked above her.

Aboard their starship there were several good researchers and agents already working on the planet's surface, spread all over that barbaric alien world, who provided -- obviously unseen and unbeknown to humans -- the daily footage shot for study purposes. She even knew some of them in person. Whenever she was listening to the tales of their interesting missions and assignments while taking a break in the mess hall, she was thrilled and saddened at the same time, feeling embarrassed for doing the same duties day in and day out. Lucky them! How Bl-lb-bl wished, damn how she wished, that she could be sent to the surface for at least one mission! But there was nothing to do, the technician was well aware of that fact. There was no way to leave the control room even for a single day and walk around on the ground. She dreamed of being fully equipped with all the usual supplies, maybe even being forced to face an emergency somewhere down there. But there was no chance to do that, no hope, as far as she knew. Bl-lb-bl wasn't agile enough nor well-trained enough for such a job. She felt certain that she wouldn't ever come off all that machinery and instrumentation in the near future. At least that was story she had been given while onboard the surveillance starship, unfortunately.

Bl-lb-bl's species -- the Hehe-hes -- were made up of bipedal, seven-fingered, bilby-like beings that stood approximately 4 to 5 feet and had an elongated head - hairless with an incredibly pale skin and two tiny auricles, while the rest of the body was a bit darker. Their own language was very odd, and difficult to learn for the many alien species they were in contact with at present. Other than that, the words they pronounced came from a very small mouth that made them almost unintelligible to most listeners' ears at times.

Their society was peaceful by nature and had exorcized the tendency towards violence and aggression long ago. Representatives from such an alien species had profound respect for the views of others, and appeared as likable and pleasant beings, even though some more warlike aliens found them a bit dull.

All the video the technician was presently examining came from the same area. B1-lb-bl had a look at the label indicating the town's name: Johannesburg, also known as Jo'burg or Egoli by the locals. This was South Africa's largest city by population, and its skyline included the majority of the tallest buildings on the continent.

The records aboard the spacecraft indicated the city was also the world's largest metropolis that was not situated on a river, lake, or coastline. According to their electronic survey, the overall population was around 9,678,180 (mostly native African with a huge group of people of Indian ethnicity) and the city's land area was 735 sq mi, resulting in a moderate population density of 6,720 /sq mi.

There were also nine million trees occupying the land as well, although deforestation had occurred recently to make way for both residential and commercial redevelopment. Actually, at times she thought their surveys were too detailed in comparison to their needs of study, but you couldn't ask a computer to be less than precise, of course.

The city enjoyed a sunny climate and temperatures were usually fairly mild due to the high altitude. Snow was a very rare occurrence, with snowfall having been experienced only a few times over the course of this century. The whole area was located on the mineral-rich Witwatersrand range of hills, so the city itself was important in the international market of large-scale gold and diamond mining.

Jo'burg, located at an elevation of 5,751 ft, claimed to be the lightning capital of the world, although this title was also maintained by other human towns on the surface. But whichever claim was true, such a thing proved very useful for their activities, because it was very easy to send teams of Hehe-hes researchers to the ground during thunderstorms. They did this by deceiving the Earthmen, dropping their crews down using the lightning as decoy to make the faster-than-light transportation system (from their starship to the designated area) invisible or unnoticeable in the locals' eyes.

Johannesburg's residential areas ranged from luxurious, wooded suburbs to shantytowns and squatter settlements. Since the end of the last century, large numbers of people had moved to this town in search of work. A lack of housing in the city forced many to set up poor settlements on the outskirts of the city. Most of these communities lacked electricity and running water, and residents lived in shacks made of scrap metal, board, and other discarded materials. Those were the best place to have a look at the humans for the purpose of studying them, because there you could watch them living and behaving as you would see wildlife in the forests or within some pristine environment deep into the continent. In places like this, humans living under difficult circumstances would strive to survive, trying their best to improve their conditions and fighting for their lives inside an urban setting – which was a very rare condition on this planet today, according to their alien way of thinking. And that was exactly what their species needed most for developing their better knowledge of Mankind in general. Such settlements seemed to be so steeped in violence that brutality had almost become a common way of life.

It was likely that most people there simply believed they were born into a cruel world, were living in a cruel world, and were going to die in a cruel world. They didn't have money so what were they to do? Stealing a vehicle, getting money any way they could was how they tried to support their wives and children and so on. What better place was there to have a look

at aggressive, angry members of human race and then turn those observations into sociological essays on what was observed?

This was just like the interplanetary studies on the difficult lives of the Lntln, the alien species whose homeplanet was destroyed by a disaster which forced its inhabitants to live on their remaining colonies, while scattered in space. Or even like the texts from ten years before, depicting the warlike behavior of the last remnants of the almost extinct Uheh: a once peaceful and famous race, that now was constantly fighting in cruel bloodshed, pitting each surviving starship one against the other, in order to get by any means possible the last remains of the precious mineral they needed to sustain their vital systems on board.

As she was cataloging the last videos from the night before, which was about a gunfight in the Ekurhuleni metropolitan municipality, she heard the bleep of the entrance phone. When she looked at the monitor, she saw the unmistakable face of Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl, a middle-aged agent operating directly in the field. Bl-lb-bl knew him well - he was a decent guy, working for the Operational Ground Groups which was a team assigned to deal with any sort of occurrences which might take place while on assignment on livable alien worlds like Earth.

She opened the door and let him in. Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl was a good-looking male representative from Hehe-hes species; undoubtedly, with his four grey protuberances on his back proudly in full show (female Hehe-hes had only one of them, except in some very rare cases).

“Hi, you!” she greeted the newcomer. “Did you get tired of going on exciting adventures, trying to spot the locals doing dangerous things, and so decide to visit a dull, valueless technician who is sadly working away in this dull control center?”

“You’re never valueless, my darling,” the agent replied, smiling. “What would we do without all the precious information and data you and your team collects in order to provide our superiors with necessary details in advance?”

Bl-lb-bl sneered in return, setting her blue-black-chestnut eyes on him.

“You know I’d much rather work up here,” he said. “If I were in your position, it would be much safer that the locations I am usually forced to work in down there.”

“But you should try fighting the boredom I face every single day. It would probably get the better of you in the end.” She spoke ironically, exchanging knowing looks with her co-worker while she was doing it.

“It’s better to be bored than to be wounded because of some outdated ball while caught in the middle of a fight between two different gangs in the streets - especially when you are filming them and they can’t see you because of your suit in stealth-mode. I mean, we can’t harm them in return, we can only hope nothing bad happens to us when we’re invisible.”

“Just like the documentary cinematographers filming some wild beasts in the jungle...”

“Exactly...”

“Anyway, I still wish I were you, believe it,” Bl-lb-bl insisted, her eyes back on the screens.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl stared at her for a while, then said, “Maybe we can arrange something this time.”

The technician suddenly stopped what she was doing, being all ears. “Are you just kidding?”

“No kidding today, I’m serious.”

“Really?” she asked, deeply surprised.

“Really,” the agent confirmed, his face looking trustworthy.

“How?”

“This evening I’ll be on assignment on the planet’s surface ...alone,” he said.

“That meaning?” Bl-lb-bl looked at him, a bit surprised.

“That means that I’m not going to be operating with a team of agents, as is usually happening. So maybe we could arrange something, if you like.”

“What are you saying?” the technician asked, doubtful but also deeply interested.

“I could take you to the ground, inside the same pod I’m going to be dropped to Earth inside.”

“To Earth? Oh my...”

“Are you interested?” Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl demanded her.

“You bet I am!”

“Of course, this will be not strictly according to our starship’s rules, you know...it will be our secret.”

Bl-lb-bl stared at her friend, perplexed. “You mean...”

“Exactly,” the agent nodded.

“But, it’s illegal...and you it could get you into trouble.”

“There won’t be another chance for awhile. I know you won’t be given a permit in the near future,” he said, speaking softly. “We can enter the cargo bay this evening, put on two environmental suits of mine and secretly board a pod to the surface.”

“So, you’re asking me to sneak away in order to live on the edge for just one evening, tasting what a real mission on the field is like, a mission like you do almost every day. You’re asking me to do this without complying with all the rules regarding the team composition of Operational Ground Groups? Are you sure? Don’t you think all this might cause some problems for you?”

“It will be my responsibility. If anything happens, I’ll take the blame,” he stated. “Bl-lb-bl, I know how long you’ve been waiting for an opportunity to work directly on the planet’s surface - how many times have you told me that? But this chance hasn’t come up before and, frankly speaking, I don’t think it will happen again anytime soon. I mean - if we follow all the rules about missions to the field down there.”

The technician’s face looked hopeless. “I don’t know,” she said.

“You’ve been watching the Earthmen for so long on the screens, maybe this is the right time to have a closer look at them, don’t you think so? What if we engage in a simple task? Maybe it won’t be the most interesting or delicate mission that our teams do, but it may be something you’ll like and appreciate...a real taste of a fieldwork. What do you say?”

“Come on now - you already know. What other chance will I get? How could I miss such an offer?”

“So, it’s set! I’ll make all the preparations,” Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl closed the argument finally. “Let’s meet up at 400 hours in the hangar bay. I’ll bring all the equipment we’ll need, so don’t worry.”

“Okay. We’ll do it, exactly as you say.”

When her shift ended, Bl-lb-bl left the control center, greeting her replacement for the evening, then she headed to her quarters. She entered the bathroom and remained inside for a while, staring at her reflection awhile, thinking about what she was going to do. Then she made up her mind and headed for the door. The cargo-bay was nine decks below, so she had to take the speedlift in order to get there.

As the technician found herself in the cargo bay full of drop-pods, machinery, vehicles and dozens of crates, a voice cried out from afar.

“Come here, Bl-lb-bl! There’s not much time before the next departure...”

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl showed her into a smaller chamber where there was a closet. He opened it, pointing to the equipment stored inside.

“We use special suits to walk on an alien planet’s surface, Of course,” he said, showing off the clothes on the rack. There were lots of them because every agent had to have with three of them, at least, just in case of need.

“Do you use all of your suits when you go down to the surface?” she asked.

“Actually, I don’t - that’s why I asked you to come here. I mean, I usually use only one suit at a time, making all the adjustments and modifications to fit the mission - you know like atmosphere, gravity, humidity, weather conditions, ground type, dangerous location and so on. So the others are only meant to be left here onboard. There has only been one time when I was forced to wear one of my spare suits because my usual one was damaged the day before. So, all of this is really just being super cautious.

“The Hehe-hes’ safety precautions are well-known. Our teams from the Operational Ground Groups don’t lack for anything at all,” she noticed.

“That’s my point, exactly,” he added. “I’ve got two suits more at my disposal, other than the one I’ll wear.”

“So...” she began figuring everything out now, her eyes becoming wide, showing her excitement.

He pointed out one of the metallic-brown environmental suits. “This one is yours, for today.”

“Wonderful! Great idea!” she cried out, thanking her friend for the offer.

The agent showed her the way to correctly wear the clothing, connecting all the instrumentation and the high-tech systems inside and outside.

When Bl-lb-bl had her strange suit on, she felt a little embarrassed, all enveloped into that snug clothing (and she was ill at ease, too). But this was no time to back down, certainly.

“The actual pod-dropping might feel a bit abrupt, because you aren’t accustomed to it,” Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl warned his friend.

“Don’t worry!” the technician replied. The excitement was so all encompassing now that she was sure she could face anything from now on.

They sat down inside the pod and were dropped into the atmosphere, taking the perfect opportunity for the launching so as not to attract attention. They were launched during a violent lightning storm in the designated area and they found themselves jolted, but they didn’t move thanks to the strong belts that bound them securely to their seats. As the craft reached the surface, she had a glimpse of the terrain surrounding their bulb-shaped pod through the windows. A brownish ground, lonely rocks all around, a limitless plain ahead... What an incredible show!

When the rear door opened and they went outside, Bl-lb-bl felt, for the first time, a sort of unexpected hesitancy. Finally she was going to put her feet on the ground of the alien planet she had been studying and examining for so long from above!

“You reacted well to the launching procedure and didn’t faint at all, very well done!”

“On our homeworld, I spent long hours -- practicing for days in fact -- riding high speed vehicles in amusement parks in order to get ready for the day when I could finally work for the Operational Ground Groups, but you know...”

“I see,” Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl looked pleased. “We have to walk for a while; the town is some miles away. Just remember, we are there to watch the local Earthmen doing and behaving normally, not to try and alter their behavior. Other than that, first rule: we must not harm them at any cost!”

The technician nodded, her metallic-brown helmet going up and down. She pointed at her face meaning that she was trying to speak, but was unable to find the voicelink adjustment

settings. Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl showed her the volume control display on the left of her visor by pointing at it.

“What do we look like from the outside? I mean, how do the humans perceive us, thanks to our suits’ technology?”

“We look the same as two common people walking around. You can have a look at our appearance using the visor side panel on your left. You only need to activate it by using the instrumentations connecting your fingers to the controls. The first button is for your vital system settings, the second one on your right will show you how we look.”

So she saw the features of two humans who seemed to be much taller than the Hehe-hes, although bipedal as they were, five-fingered, with long dark hair on their heads and two weird eyes, deep black and thin - very different from hers.

“So, is this how the humans usually dress when they’re just walking around?” Bl-lb-bl looked over the clothes the holoemitters showed they had on at present.

“More or less, I daresay. These clothes have very strange colors, and a few weird drawings on them. Probably not something we would choose to wear, anyway.”

“Tell me about your last adventures here. I imagine you have had lots of interesting experiences while on assignment in the field – but tell me about something that happened recently and really sticks in your mind.”

He considered the question for a moment, then said, “I remember a situation about a month ago, on the other side of town. I filmed a little dark-skinned boy around 12-years-old who had been stabbed earlier in the day, narrowly escaping death. He was then found by members of some religious order. The religious men told him about their beliefs and how good this tragedy could turn out to be for him, for his life. Seemingly, after recovering, the boy opened his heart, and when I filmed him again at times over the course of the following days - he had become a new person, no longer obsessed by fighting and hate. Anyway, after a couple of months, the same boy was found stabbed and lying dead in the street. Like many others, he had become the victim of one of the gangs ruling in the poor areas of Johannesburg that wouldn’t let him leave the gang life behind.”

“I’m sure that such a thing really stays with you. I can’t remember I seeing such footage, so it was Vl-vb-vl, not me, who examined the videos from that mission.”

In front of them, the buildings of downtown Johannesburg stood tall in the distance. They walked a wide road heading towards downtown, but that wasn’t their destination. Rather they were going to a zone not too far from it. As they proceeded, nobody around them seemed to notice them. This was one hell of a stealth system, she thought, it was really functioning perfectly!

The place they arrived finally at didn’t look like a modern or wealthy neighborhood. The first thing they noticed was the evident decay of some major buildings. An old telecommunications tower had fallen into disuse, and thanks to its height of 885.826 feet, it dominated the area skyline of the place. Their data named it as the former JG Strijdom

Tower, which was now the Telkom Joburg Tower. Their instruments indicated it was unlikely to be restored and reopened.

“Our GPS indicates that we are now in the Hillbrow area - what does that mean?” the female technician asked her colleague.

“It’s a borough of the town we just entered,” he replied in a soft voice. “Hillbrow is known for its high levels of population density, unemployment, poverty and crime. As a result of lack of jobs, a lot of uncertainty and anxiety is entrenched in the residents. It could look ordinary, but there are a lot of illegal acts taking place here all the time. It’s a common field of study for our agents, even though it’s not the most violent place around. I could never lead you inside too insidious place, you know, because of the danger involved. After all, we’re already violating several rules by being here together.”

Bl-lb-bl nodded, clearly compliant. After all, she knew all too well that her friend had dared enough just letting her come to the surface.

The technician took the opportunity to look at data coming from the suit’s computer about the area.

“There are several young human gangs spread over this place. Their members may be only 15 or 16 years old, and coming from many minority groups, but they have already been initiated into violence...”

Along the way, the technician noticed that some seemingly refined people walking the streets who were escorted by armed security guards. Along the sidewalks, young women made eyes at the passers-by while wearing weird smiles on their faces (probably seductive from a human’s point of view). Clearly they were on a search for clients - according to what she had learned from the many videos she had examined before while in the control center. These humans kept a vigil, as if they were wild beasts capable of spotting their prey from a distance, thereby satisfying their hunger.

In brief, they arrived at an empty place where there were not many houses around. There were several young boys in the area surrounding those abandoned buildings. They looked typical of the "Amagents" - the streetwise gangsters motivated by need who fueled the crime wave and the fear which pervaded South Africa's townships. In some cases, most of them had taken out their disillusionment and anger by turning to crime. According to Hehe-hes’ records, there was a sort of willingness, deep inside South African society, to use violence to solve fairly minor disputes, by all means. At least that was what the data flowing on the display indicated. And usually the more bloody and daring the crime, the more respect was given in the delinquent’s world.

What made it easier for such outlaws to prosper was the easy access to guns as well. Out of 18 million of them in circulation within the country, according to the data their computer surveys had collected, only four million were registered and licensed to legal gun owners.

As the saying *went* “When children do not see wrongdoers being punished, and bad people are seen to be rewarded, their sense of morality is distorted.” She was certain the sense of morality of most the human population was greatly distorted given the bad way they treated nature, wildlife and their own land - and frequently their bad choice of leaders worldwide. At

present, South Africa was no different from other societies like Russia, South America and so on in this regard.

As a few voices coming from some academician on Earth had broadcasted on TV and then was recorded by them in space: "Beneath the appearance of confusion lies another type of order, an order informed by the power of the underground economy". The highest profits were to be found here in the drug trade and, as drugs meant drug addicts, their need for ready money often drove them into acquisitive crime. So young gangsters also found themselves in possession of hot merchandise and stolen property. In this way, drug areas tended to also be places where such goods were traded and could be bought.

Both of them were just walking around within such an area, which had remained a matter of wide interest for their teams of surface researchers so far.

Eventually, they ran into several groups of young boys, standing in the open, seemingly not attached to each other. They stood next to an abandoned two-story shed, dealing in stolen property and speaking in slang and yelling loudly. At times, they came to blows because of some dispute that Bl-lb-bl wasn't able to figure out.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl stopped and stared attentively at everything happening, then signaled for his friend to come nearer. "Have a look down there! I see several gangs of young humans caught up in their usual activities - and surely not all of them are completely legal. What better opportunity is there for us to investigate?"

The technician eyed him, dubious about what to say exactly.

"Let's go deep inside that mob," his friend exclaimed and pushed his way through the crowd of young people. "We only need a little adjustment to our holoemitter so we look younger, too, almost the same age than they are, and more shabby. The further you go inside these mobs, the more you can see and learn about those subjects."

This time she didn't need to be told twice and followed him immediately. In short, they were surrounded by lots of young humans dressed up in a diversity of styles. The agent started his filming of the day, focusing on some representatives of the groups he found more interesting than the others. A few of them didn't speak a lot of English, but they sure knew the words "turds," "assholes," "crawlers" and many other common insulting terms which he recorded over and over. Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl was never much for languages – he was better at reading faces - even though these were alien faces, because they meant a lot to him, from experience. They remained there for an entire hour. Then some discussions degenerated quickly for unknown reasons, and there was some fighting among the members of two rival gangs.

Under normal circumstances, Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl would have stayed there and reported everything he saw, after all that was his job. But this time he had to take care of his friend and think of her safety first. So the agent told her, "Enough for me, time to go... You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah!" she replied. "I've spent a few hours among these alien locals as a real agent of the legendary Operational Ground Groups and it was great! One of the more exciting and interesting experiences of my entire life!"

They had just gotten outside of the crowd and only a few young boys stood nearby, exchanging some goods of dubious origin, when all of a sudden it happened. A group of five boys had started chasing them as the Hehe-hes had walked away. They probably thought the two of them had some easy money they could grab fast.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl and Bl-lb-bl went a little faster so to outdistance them once and for all, but an unpredictable event was just round the corner.

Unexpectedly, in that moment there was a sort of blackout, all the systems went down at the same time and she was able to look at the real shape of her arm enveloped in the suit on the right instead of the illusion generated by the holoemitter - which evidently had ceased functioning.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl understood the problem immediately and said, "Stay calm!" But his voice sounded almost unintelligible from the inside of his suit.

At that point, two of the boys who had almost surrounded them cried out, the slender one started running away and the other, who was six feet tall, stopped on the spot. The last three advanced toward them, brandishing their threatening maces as a weapon.

"What the hell are you...?" the first, longhaired young human exclaimed in disgust. He was looking down his nose at her, his two chestnut alien pupils wide open. Because the translator was out, she wasn't able to figure out what he was saying, but she guessed it was nothing reassuring at all. Then the boy tried to joust the end of his weapon into her head.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl came forward quickly to intervene, giving his assistance as if he already knew a way of dealing with them. In just one motion, her colleague drew the tablet hanging at his hip - disguised as a bag thanks to the holoemitter operating on his environmental suit - then he caught the first boy by his flowing hair, and beat the tool against his wrist in order to disarm him - all of it using a single gesture. Immediately the assaulter let go of his mace, dropping it to the ground, but Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl was ready to grab it, taking it up and inflicting two heavy blows to the human's right leg and side.

Against such a show of bravery, the remaining human -- decked out with a showy shirt -- stopped and began backing up, understanding now that the two passers-by weren't the easy prey they thought they were. But the second, more self-confident man, clearly being beside himself with anger, held his position and got ready for his chance to attack. But he wouldn't have any better luck for sure.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl seemed to let himself be caught in the struggle and then started twirling the newly acquired mace in the air, rotating it, as if he was an incredibly skilled samurai. He followed his last opponent very closely making him hesitate and totter just for a moment, before hitting his arm using a terrible blow against his bulky shoulder. The violence was so decisive and ferocious that Bl-lb-bl thought her colleague was going to tear it away from the rest of the human's body.

As the second can of mace dropped to the ground, the agent picked it up and then showed off keeping the two weapons in both hands with a bloody grin on his (virtual) human face. On seeing such thing, the second boy look disheartened and flat out run away at once. The first

assaulter, still being in pain and disbelieving, stood up and soon followed his poor fellow who was already on the run.

“How did you do that?” she asked, still amazed. “You looked like a battle-hardened soldier!”

“I sweat it out.”

“Thanks so much for saving me!”

“You’re welcome. I would never let you damage one of our precious environmental suits, you know. Beyond that, we are good colleagues, aren’t we?”

Bl-lb-bl smiled and laughed briefly, then frowned. “Aren’t you worried that they saw my real appearance, my alien features? Are the Hehe-hes’s investigations on this world in danger after all this?” she asked him.

“Not at all. Dysfunctions, or perhaps battery failure, happen unfortunately, and sometimes our agents have been spotted moving among the humans. It has happened many times before worldwide. Certainly, I couldn’t have imagined that it would happen during your first — moreover your unauthorized - experience on the surface of this alien planet. Actually, what those humans saw this time was only the environmental suit you wear, nothing else...they can’t be sure about what exactly they had a glimpse of. Maybe they’ll think it was a dream, or a hallucination, or even a sort of governmental covert activity. Who knows!”

“But I thought we weren’t supposed to harm the locals?” she added.

“Well, I thought, who cares? After all - aren’t we more important than they are?”

“More evolved and technologically advanced, maybe, but not more important, actually,” the technician pointed out.

“Well, as you say.”

“So, no problem then?”

He approached her, made an experienced gesture and linked her suit to his energy supply storage via a plug - in order to reactivate her vital system and the holoemitter quickly. “I’m sure it will be fine. Beyond that, there’s something more that makes me feel certain that everything will be all okay,” and, that said, he began laughing soundly.

Bl-lb-bl smiled in return again but, as he kept on laughing openly for some time, she asked what was so funny.

Tdl-lbtdl-tdbl replied at last, “You see, at first our personal holoemitters made our bodies look just like humans outside, a sort of wealthy individual, wearing good clothing. Then we changed the settings and the image emitted outwards appeared just as if we were young boys from some gangs.”

“So what?”

“So I had just changed the setting of my holoemitter again, before coming to help you. I don’t think that the members of that party of assaulters -- whom I beat down so easily-- will go around boasting about how they have been taken in by a ninety-year-old, white-haired woman, which is what I appeared to be.”

“Are you positive?”

“You really do have a lot to learn about Earthmen...”

“Yeah, I do, you’re right.” Then, considering the way that everything had worked out, Bl-lb-bl added, “As you said, they’ll never talk about this to anyone, because they wouldn’t look good, undoubtedly!”

And she started laughing again.

THE END

AYAME'S LOVE by Thomas C Hewitt

Part Six

Not currently available

A PICTURE FROM HARRIETT by John L Campbell

Part Two

July led to August, and four weeks after the murder there was a meeting in the conference room of the sheriff's office. Cecil was there, along with Maggie Tobias and Don Havermeyer. The department's other two sergeants, Lucas Worthy and Zeke Davis, were present as well, and seated near Doc Fulcrum. Johnny Lee Reed sat against a wall next to one of his state police investigators, a big ex-marine named Donovan, who drummed his fingers on a manila folder and shot evil looks at Maggie Tobias. And finally there was J.T. Thomas, the District Attorney, who had shed his suit jacket and was holding a bottle of Poland Spring.

Tobias took the lead in the briefing. The news wasn't good.

"Harriett LaCroix leaves her mama's trailer at approximately nine-forty-five a.m. on Wednesday, July nineteenth. She's carrying her favorite book, *The Cat in the Hat*, and she has a ten dollar bill, recovered at the scene. She's walking alone on Younger Creek Road, heading the half mile to Foster's Shell station to buy her mama a pack of Newports. Three witnesses at the trailer park," she read off the names, "saw her leave and confirmed the time.

"Harriett never makes it to the Shell Station. She knows the way, has done this lots of times, so she didn't get lost. Kit Foster never sees her, and the store's surveillance cameras verify that the girl never enters the store. There's only one exterior camera, and it's pointed at the pumps, not the road, so we can't see if she ever walked past, or went by as the passenger in a vehicle. It had to be an abduction, somewhere between home and the gas station."

"What about other customers?" asked Donovan, annoyed that he had to ask at all.

"We identified thirteen people who came into Fosters that day before Harriett was murdered, all of them local, all who would recognize her if they saw her. The one's we couldn't recognize right off we tracked down through credit card receipts. No one saw her. Two of the thirteen had criminal records, minor offenses, and they were cleared through DNA." She nodded towards Doc Fulcrum.

"And it isn't possible that one of the others you talked to was lying?" Donovan wasn't even trying to hide his contempt. Johnny Lee, sitting beside him, patted the bigger man's hand gently, but it was a warning to behave nonetheless.

"No," Tobias said, looking straight at the ex-marine. "I did, or sat in on each of those interviews personally. No one was lying. Harriett didn't make it to the Shell station, and none of the people in and out of there had anything to do with her murder."

"Let's move on," said the DA, checking his watch.

"Doc Fulcrum sets time of death at approximately one p.m. It would have taken Harriett half an hour at most to reach the gas station, so we're saying she's picked up between nine-forty-five and ten-fifteen. The scene is five miles away, so even if the killers drove straight there, they arrive at about ten a.m. at the earliest, but most likely later. That means two to three hours at the scene on County Road 17. No one reports seeing Harriett in a vehicle, or anywhere near where she ended up."

"Let's review evidence," said the DA.

Tobias didn't have to open her folder, she knew it by heart. "Cause of death was definitely the rock embedded in the ground, and we're fairly certain she fell against it instead of being intentionally pounded against it."

"Accidental?" Donovan sneered.

Tobias looked over at him. "The death, yes. Still a murder due to the abduction and the rape, but we don't think it was an intentional killing." She looked back at the DA.

“We’re calling it three male suspects, all white. Environmental conditions have eliminated fingerprints and shoe prints. We have some clothing fibers. There was drinking, beer and whiskey, cigarette smoking, and marijuana. Harriett was forced – *I’m* saying forced – to drink enough hard liquor to possibly make her pass out, but certainly make her unable to fight back. No DNA evidence found under her fingernails.”

“But we *do* have DNA evidence,” pointed out the DA.

“Yes, and plenty of it. Recovered from the cigarette butts and the piece of a joint we found, from inside the one condom, and of course from semen and pubic hair recovered during the Doc’s exam. Enough to put a needle in our suspect’s arms.”

They all knew the problem, though. There were no suspects. That was the necessary part to make the match. Don Havermeyer went on to explain his work with trying to pair up the crime scene DNA with samples in the national database collected from sex offenders and incarcerated felons, without result. He was also tracking down every known establishment that sold the brands of beer and whiskey identified at the scene, spending countless hours interviewing clerks and looking at and copying what surveillance video existed in those places. It was a monumental task, and far from finished. Rewards for information had been offered, without a single valid tip. And no one had walked in to confess. Assuming the killers were from Mississippi, the job would have been simple if only they were able to collect a DNA sample from everyone in the state. Unfortunately, not only was that logistically impossible, there was a certain little wrinkle called the Constitution that got in the way.

“Pardon me, Sergeant Tobias,” said Johnny Lee. “Just between us here in the room, what are we calling this? Serial killers? Random impulse act?”

Tobias shook her head. “Three perps, not a serial killing. Impulse is much more likely. Three fellas drinking early in the day, they see Harriett alone on the road. We know that she was very...advanced, physically, for her age.”

“She could have passed for seventeen, eighteen,” offered Zeke Davis. “She had a piece of trouble in the springtime, a boy at the trailer park touching her, remember, Ham?”

The sheriff nodded.

“The boy said he thought she was lots older,” said Zeke, “‘cause of how filled out she was.”

“Where’s that boy now?” asked Johnny Lee.

Don Havermeyer answered. “Work farm for youthful offenders, down Biloxi way. Been there four months on a one year bit.”

“So like I said,” continued Tobias, “we got some fellas drinking, they see Harriett on the road, hell maybe they know her and offer her a ride. Somehow she gets in the car, and they end up at that spot out on 17. More drinking, smoking weed, they make her drink, they take turns raping her. At some point she tries to run, goes down on the rock and its over. The fellas take off.”

The cops around the table looked at one another for disagreement. There was none, the theory played well.

“I’m happy to hear we don’t have a serial killer or a pack of homicidal maniacs running around Terrell County,” the DA said, rising and putting on his suit jacket, “But as far as your investigation goes, essentially you’re saying we’re at a dead end.”

“I’m not saying that at all, not in a rape-murder, and not after only four weeks,” said Tobias.

“It’s looking like that from where I stand,” he said, heading for the door. “Sheriff, let me know if anything new comes up. In the meantime, considering the drug trafficking problem this county has, you may want to consider how much more of your limited resources you’re going to put into a nowhere case. I’m sure the selectmen would agree with me.”

As the door closed behind him, Maggie Tobias looked at her boss, but he had no answer to give her. And as the sheriff left his offices that afternoon, there was Wisdom LaCroix on a bench across the street, watching him and smoking his foul cigarettes.

September was busy for Cecil Hamilton. His re-election campaign was at full speed, and between the handshaking, public appearances, meetings and the time spent supporting others up for re-election, the sheriff had precious little time left. What he did have he spent on his son David, who was now a starting wide receiver on Jasper High's varsity football team. The Jasper Spartans looked tough this year, and David, who had been playing the game since he was tiny, was not only one of their best players but had a shot at a scholarship or two, specifically Ole Miss. Hamilton worked with David as often as he could, helping the coach during practices, and showing up at the games.

The members of the sheriff's department understood very well what re-election meant, and there was no complaining about their boss's frequent absences. No one wanted to be shown the door by a new sheriff, and most helped Hamilton with his campaigning in their spare time.

Don Havermeyer was pulled away more frequently from the LaCroix case to higher profile drug investigations, and even as dedicated as Maggie Tobias was to solving Harriett's murder, it wasn't the only case on her board. She, too, was forced to spend less and less time on the little girl, but then as the DA had so bluntly pointed out, it was fast turning into a dead end. Without new information or a hit from the DNA database, it was growing colder every week.

One afternoon, as Hamilton was leaving the Lunch Counter on Main Street, he saw Wisdom LaCroix waiting for him in the shade of a canopy over the Payless Shoes next door, his clawed hands held to his belly.

"I wish I had some information for you," Cecil told the old man. "The investigation is ongoing." He regretted it the moment he said it. It was the kind of thing you told the press when you wanted them to fuck off and leave you alone.

"Harriett come to see me last night, Sheriff," Wisdom said, "in my room in the night. She just a shade now, but I knows it be her. My grandbaby's full of pain, suh, and full of darkness."

Cecil couldn't reply. What was there to say to a man dealing with advancing years and a grandfather's grief?

"She was tryin' to tell me who done it to her, but she can't make the words."

"We're doing what we can, Wisdom. I'll be in touch if we have anything. And you come see me again if Harriett tells you something I can use." He wasn't trying to be condescending, and Wisdom seemed to take it at face value.

"Oh, I will, Sheriff."

That night, Cecil Hamilton dreamed of a dead little girl standing at the foot of his bed, watching him with black, soulless eyes.

In October, Maggie Tobias asked to see Hamilton in his office, and closed the door behind her, taking one of the chairs in front of his desk and getting right to it. "Atlanta PD has an opening for a detective. I want to apply for it, but I wanted to tell you before I did it."

Cecil sat there for a long moment. He wasn't caught completely by surprise. Maggie was talented, career-driven, and any department would be lucky to get her. She was well beyond small town law enforcement, and would thrive in a big city.

"I won't ask if you've thought it through," he said. "Except to say, do you really want to move to *Georgia*?"

“It’s not that I’m not happy working for you, Ham. You’ve done right by me since you hired me, and you’ve put up with my stubborn nonsense when you didn’t have to. I’ll always be grateful to you. But I need more, and I know you know that.”

“You could have a fine career right here in Terrell County,” he offered, but it sounded hollow, even to him.

Maggie smiled. “And I can think of a lot worse things than being your sergeant until I retire. But I want to run things one day, make the big decisions, and I can’t do that here.”

“Maggie, that’s not really true, you could...”

“Ham, the only way that happens is if I’m sitting where you are. First, I’d never even try to run against you. And second, no way the people in this county ever elect a woman sheriff. Especially not one with a girlfriend.”

“You know that’s never made a bit of difference with me,” he said, and it was true. Maggie’s lady friend was a charming and funny young woman who worked as a legal secretary, and Cecil and Patricia had had the two of them over for countless dinners and get-togethers over the years.

“And you’ll never know what that has meant to the two of us. But it’s not your vote I’d need. This county is a little too Baptist, a little too old fashioned, a little too Mississippi to ever let that happen.” She held up a hand. “And I don’t blame them for it, they are who they are. But that doesn’t change things.”

Hamilton nodded. He couldn’t argue with anything she had said. “Maggie Lynn, I have no doubt you’ll be a chief one day if you want to be. And much as I hate to see you go, I’ll do whatever I can to help you with this. You let me know when, and I’ll talk with some folks.” It hurt like hell to say.

Maggie came around the desk and threw her arms around the big man, kissing him on the forehead, her eyes wet for the second time in Cecil’s experience. “Thank you, Ham,” she said, her voice choking just the smallest bit.

By the second week in November, Cecil Hamilton had won re-election by an embarrassing margin (his opponent had been a police lieutenant out of Jackson whom no one knew, and who simply wanted to spend the rest of his law enforcement career in the quiet of the sticks.) The Jasper High Spartans were undefeated, and David had a new girlfriend, a cute little cheerleader named Ashley. Maggie Tobias was gone to Atlanta. Although she had landed the job on her own, Cecil’s personal contacts, a glowing letter of recommendation and a casual call to Atlanta’s chief from Georgia’s Attorney General (who had been nudged at a national golf outing by the Mississippi Attorney General, who happened to be a twenty year friend of Cecil Hamilton) had simply helped speed up the process. Maggie regretted leaving her boss with a stack of open investigations, but he had assured her their little department would get along just fine, only they’d be a little sad for a while. Jeff Hooper was promoted to sergeant, Zeke Davis was scheduled to begin investigator school. Don Havermyer caught a bullet during a narcotics raid, non-life threatening, but he would be out for six months while he rehabbed.

No one thought much about Harriett LaCroix.

It was a Sunday, two weeks before Christmas, and the days were hovering around fifty degrees, the skies a perpetual gray and threatening rain. David and the Jasper Spartans were still undefeated, and heading into the finals. No one doubted they would make it all the way to State. Cecil Hamilton took a break from working on the quad in the driveway and headed into the house, leaving David to wrestle with a lug wrench on one of the big tires.

Patricia took the greasy rag from her husband and handed him a coffee as he eased into a kitchen chair, making a noise as he did it.

“Old people make noises when they sit down, Cec.”

“No, old people make noise when they sit down *and* stand up, so I don’t qualify. Sit down noises *only* are relaxation noises.”

“Back still troubling you?”

Ham sipped his coffee. “Not so much.”

“I saw Doans in your medicine cabinet.” She winked at him as she rinsed her own cup in the sink. “Cop’s wife.”

He grinned. “Well, now and again. Could be I overdid it a bit out there with David.”

“Uh-huh. Got to show your son you’re as tough as you ever were.” Her eyes were bright and mischievous. “But a smart *older* man would let a younger man do the heavy lifting.”

Ham grunted into his coffee cup.

“But since you probably won’t, at least make an appointment to have your back looked at, okay honey?” He agreed that he would – have his back looked at, anyway - and Patricia looked out the window over her kitchen sink. David was manhandling a tire to the side of the drive. Beyond him, walking slowly up the road towards the house, was Wisdom LaCroix.

“Cecil,” she said, just as outside their son noticed the visitor and called, “Daddy?”

Ham stepped beside his wife and looked out the window, then disappeared into the other room. He returned a moment later, tucking something into the back of his waistband and pulling his shirt down over it. Then he was out the kitchen door, walking to join his son.

Wisdom moved slowly, the sharp weather taking a heavy toll on his old bones, and especially his gnarled hands. He walked with his head down, as if putting all his concentration into placing one foot in front of the other. Hamilton noticed that he had something slung on his back, something with pink shoulder straps. It took him some time to reach the driveway proper, and Cecil stood next to David, the two of them watching him come. As the old man arrived, Cecil squeezed the boy’s shoulder. “Find something to do for a while, okay?”

“You alright, Daddy?” David had noticed the bulge at the back of his father’s shirt. Cop’s son.

Ham nodded. “Just careful, is all. I’ll be fine. Just gonna hear what the man has to say. He’s come a fair distance.”

David nodded and walked slowly around the side of the house, looking back at the approaching visitor and pulling out his phone to text his girlfriend. Cecil walked towards Wisdom, meeting him mid way down the drive. “Did someone give you a ride?”

Wisdom took a moment to answer. He was winded. “Nossir...walked...ain’t far.”

“It’s five miles here to your house, and this cold must be playin’ the devil with your hands.” He steered the old man towards a picnic table over near his boat, something he and David had built as a scouting project when David was fourteen. The old man nodded his gratitude and eased himself down onto a bench, breathed deeply for several moments, then slipped out of the backpack he was wearing. On it was the cartoon image of a little Chinese girl and her animal friends, something a six-year-old would have loved. Wisdom set it gently on the ground between his feet, as if it contained something fragile.

“You could have called the office, Wisdom. They know how to find me, I could have met you and saved you this awful walk.”

Wisdom LaCroix shook his head. “Bad enough to bother you on the Lord’s day, Sheriff. Ain’t gonna make a man leave his family as well.” He smiled with his few yellowed teeth, not a pleasant sight. “Sides, the exercise good fo’ me.”

Then the smile dropped away, as well as any pretense at good humor. He peered around, a furtive look on his wrinkled brown face, as if someone might be listening. When he spoke his voice was soft.

“She come again last night, Sheriff. Only this time I’s so scairt I peed muh bed.”

“Harriett?”

“Yessir. But not my sweet grandbaby. The darkness, it come up on her powerful, like. She floatin’ at the foot muh bed like a balloon, an her face was...it like her eyes, they be blazin’ with fire, only black.” Even as he spoke, the old man began to tremble.

“Wisdom, I...”

“Sheriff, she still tryin’ to speak, but can’t make no words, only a terrible moanin’ like to make me hide under muh pillow. When I gets the courage to look, she gone, but somethin’ like a beast ragin’ in her room next to mine. The walls was shakin’ an I heard her bed bangin’ up an down like a child wif a pot on the kitchen floor.”

Hamilton felt a cold crawl down his arms.

Wisdom went on, his voice now just above a whisper. “Was near dawn when the carryin’ on stopped, an I went to Harriet’s room. The door was busted, like it been kicked open...from the inside. Her place, what I fixed up so nice for her, it be ruined, an smelled like somethin’ crawl under the outhouse an died.”

He reached down and carefully unzipped the child’s backpack, removing a large piece of yellow construction paper which he had neatly rolled up inside a rubber band. He rolled it open onto the picnic table.

“Her crayons was all over the floor...child loved colorin’...an this was on the floor as well.”

Hamilton looked at the drawing, for that’s what it was, a kindergartener’s crude illustration using lots of black and green and red and brown. The people in it were stick figures, and at the center was a little girl colored brown, the smallest figure in the group. She wore a crude version of the Cat in the Hat’s red and white top hat, and a red and white dress. That figure was crying or bleeding or both, red raindrops spilling from her in all directions. The figures all stood in the woods, the bigger ones holding brown bottles from which more red drops fell. They were all smiling with wide, toothy grins. A green truck was on one side of the paper.

What really caught the sheriff’s eye was the fact that one of the figures had a scribble of red hair and glasses, and another wore a shirt on his stick figure chest with the word MILL scrawled on it.

Hamilton looked up from the drawing and into Wisdom’s eyes. “You been busy, old fella. And you spin a mighty good ghost story. But I know for a fact that Harriett couldn’t spell.”

“She can now,” Wisdom said, meeting the sheriff’s gaze.

“Doin’ a little colorin’ are we, Wisdom?”

The old man laughed, a short, raspy bark, and held up his clawed hands. “Sheriff, I can’t hardly wipe muh own ass wif these damned things. I surely can’t hold no crayon. Telled you it was muh grandbaby what done this.”

Hamilton looked at the man’s hands. Wisdom might be spinning a tale, but those claws hadn’t been drawing pictures.

One of those spidery fingers uncurled and pointed at the drawing. “Those be white boys, Sheriff. An I know you knows who they is.” His eyes were narrowed now, with a sly look. “Ain’t gonna try to say you don’t, is you?”

Hamilton pushed the picture back towards Wisdom and stood up from the table. “Not sure why you came here, old fella...”

“I come to see my grandbaby gets justice.”

“...but I ain’t gonna have you accusing local boys and using a story and some stick figures as evidence. I see who you mean for one, maybe too of them to be. Don’t know what they done to make you do such a thing, don’t really care. But I’m not sitting for any more of this foolishness.”

The old man rose and slowly shrugged into the backpack. A gust of wind picked the yellow piece of paper up off the table and twisted it through the air several times before it came to rest, flattened against the nearby boat trailer’s tire.

“She getting’ mean, Sheriff,” Wisdom said. “An I’m feared of what might be.” He turned his back and started down the long driveway, hunched against the breeze and cradling his hands once again. Hamilton knew he should do the decent thing, despite his anger, and drive the old man back into town.

But he didn’t. He let him walk.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

THE KNIFE by Todd Nelsen

“Wanna see it?”

It was the type of question a devil would ask a saint, the sort of thing a flasher would say to a little girl in a park. And I was buying every word of it. My anticipation was almost unbearable. “Can I? Really?” I asked.

My uncle tossed the bag on the dining room table and undid the drawstring; the sound of the leather made a swishing, slipping sound as it came open. “Go ahead,” he said with a smile and stepped back, giving me some room. “Take a look. Knock yourself out, buddy boy.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, listening for the familiar sound of a car pulling into the drive, the jangling and turning of a key, the door to the living room, opening, signaling the arrival of my parents. If they came home early and saw what I was up to? Man, I’d be fucked. They’d ground me for sure this time. Uncle Jack wasn’t supposed to be here. I’d let him in, and that was *way* against house rules. Jack may have been my all time favorite relative, but he did some pretty weird shit with his spare time. Jack didn’t have a job. There was often talk of drugs. Best to stay away from him unattended, Dad said, except on birthdays, holidays, Christmas, maybe Easter, if that “idiot brother of mine” was lucky. I liked Jack, but Dad was right in that respect, I guess. What was in that bag wasn’t for a thirteen year old kid; it wasn’t a cute, little puppy in there.

“Chicken?” I recognized the tactic immediately. Jack was taunting me, daring me, just like a couple of kids on a playground. Jack liked to tease. I think he got a real kick out of it.

I stared at the bag on the dining room table, my *parent’s* dining room table. Nah, I wasn’t scared. This was something different. What did they call it in school? Misbehaving. Was I being a bad boy? I often wondered what my uncle was like when he was my age. There probably wasn’t a day in his life that he hadn’t misbehaved. Are some people born that way? Born bad? I wondered. My grandparents, Jack’s parents, seemed all right. In fact, they were the most loving and conscientious people I knew. My grandma wouldn’t let me cross the street without looking both ways or leave the house before checking to see if my shoes were tied. My dad seemed pretty okay, too. Maybe Jack had fallen in with the wrong crowd when he was younger, did all the shit you weren’t supposed to... and, in his words, had “a *hell* of a lot of fun doing it.”

“Well, hell, if you ain’t interested --” He started to reach for it.

“No, wait,” I said. I was fearful he’d take it away. “I said, I’d look. I’ll look. And don’t call me chicken,” I added.

That wicked smile, again. “I knew you wouldn’t wuss out on me, buddy boy. You’ve always been my favorite.” He affectionately rubbed the top of my head. I pulled back; I wasn’t 6 anymore. He didn’t seem to mind that, though. “Go ahead, Charlie,” he urged. “You know, before *they* get home.”

I nodded - he was right; we didn’t have a lot of time; my parents would be back soon - and peered into the bag. I didn’t touch, however. Maybe I was scared after all. I bet I looked like some old lady inspecting fruit at the supermarket, the way I was hovering over it.

“Here, let me help,” he said, and he stepped around me and reached in, pulling it out. It was a rectangular bundle, about 8 inches in length, carefully wrapped in an old shirt. “Be careful,” he warned, genuinely meaning it. “It’s sharp.”

He handed the bundle to me.

I gawked back at him, like I didn’t understand what he’d said. I’d taken it, but my hands were shaking. I didn’t know what to do with it.

“Unwrap it,” he said.

He chuckled and snatched the bundle back. Unwrapping it and handing it back to me, he said: “It’s the real thing, Charlie boy. It’s not a movie prop or some bullshit knock off. Look closely at the blade. See the blood?”

He said it like it was the coolest of things. It reminded me of the last horror movie I’d seen. *Ya wanna see somethin’ really scary?* Now that it was out of the bag, unwrapped, and in my hands, I felt less intimidated. My curiosity took over then. I raised it up to the light. I didn’t see blood, like Jack said I would. He was bullshitting me on that account. Uncle Jack did have a tendency to exaggerate. Still -- “He really used this?” I asked, turning it in the light. I choked a little, not entirely believing.

“Yep,” he said, his eyes twinkling. He was obviously getting a kick out of this. “On 30 of ‘em, he did. The rest --” He put his hands out in front of him and cupped them furiously. “He strangled. Griffith said it was more --”

“Much more *satisfying*,” I finished for him. “And it was 48, not 30, Uncle Jack.”

Jack shrugged, as if to say, you know better than I do, kid, and went silent.

I was right, though. I didn’t need to be told. I knew everything about Lester Griffith. Some kids collected Pokémon. I collected serial killers; well, I didn’t officially collect them per se. I just knew a lot about them: watched the movies, downloaded the documentaries, read the books. It was a passion of mine, and my uncle knew it. Lester Griffith was something special, though. By the time they’d caught him, he’d got himself 81. That was three times Ackerman, 10 more than Red Lake. And in my hands now, *my* hands, was the murder weapon of one of the most prolific serial killers the United States had ever seen. This wasn’t the Silence of the Lambs or Friday the 13th or Psycho here. Like Jack said, screw all that movie bullshit.

This was the real deal, buddy boy.

Jack had his tongue out, in a comical imitation of some poor victim getting the life choked out of them. Another time it might have been funny, and I might have laughed, but I barely noticed.

Wow, I thought, turning it in the light... the knife of Lester Griffith. I was hypnotized.

“What will you give for it?”

My heart stopped.

“100 bucks?”

I looked at him. I was speechless.

“How about 50?” he asked. “I could part with it for 50.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” I said. After all, I was just a 13 year old kid!

Suddenly, I heard the sound of gravel on the drive and a car door shutting.

“What *do* you have, Charlie boy?”

“10 bucks. I have 10 bucks.”

“Let’s see it.”

I reached into my pocket and held it out to him.

“Done,” Jack said. And he took the money, snatched up his bag, and bolted out the back door, leaving the knife in my hands.

For the next few days, I was one of the coolest kids at school - at the very least, the weirdest. Pokémon? Shit. Fuck Pokémon. We’re talking Lester Griffith here, man.

“Wanna see it?”

It was the type of question a devil would ask a saint, the sort of thing a sixteen year old says to his virgin girlfriend.

“Well, you wanna or not?”

It wasn’t until later, when I was sitting in the principle’s office with my mother, and

she recognized the knife from her own cutlery, that I realized Uncle Jack had pulled a fast one on me.

THREE WISE MEN by Nathan Rowark

A circle's formed above our heads from wielded wings of an empty sky;
We walk the mile with heavy foot, yet know no reason we should ask why.
Our journey has been arduous, rugged, rocky terrains attest;
They speak their individual silences that to the sullen are confessed.

Unwoven glass slips endlessly between our sanctuaries toe,
Invades their inner sanctums, for deities yet to know.
This striving for atonement, an imaginative wander,
Grows from roots within us, so we must have seeds to ponder.

As for why we left in instant, a fleeting cloud depart,
Remains a cold cased mystery, but is understood in heart.
The unseen stands to beckon us; we deduce land to embark;
A path that we could clear ourselves, for emergence from the dark.

An odd mirage for desert souls to cover so much ground,
Without the slightest inkling of what's there to be found.
Divining way, the rivers stretch seems to flow forever;
"Is this the way?" the coven asks, for appeasement of endeavour?

Piece by piece, the whole find clear natures puzzle shown;
One by one, it occurs to them that they are not alone.
And so the first left travelling, on adventure from a whim,
Discover much to scholar back on state and social hymn.

Others learn from gatherings, of theory and on fact;
Judas named much later on spies power in such tact.
Penitents find stardom now in a non communicative age,
With no knowledge of religion, that man will years engage.

‘What is the House of Skulls?’ Dogo asked, shortly after. They had dug a grave in the red earth for the old woman, whose ghost left her body with her final words. Now they were interring her. Even now, what she had said resounded within Yeduza’s mind. *The House of Skulls...*

‘When my lord, the Emperor Mtogo, was little more than an outlaw,’ she said, after they had filled in the grave, ‘Nago was ruled by an evil tyrant called Mungu-Ovu. He dwelt in Mnara, where he had a palace whose mud walls were studded with the skulls of those he had slain. Mtogo gathered a band of warriors. I was young then, a girl, and I joined them after Mungu-Ovu’s leopard-warriors slew my father and mother. There was little left for me except revenge in those days.

‘He began a rebellion against Mungu-Ovu. During those years, I rose from the ranks to become Mtogo’s right hand warrior. We overthrew Mungu-Ovu and took over Nago. Mtogo’s first act after slaying the tyrant was to demolish the House of Skulls and have the bones buried to lay their ghosts to rest.’ She looked at Dogo with troubled eyes. ‘What has happened to my lord, that he has reverted to the ways of the one he overthrew?’

Dogo looked at her. ‘It seems that your emperor poses as great a threat as Chinja,’ he said.

‘I must go to him,’ said Yeduza suddenly. ‘I cannot waste time on this fruitless quest. It is far to the northern deserts. Many, many leagues lie between us and the lands of the Tiburi; all Nago, where the Kikwenzi roam unchecked. I must go to Mtogo and persuade him to fight back. He has lost heart now that I am not with him...’

Dogo shook his head. ‘No,’ he said shortly. ‘What would you achieve by that? He has already tried to have you killed. And why? Because the Kikwenzi defeated you. So they would again, if you led the Nagos against them with spears and knives.’

Yeduza extended her arm, gesturing at the ransacked village. ‘I cannot stand by when the Nagos are under attack!’

Dogo reached up to put his hand on her arm. ‘I do not tell you to stand by,’ he said. ‘Chinja must be defeated before anyone is safe. Only when you have the means to slay him, and have vanquished his warriors, can you think about anything else. Chinja must die.’

Yeduza sighed, and dragged her knuckles across her brow. After a moment, she said, ‘You are right, Dogo. I can achieve nothing as I am. A penniless wanderer. Why, I do not even own a horse! We must journey north as fast as we can.’

‘Then let us start at once!’ Dogo cried. He led her at a run from the village.

* * * * *

The sun beat down. The wind moaned among the sands. Yeduza licked at her dry lips, and gazed at the barren sea of sand that had surrounded them since they quit the ravaged lands of

Nago. She propped her assegai in the crook of her arm, shaded her eyes against the glare, and scanned the horizon.

They had had a long, dangerous journey across an empire plunged into anarchy. At many points along the way, Yeduza had thought she would never see the sands of the northern desert. Now they stretched around her on every side, and she realised how hard it would be to find wandering nomads in such a bleak and empty land.

She licked her lips again, and heard a dry croak from Dogo. Looking down, she saw him shaking the calabash of water they had filled at the last waterhole. He caught her gaze and shook his head.

‘We need water.’

Silently, Yeduza scanned the horizon another time; the pygmy was right, water was their first priority. Barbarians, and the salvation of Nago, would have to come second. They could not save the empire if they died of thirst. Her eyes settled on something, a depression in the sands, a *wadi*. Could they find water there? They might have to dig, but the precious drops would be all that stood between them and slow, lingering death. She indicated the *wadi* to Dogo.

‘We might find water there,’ she said, and was shocked by the way that her voice cracked, like a dry, dusty bone.

Dogo nodded, panting like a dog. ‘I know little of these northern lands,’ he said. ‘I was here only briefly with the Kikwenzi. But I trust you.’

As she limped beside him across the baking sands towards the distant *wadi*, Yeduza looked at her companion. He had great faith in her, this loyal little man from the forest, but her fund of desert lore was meagre. She could not guarantee that the dried-up riverbed towards which they were walking would yield any water. No vegetation grew along its banks. But she could not see any plants anywhere among the sands that surrounded them.

They reached the *wadi*. Yeduza began to dig using her assegai. Dogo aided her with his blowpipe, and then his bare hands.

Sand gave way to sand, and more sand, dry sand that trickled back into the pit they dug. Now the wind that had been moaning across the dunes began to pick up, screaming and wailing as it hurtled across the desert. Yeduza looked up to see a sandstorm towering on the skyline like a vengeful spirit of the desert. It began to whirl towards them.

She flung down her assegai and turned to Dogo.

‘A storm!’ she mouthed, pointing towards the whirlwind that was now so loud her words were inaudible. ‘We need shelter!’

Dogo pointed towards the hole they had dug, seized her hand, and drew her down into it. The storm hit them, and stinging grains of sand were everywhere, a swirling chaos in which Yeduza, crouched in the pit, lost all sense of reality. As the storm reached its height, she lost consciousness.

* * * * *

A boot in her ribs stirred her, shocked her back into awareness. Her eyes were gummed together but she could hear that the storm was gone. The desert was silent except for a muted sound of voices and a stench of animals.

A voice snapped something in a foreign tongue, and the boot thudded into her ribs again. She opened her eyes to be confronted by a close-up view of sand. Weakly, she moved her head to one side, and saw a tall man glaring down at her, clad in white robes that left his face veiled except his burning, hawkish eyes. Behind him was a monstrosity Yeduza recognised as a camel. She blinked and focussed on the thing the man carried nonchalantly in his right hand; a long iron object with an ornately carved wooden stock. A musket!

She had found the barbarians.

She tried to rise, and found that her arms would not obey her. Angrily, she tore at them, to discover she was bound. In her struggle, which the man watched with eyes as pitiless as the desert sun, she glimpsed her watchers' companions. More nomads, more camels -- and a long coffle of slaves, their wrists bound to wooden poles. She had been found by slavers.

The barbarian looming over her produced a long whip and again gestured to her to rise. He barked an order in what Yeduza presumed to be his own tongue, then followed it by commands in other languages. Finally, Yeduza caught a word in Bengue, which she spoke but little.

'Up!' the barbarian was barking. 'Rise, wool-head! Rise, ape!'

Yeduza gritted her teeth. She would get up, certainly, if only to teach this stinking cameleer what happened to those who insulted an Amazon of Nago. She struggled to her knees, glowering, off-balance with her bound hands, feeling pain from her lame leg. The Tiburi slaver watched in silence.

Finally, Yeduza rose to her feet, and stood before the Tiburi, her arms still bound. He handed his musket to another slaver, and came closer to her. She curled her lip at the smell of his unwashed body.

'Slave!' he snapped. 'You -- slave now! Get in coffle!' He indicated the line of slaves with a jerk of his head.

Yeduza looked at him, her eyes full of hate. She drew back her head and spat in his face.

He jerked back, and glared at her, incensed. He rushed towards her, whip upraised, and she lifted her good leg and kicked him in the belly. He fell back on the sands as his fellow barbarians laughed. Yeduza, off-balance again, toppled to the ground nearby.

Weakly, she got to her knees again, only to see the barbarian rise. He kicked her in the face and she went back down. Then he was on top of her, tearing at her clothes. She fought to throw him off but he had her pinioned. He gripped her tunic and yanked it down, with a cruel grin of satisfaction. Suddenly, his eyes widened, and he half rose.

A dart jutted from his neck. With a confused, querulous moan, he slumped across her body.

Angrily, Yeduza thrust the limp body to one side with her leg. Again, she got to her feet and stood there swaying slightly. What had happened? She looked at the surrounding slavers, who regarded their dead chief in bafflement. She looked down at the corpse and her eyes fixed on the dart. Scanning the dunes surrounding them, she thought she saw a small, black figure duck into cover. She smiled slowly, then she turned to the Tiburi.

‘Set me free!’ she shouted in Bengue. ‘Cut my bonds -- or you will all die as did your leader! I came here to trade, not to be treated as a slave!’

‘Who are you, then?’ Another barbarian stepped forward, the one who had taken the chieftain’s musket. He pulled down his veil to reveal a pale, youthful face with a cynical smile and laughing, dancing eyes. ‘What do you wish to trade?’

‘Free me, and then we can talk,’ Yeduza replied. The barbarian shrugged, shouldered the two muskets, and produced an ornate, curved-bladed dagger. He crossed to her side and slashed her bonds. Yeduza stretched her arms then replaced her tunic. She searched the surrounding sands for her shield and assegai, but saw no sign of them.

‘I am Assouad,’ the youth declared. He indicated the dead chieftain. ‘Now that Hagal is dead by your sorcery, I succeed him as leader of the caravan. You have done us a favour -- none of us liked him; he was greedy, always kept the best prizes for himself. You speak of trade, black witch. What do you wish to buy? What do you have to offer?’ His eyes flicked up and down her scornfully.

Yeduza’s mind raced. Throughout the journey, she had been anticipating this moment, this question. What did she have to trade? She no longer even had the horse, the assegai, or the shield that were all she had taken with her when she fled Mnara.

‘Let me tell you what I want,’ she said. ‘My land is Nago. I am captain of the Emperor’s Guard. My country is under attack from warriors who use sorcery to make themselves invulnerable to spears or swords. I have learnt that muskets can kill them. I wish to buy a musket so that I can slay their leader, Chinja.’

‘Impossible,’ said Assouad. ‘We are forbidden to sell muskets to your folk. Had you wool-heads the means to make them, we free people of the desert would lose our edge over you. We do not have a deal.’

Yeduza snarled. ‘Listen to me, camel offal,’ she said, ‘I have travelled far to trade. Listen to me, or my familiar spirit’ -- she raised her voice in the hopes that Dogo would hear behind his sand dune -- ‘will strike you down!’

Assouad turned back, his eyes flickering towards Hagal’s stiffening corpse. ‘You expect me to trade under duress?’ he demanded. ‘There’s such a thing as good will, woman.’

‘My name is Yeduza,’ she hissed. ‘You will call me “Yeduza” or “my lady”. You will not call me “wool-head”, or “ape”, and certainly, you will not call me “woman.” I am an Amazon of Nago, and you will treat me as my rank demands. Or else my...’

‘...familiar spirit will strike me dead, yes. I heard you the first time,’ Assouad replied. ‘From which I can only conclude you are a witch. Why not use your black sorcery to fight this Chinja?’

Yeduza gritted her teeth. ‘I have told you what I want,’ she said. ‘I want a musket.’

Assouad folded his arms. ‘I’ll consider it,’ he said. ‘But what do you have to offer in return? You can strike me dead, but will your familiar spirit stop the bullets of my men as they sink into your carcass?’ He studied her face. ‘I thought as not. Then what do you have to trade?’

‘The plunder of the Kikwenzi!’

Yeduza looked up in amazement to see Dogo racing down the dune towards them. The barbarians whirled round. Even the cowed slaves looked on in amusement as Dogo rushed to Yeduza’s side.

‘So this is your familiar spirit,’ said Assouad with a laugh. ‘I could get a good price for a dwarf like him, in the stone cities beyond the desert.’ Yeduza ignored him, looking down at her pygmy friend.

‘I was with the Kikwenzi when they looted the caravan that carried the gold tribute from the miners of the south to the kingdom of Habesh, in the eastern mountains,’ Dogo told Assouad. ‘They have it still.’ He turned to Yeduza. ‘Offer them that in return for their aid.’

Yeduza smiled. ‘You hear that, Assouad?’ she said. ‘Aid us, and we will let you take your pick of the Kikwenzi’s plunder. They have been raiding for many years. You are welcome to as much as you wish.’

Assouad’s eyes were wide with greed. ‘The gold of Habesh...’ he breathed. ‘Woman, it is a done deal. We will come with you. We will fight for you. It is against our code to let wool-heads buy muskets, but for the promise of the gold of Habesh, I will give you this.’ He handed her the musket that had belonged to Hagal. Yeduza took it eagerly, and examined the weapon.

‘Will you instruct me in its use?’ she demanded.

Assouad laughed. ‘Lady, you strike a hard bargain,’ he said. ‘But for even a chance at so much gold, I will do even that.’ He glanced at the huddled form at their feet. ‘And you might as well take Hagal’s camel. He won’t need it. Come, let us make haste. Where is this Chinja?’

Yeduza shouldered the musket, and limped to Hagal’s camel, Dogo following. Before she mounted the ugly-looking beast, she turned to Assouad.

‘One last condition,’ she said. The barbarian sighed.

‘What now, wo... my lady?’

Yeduza indicated the slaves. ‘Set them free when we reach Nago.’

Assouad flung up his hands in anger. Then he laughed suddenly. 'This had better be worth it,' he said. He mounted his camel.

Slowly, the caravan moved on its way, leaving behind it the stiffening body of Hagal, motionless in the desert sands. As the barbarians and their companions crested the brow of the dunes, the vultures swooped down.

Schlock! Classic Serial: VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE BANNERWORTHS FROM THE HALL.—THE NEW ABODE.—JACK PRINGLE, PILOT.

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During that very evening, on which the house of Sir Francis Varney was fired by the mob, another scene, and one of different character, was enacted at Bannerworth Hall, where the owners of that ancient place were departing from it.

It was towards the latter part of the day, that Flora Bannerworth, Mrs. Bannerworth, and Henry Bannerworth, were preparing themselves to depart from the house of their ancestors. The intended proprietor was, as we have already been made acquainted with, the old admiral, who had taken the place somewhat mysteriously, considering the way in which he usually did business.

The admiral was walking up and down the lawn before the house, and looking up at the windows every now and then; and turning to Jack Pringle, he said,—

"Jack, you dog."

"Ay—ay, sir."

"Mind you convoy these women into the right port; do you hear? and no mistaking the bearings; do you hear?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"These crafts want care; and you are pilot, commander, and all; so mind and keep your weather eye open."

"Ay, ay, sir. I knows the craft well enough, and I knows the roads, too; there'll be no end of foundering against the breakers to find where they lie."

"No, no, Jack; you needn't do that; but mind your bearings. Jack, mind your bearings."

"Never fear; I know 'em, well enough; my eyes ain't laid up in ordinary yet."

"Eh? What do you mean by that, you dog, eh?"

"Nothing; only I can see without helps to read, or glasses either; so I know one place from another."

There was now some one moving within; and the admiral, followed by Jack Pringle, entered the Hall. Henry Bannerworth was there. They were all ready to go when the coach came for them, which the admiral had ordered for them.

"Jack, you lubber; where are you?"

"Ay, ay, sir, here am I."

"Go, and station yourself up in some place where you can keep a good look-out for the coach, and come and report when you see it."

"Ay—ay, sir," said Jack, and away he went from the room, and stationed himself up in one of the trees, that commanded a good view of the main road for some distance.

"Admiral Bell," said Henry, "here we are, trusting implicitly to you; and in doing so, I am sure I am doing right."

"You will see that," said the admiral. "All's fair and honest as yet; and what is to come, will speak for itself."

"I hope you won't suffer from any of these nocturnal visits," said Henry.

"I don't much care about them; but old Admiral Bell don't strike his colours to an enemy, however ugly he may look. No, no; it must be a better craft than his own that'll take him; and one who won't run away, but that will grapple yard-arm and yard-arm, you know."

"Why, admiral, you must have seen many dangers in your time, and be used to all kinds of disturbances and conflicts. You have had a life of experience."

"Yes; and experience has come pretty thick sometimes, I can tell you, when it comes in the shape of Frenchmen's broadsides."

"I dare say, then, it must be rather awkward."

"Death by the law," said the admiral, "to stop one of them with your head, I assure you. I dare not make the attempt myself, though I have often seen it done."

"I dare say; but here are Flora and my mother."

As he spoke, Flora and her mother entered the apartment.

"Well, admiral, we are all ready; and, though I may feel somewhat sorry at leaving the old Hall, yet it arises from attachment to the place, and not any disinclination to be beyond the reach of these dreadful alarms."

"And I, too, shall be by no means sorry," said Flora; "I am sure it is some gratification to know we leave a friend here, rather than some others, who would have had the place, if they could have got it, by any means."

"Ah, that's true enough, Miss Flora," said the admiral; "but we'll run the enemy down yet, depend upon it. But once away, you will be free from these terrors; and now, as you have promised, do not let yourselves be seen any where at all."

"You have our promises, admiral; and they shall be religiously kept, I can assure you."

"Boat, ahoy—ahoy!" shouted Jack.

"What boat?" said the admiral, surprised; and then he muttered, "Confound you for a lubber! Didn't I tell you to mind your bearings, you dog-fish you?"

"Ay, ay, sir—and so I did."

"You did."

"Yes, here they are. Squint over the larboard bulk-heads, as they call walls, and then atween the two trees on the starboard side of the course, then straight ahead for a few hundred fathoms, when you come to a funnel as is smoking like the crater of Mount Vesuvius, and then in a line with that on the top of the hill, comes our boat."

"Well," said the admiral, "that'll do. Now go open the gates, and keep a bright look out, and if you see anybody near your watch, why douse their glim."

"Ay—ay, sir," said Jack, and he disappeared.

"Rather a lucid description," said Henry, as he thought of Jack's report to the admiral.

"Oh, it's a seaman's report. I know what he means; it's quicker and plainer than the land lingo, to my ears, and Jack can't talk any other, you see."

By this time the coach came into the yard, and the whole party descended into the court-yard, where they came to take leave of the old place.

"Farewell, admiral."

"Good bye," said the admiral. "I hope the place you are going to will be such as please you—I hope it will."

"I am sure we shall endeavour to be pleased with it, and I am pretty sure we shall."

"Good bye."

"Farewell, Admiral Bell," said Henry.

"You remember your promises?"

"I do. Good bye, Mr. Chillingworth."

"Good bye," said Mr. Chillingworth, who came up to bid them farewell; "a pleasant journey, and may you all be the happier for it."

"You do not come with us?"

"No; I have some business of importance to attend to, else I should have the greatest pleasure in doing so. But good bye; we shall not be long apart, I dare say."

"I hope not," said Henry.

The door of the carriage was shut by the admiral, who looked round, saying,—

"Jack—Jack Pringle, where are you, you dog?"

"Here am I," said Jack.

"Where have you been to?"

"Only been for pigtail," said Jack. "I forgot it, and couldn't set sail without it."

"You dog you; didn't I tell you to mind your bearings?"

"So I will," said Jack, "fore and aft—fore and aft, admiral."

"You had better," said the admiral, who, however, relaxed into a broad grin, which he concealed from Jack Pringle.

Jack mounted the coach-box, and away it went, just as it was getting dark. The old admiral had locked up all the rooms in the presence of Henry Bannerworth; and when the coach had gone out of sight, Mr. Chillingworth came back to the Hall, where he joined the admiral.

"Well," he said, "they are gone, Admiral Bell, and we are alone; we have a clear stage and no favour."

"The two things of all others I most desire. Now, they will be strangers where they are going to, and that will be something gained. I will endeavour to do some thing if I get yard-arm and yard-arm with these pirates. I'll make 'em feel the weight of true metal; I'll board 'em—d——e, I'll do everything."

"Everything that can be done."

"Ay—ay."

The coach in which the family of the Bannerworths were carried away continued its course without any let or hindrance, and they met no one on their road during the whole drive. The fact was, nearly everybody was at the conflagration at Sir Francis Varney's house.

Flora knew not which way they were going, and, after a time, all trace of the road was lost. Darkness set in, and they all sat in silence in the coach.

At length, after some time had been spent thus, Flora Bannerworth turned to Jack Pringle, and said,—

"Are we near, or have we much further to go?"

"Not very much, ma'am," said Jack. "All's right, however—ship in the direct course, and no breakers ahead—no lookout necessary; however there's a land-lubber aloft to keep a look out."

As this was not very intelligible, and Jack seemed to have his own reasons for silence, they asked him no further questions; but in about three-quarters of an hour, during which time the coach had been driving through the trees, they came to a standstill by a sudden pull of the check-string from Jack, who said,—

"Hilloa!—take in sails, and drop anchor."

"Is this the place?"

"Yes, here we are," said Jack; "we're in port now, at all events;" and he began to sing,—

"The trials and the dangers of the voyage is past,"

when the coach door opened, and they all got out and looked about them where they were.

"Up the garden if you please, ma'am—as quick as you can; the night air is very cold."

Flora and her mother and brother took the hint, which was meant by Jack to mean that they were not to be seen outside. They at once entered a pretty garden, and then they came to a very neat and picturesque cottage. They had no time to look up at it, as the door was immediately opened by an elderly female, who was intended to wait upon them.

Soon after, Jack Pringle and the coachman entered the passage with the small amount of luggage which they had brought with them. This was deposited in the passage, and then Jack went out again, and, after a few minutes, there was the sound of wheels, which intimated that the coach had driven off.

Jack, however, returned in a few minutes afterwards, having secured the wicket-gate at the end of the garden, and then entered the house, shutting the door carefully after him.

Flora and her mother looked over the apartments in which they were shown with some surprise. It was, in everything, such as they could wish; indeed, though it could not be termed handsomely or extravagantly furnished, or that the things were new, yet, there was all that convenience and comfort could require, and some little of the luxuries.

"Well," said Flora, "this is very thoughtful of the admiral. The place will really be charming, and the garden, too, delightful."

"Mustn't be made use of just now," said Jack, "if you please, ma'am; them's the orders at present."

"Very well," said Flora, smiling. "I suppose, Mr. Pringle, we must obey them."

"Jack Pringle, if you please," said Jack. "My commands only temporary. I ain't got a commission."

Chapter IV: The Invaders

Those who live by agriculture or in towns, and are descended from the remnant of the ancients, are divided, as I have previously said, into numerous provinces, kingdoms, and republics. In the middle part of the country the cities are almost all upon the shores of the Lake, or within a short distance of the water, and there is therefore more traffic and communication between them by means of vessels than is the case with inland towns, whose trade must be carried on by caravans and waggons. These not only move slowly, but are subject to be interrupted by the Romany and by the banditti, or persons who, for moral or political crimes, have been banished from their homes.

It is in the cities that cluster around the great central lake that all the life and civilization of our day are found; but there also begin those wars and social convulsions which cause so much suffering. When was the Peninsula at peace? and when was there not some mischief and change brewing in the republics? When was there not a danger from the northern mainland?

Until recent years there was little knowledge of, and scarcely any direct commerce or intercourse between, the central part and the districts either of the extreme west or the north, and it is only now that the north and east are becoming open to us; for at the back of the narrow circle or cultivated land, the belt about the Lake, there extend immense forests in every direction, through which, till very lately, no practicable way had been cut. Even in the more civilized central part it is not to this day easy to travel, for at the barriers, as you approach the territories of every prince, they demand your business and your papers; nor even if you establish the fact that you are innocent of designs against the State, shall you hardly enter without satisfying the greed of the officials.

A fine is thus exacted at the gate of every province and kingdom, and again at the gateways of the towns. The difference of the coinage, such as it is, causes also great loss and trouble, for the money of one kingdom (though passing current by command in that territory) is not received at its nominal value in the next on account of the alloy it contains. It is, indeed, in many kingdoms impossible to obtain sterling money. Gold there is little or none anywhere, but silver is the standard of exchange, and copper, bronze, and brass, sometimes tin, are the metals with which the greater number of the people transact their business.

Justice is corrupt, for where there is a king or a prince it depends on the caprice of a tyrant, and where there is a republic upon the shout of the crowd, so that many, if they think they may be put on trial, rather than face the risk at once escape into the woods. The League, though based ostensibly on principles the most exalted and beneficial to humanity, is known to be perverted. The members sworn to honour and the highest virtue are swayed by vile motives, political hatreds, and private passions, and even by money.

Men for ever trample upon men, each pushing to the front; nor is there safety in remaining in retirement, since such are accused of biding their time and of occult designs. Though the population of these cities all counted together is not equal to the population that once dwelt in a single second-rate city of the ancients, yet how much greater are the bitterness and the struggle!

Yet not content with the bloodshed they themselves cause, the tyrants have called in the aid of mercenary soldiers to assist them. And, to complete the disgrace, those republics which proclaim themselves the very home of patriotic virtues, have resorted to the same means. Thus we see English cities kept in awe by troops of Welshmen, Irish, and even the western Scots, who swarm in the council-chambers of the republics, and, opening the doors of the houses, help themselves to what they will. This, too, in the face of the notorious fact that these nations have sworn to be avenged upon us, that their vessels sail about the Lake committing direful acts of piracy, and that twice already vast armies have swept along threatening to entirely overwhelm the whole commonwealth.

What infatuation to admit bands of these same men into the very strongholds and the heart of the land! As if upon the approach of their countrymen they would remain true to the oaths they have sworn for pay, and not rather admit them with open arms. No blame can, upon a just consideration, be attributed to either of these nations that endeavour to oppress us. For, as they point out, the ancients from whom we are descended held them in subjection many hundred years, and took from them all their liberties.

Thus the Welsh, or, as they call themselves, the Cymry, say that the whole island was once theirs, and is theirs still by right of inheritance. They were the original people who possessed it ages before the arrival of those whom we call the ancients. Though they were driven into the mountains of the far distant west, they never forgot their language, ceased their customs, or gave up their aspirations to recover their own. This is now their aim, and until recently it seemed as if they were about to accomplish it. For they held all that country anciently called Cornwall, having crossed over the Severn, and marched down the southern shore. The rich land of Devon, part of Dorset (all, indeed, that is inhabited), and the most part of Somerset, acknowledged their rule. Worcester and Hereford and Gloucester were theirs; I mean, of course, those parts that are not forest.

Their outposts were pushed forward to the centre of Leicestershire, and came down towards Oxford. But thereabouts they met with the forces of which I will shortly speak. Then their vessels every summer sailing from the Severn, came into the Lake, and, landing wherever there was an opportunity, they destroyed all things and carried off the spoil. Is it necessary to say more to demonstrate the madness which possesses those princes and republics which, in order to support their own tyranny, have invited bands of these men into their very palaces and forts?

As they approached near what was once Oxford and is now Sypolis, the armies of the Cymry came into collision with another of our invaders, and thus their forward course to the south was checked. The Irish, who had hitherto abetted them, turned round to defend their own usurpations. They, too, say that in conquering and despoiling my countrymen they are fulfilling a divine vengeance. Their land of Ireland had been for centuries ground down with an iron tyranny by our ancestors, who closed their lips with a muzzle, and led them about with a bridle, as their poets say. But now the hateful Saxons (for thus both they and the Welsh designate us) are broken, and delivered over to them for their spoil.

It is not possible to deny many of the statements that they make, but that should not prevent us from battling with might and main against the threatened subjection. What crime can be greater than the admission of such foreigners as the guards of our cities? Now the Irish have their principal rendezvous and capital near to the ancient city of Chester, which is upon the ocean, and at the very top and angle of Wales. This is their great settlement, their magazine and rallying-place, and thence their expeditions have proceeded. It is a convenient port, and well opposite their native land, from which reinforcements continually arrive, but the Welsh have ever looked upon their possession of it with jealousy.

At the period when the Cymry had nearly penetrated to Sypolis or Oxford, the Irish, on their part, had overrun all the cultivated and inhabited country in a south and south-easterly line from Chester, through Rutland to Norfolk and Suffolk, and even as far as Luton. They would have spread to the north, but in that direction they were met by the Scots, who had all Northumbria. When the Welsh came near Sypolis, the Irish awoke to the position of affairs.

Sypolis is the largest and most important city upon the northern shore of the Lake, and it is situated at the entrance to the neck of land that stretches out to the straits. If the Welsh were once well posted there, the Irish could never hope to find their way to the rich and cultivated south, for it is just below Sypolis that the Lake contracts, and forms a strait in one place but a furlong wide. The two forces thus came into collision, and while they fought and destroyed each other, Sypolis was saved. After which, finding they were evenly matched, the Irish withdrew two days' march northwards, and the Cymry as far westwards.

But now the Irish, sailing round the outside of Wales, came likewise up through the Red Rocks, and so into the Lake, and in their turn landing, harassed the cities. Often Welsh and Irish vessels, intending to attack the same place, have discerned each other approaching, and, turning from their proposed action, have flown at each other's throats. The Scots have not harassed us in the south much, being too far distant, and those that wander hither come for pay, taking service as guards. They are, indeed, the finest of men, and the hardiest to battle with. I had forgotten to mention that it is possible the Irish might have pushed back the Welsh, had not the kingdom of York suddenly reviving, by means which shall be related, valiantly thrust out its masters, and fell upon their rear.

But still these nations are always upon the verge and margin of our world, and wait but an opportunity to rush in upon it. Our countrymen groan under their yoke, and I say again that infamy should be the portion of those rulers among us who have filled their fortified places with mercenaries derived from such sources.

The land, too, is weak, because of the multitude of bondsmen. In the provinces and kingdoms round about the Lake there is hardly a town where the slaves do not outnumber the free as ten to one. The laws are framed for the object of reducing the greater part of the people to servitude. For every offence the punishment is slavery, and the offences are daily artificially increased, that the wealth of the few in human beings may grow with them. If a man in his hunger steal a loaf, he becomes a slave; that is, it is proclaimed he must make good to the State the injury he has done it, and must work out his trespass. This is not assessed as the value of the loaf, nor supposed to be confined to the individual from whom it was taken.

The theft is said to damage the State at large, because it corrupts the morality of the commonwealth; it is as if the thief had stolen a loaf, not from one, but from every member of the State. Restitution must, therefore, be made to all, and the value of the loaf returned in labour a thousandfold. The thief is the bondsman of the State. But as the State cannot employ him, he is leased out to those who will pay into the treasury of the prince the money equivalent to the labour he is capable of performing. Thus, under cover of the highest morality, the greatest iniquity is perpetrated. For the theft of a loaf, the man is reduced to a slave; then his wife and children, unable to support themselves, become a charge to the State, that is, they beg in the public ways.

This, too, forsooth, corrupts morality, and they likewise are seized and leased out to any who like to take them. Nor can he or they ever become free again, for they must repay to their proprietor the sum he gave for them, and how can that be done, since they receive no wages? For striking another, a man may be in the same way, as they term it, forfeited to the State, and be sold to the highest bidder. A stout brass wire is then twisted around his left wrist loosely, and the ends soldered together. Then a bar of iron being put through, a half turn is given to it, which forces the wire sharply against the arm, causing it to fit tightly, often painfully, and

forms a smaller ring at the outside. By this smaller ring a score of bondsmen may be seen strung together with a rope.

To speak disrespectfully of the prince or his council, or of the nobles, or of religion, to go out of the precincts without permission, to trade without license, to omit to salute the great, all these and a thousand others are crimes deserving of the brazen bracelet. Were a man to study all day what he must do, and what he must not do, to escape servitude, it would not be possible for him to stir one step without becoming forfeit! And yet they hypocritically say that these things are done for the sake of public morality, and that there are not slaves (not permitting the word to be used), and no man was ever sold.

It is, indeed, true that no man is sold in open market, he is leased instead; and, by a refined hypocrisy, the owner of slaves cannot sell them to another owner, but he can place them in the hands of the notary, presenting them with their freedom, so far as he is concerned. The notary, upon payment of a fine from the purchaser, transfers them to him, and the larger part of the fine goes to the prince. Debt alone under their laws must crowd the land with slaves, for, as wages are scarcely known, a child from its birth is often declared to be in debt. For its nourishment is drawn from its mother, and the wretched mother is the wife of a retainer who is fed by his lord. To such a degree is this tyranny carried! If any owe a penny, his doom is sealed; he becomes a bondsman, and thus the estates of the nobles are full of men who work during their whole lives for the profit of others. Thus, too, the woods are filled with banditti, for those who find an opportunity never fail to escape, notwithstanding the hunt that is invariably made for them, and the cruel punishment that awaits recapture. And numbers, foreseeing that they must become bondsmen, before they are proclaimed forfeit steal away by night, and live as they may in the forests.

How, then, does any man remain free? Only by the favour of the nobles, and only that he may amass wealth for them. The merchants, and those who have license to trade by land or water, are all protected by some noble house, to whom they pay heavily for permission to live in their own houses. The principal tyrant is supported by the nobles, that they in their turn may tyrannise over the merchants, and they again over all the workmen of their shops and bazaars.

Over their own servants (for thus they call the slaves, that the word itself may not be used), who work upon their estates, the nobles are absolute masters, and may even hang them upon the nearest tree. And here I cannot but remark how strange it is, first, that any man can remain a slave rather than die; and secondly, how much stranger it is that any other man, himself a slave, can be found to hunt down or to hang his fellow; yet the tyrants never lack executioners. Their castles are crowded with retainers who wreak their wills upon the defenceless. These retainers do not wear the brazen bracelet; they are free. Are there, then, no beggars? Yes, they sit at every corner, and about the gates of the cities, asking for alms.

Though begging makes a man forfeit to the State, it is only when he has thews and sinews, and can work. The diseased and aged, the helpless and feeble, may break the law, and starve by the roadside, because it profits no one to make them his slaves. And all these things are done in the name of morality, and for the good of the human race, as they constantly announce in their councils and parliaments.

There are two reasons why the mercenaries have been called in; first, because the princes found the great nobles so powerful, and can keep them in check only by the aid of these foreigners; and secondly, because the number of the outlaws in the woods has become so great that the nobles themselves are afraid lest their slaves should revolt, and, with the aid of the outlaws, overcome them.

Now the mark of a noble is that he can read and write. When the ancients were scattered, the remnant that was left behind was, for the most part, the ignorant and the poor. But among them there was here and there a man who possessed some little education and force of mind. At first there was no order; but after thirty years or so, after a generation, some order grew up, and these men, then become aged, were naturally chosen as leaders. They had, indeed, no actual power then, no guards or armies; but the common folk, who had no knowledge, came to them for decision of their disputes, for advice what to do, for the pronouncement of some form of marriage, for the keeping of some note of property, and to be united against a mutual danger.

These men in turn taught their children to read and write, wishing that some part of the wisdom of the ancients might be preserved. They themselves wrote down what they knew, and these manuscripts, transmitted to their children, were saved with care. Some of them remain to this day. These children, growing to manhood, took more upon them, and assumed higher authority as the past was forgotten, and the original equality of all men lost in antiquity. The small enclosed farms of their fathers became enlarged to estates, the estates became towns, and thus, by degrees, the order of the nobility was formed. As they intermarried only among themselves, they preserved a certain individuality. At this day a noble is at once known, no matter how coarsely he may be dressed, or how brutal his habits, by his delicacy of feature, his air of command, even by his softness of skin and fineness of hair.

Still the art of reading and writing is scrupulously imparted to all their legitimate offspring, and scrupulously confined to them alone. It is true that they do not use it except on rare occasions when necessity demands, being wholly given over to the chase, to war, and politics, but they retain the knowledge. Indeed, were a noble to be known not to be able to read and write, the prince would at once degrade him, and the sentence would be upheld by the entire caste. No other but the nobles are permitted to acquire these arts; if any attempt to do so, they are enslaved and punished. But none do attempt; of what avail would it be to them?

All knowledge is thus retained in the possession of the nobles; they do not use it, but the physicians, for instance, who are famous, are so because by favour of some baron, they have learned receipts in the ancient manuscripts which have been mentioned. One virtue, and one only, adorns this exclusive caste; they are courageous to the verge of madness. I had almost omitted to state that the merchants know how to read and write, having special license and permits to do so, without which they may not correspond. There are few books, and still fewer to read them; and these all in manuscript, for though the way to print is not lost, it is not employed since no one wants books.