



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

Vol. 2, Issue 4
4 December 2011

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

For details of previous editions, please go to the Archive.

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

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

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This week's cover illustration is "Blind Minotaur Led By A Little Girl In the Night" by Pablo Picasso. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

Skullery by Nathan Rowark - *The creep that crept below the hall...* POETRY

The Hettford Witch Hunt by James Rhodes - *The witch-hunters of Hettford gain a new member while Gary considers a change of career ...* OCCULT SIT-COM

State of Emergency - Part Sixteen by David Christopher - *Blam! Blam! Blam...!* SCIENCE FICTION

Environmentally Unfriendly by John Jennings - *Bill was a devoted nature lover...* HORROR

Pale Tamora / Penny Dreadful by Obsidian M. Tesla... *In thy cool shadow I am truly blessed...* POETRY

Fearful Symmetry by James Rhodes - *Kev questions the health and safety policy of Birkenhead Park Wild Life Enclosure...* FANTASY

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 27) by Ray Cummings - *Anita would not admit that she was tired. She was more skilful than I in this leaping over the broken rock masses. Yet I felt that her slight strength must give out...* SPACE OPERA

EDITORIAL

It's been all hands to the pumps aboard the good ship Schlock! We've been busy, not just preparing another edition for your delectation and delight, but also readying two (count 'em!) Anthologies: *Fantasmagoriana*, soon to be out in print, joined by the Pseudonomicon, the Schlock! Anthology Vol. 1, containing stories gleaned mainly from the first volume of the webzine. Their publication will be announced on Schlock's Facebook page.

Meanwhile, we have the continuation of the popular occult sit-com, *The Hettford Witch Hunt*; poetry from the widely published Nathan Rowark; a welcome return from John Jennings, flash-horror writer extraordinaire; more poetry from our Victorian time traveller, Obsidian Tesla; and a cautionary tale set in the animal care industry, *Fearful Symmetry*.

Plus the long running serials: *State Of Emergency*; *Varney the Vampyre* and *Brigands of the Moon*.

Enjoy.

Gavin Chappell.

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by J Rhodes

PREVIOUSLY ON HETTFORD...

The Hunt members attempted to make an informational video promoting their cause. However, the attempt was thwarted by various mishaps. A local farmer shot the camera to bits, batteries lost power, memory cards become mysteriously full and tempers become decidedly fraught.

Meanwhile, as Alison attempted to cope with Gary's recent infidelity Gary showed her the one video that could actually make matters worse.

Episode Two: Casting the Ruins

1.

Saul and Paul stood outside of Gary's front door, their shaved heads shining with menace. Saul put one finger to his lip to quiet his younger brother: Paul was bouncing and rubbing his hands with the excited glee of danger. When Saul was absolutely sure that they had not been detected, he banged loudly on Gary's door and the two of them sprinted away.

After seven minutes and forty-three seconds, Saul and Paul observed Gary opening the door from their secret observation point (hidden behind a parked car). Gary was wearing a dressing gown that he had neglected to fully close at the front and it was apparent to any onlookers (of which there were only two) that he was not wearing anything else at all.

Gary looked wearily around for the cause of the knock and as he let his head drop wearily downwards, he spotted the fuzzy brown object that Saul and Paul had left on his doorstep.

Gary bent over and picked the object up; he sniffed it. Saul and Paul giggled in their hiding place.

Too tired to care why someone had chosen to leave a piece of kiwi fruit on his doorstep and satisfied that it was fresh, Gary bit the top off the fruit and began to peel it.

2.

Milton and Dan were sitting down to breakfast, Milton was eating the perfect four-minute egg with a runny yolk and bread soldiers. Whereas Dan was drinking a can of generic fizzy cola, that was labelled Dr Pepsa.

"No cornflakes?" Milton inquired.

"There's no shortage of cornflakes."

"Just didn't feel like them eh?"

"No, don't get me wrong, I'd love some cornflakes."

"OK."

Milton dipped a soldier into his egg with the rustic pride of self-sufficiency. It was the first egg that his recently acquired chicken had laid. That is to say, it was the first one he'd found - he had located a few more since then but he wasn't about to start carbon dating them.

“You’re wondering why I’m not eating cornflakes I suppose?”

“I was. Frankly I’m getting a little bored now.”

“There’s not enough milk - somehow.”

“Sorry, slow day at the shop yesterday.”

“You got through nearly two pints - just on cups of tea?”

Dan’s face grew red with astonishment.

“You can have an egg if you like.”

“No thanks. It’s too weird,” Dan was emphatic.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, with the chicken right out there... I don’t know, when they come in nice cardboard containers you can almost imagine that they were made in a factory. You don’t actually have to dwell on the process of ovulation, which, I am sorry, becomes more revolting each time that it occurs to me. You wouldn’t eat that if it came out of a lady’s vagina, would you? Honest to God, you could at least close the window so I don’t have to smell the thing.”

“Is there any milk left at all?”

“A little tiny bit.”

“Enough for a cup of tea?”

Dan became a violent crimson colour; his face looked like someone was throttling a grape. He was about to let fly a tirade about mass consumption and consideration but it was cut short by a knock at the door. Dan looked sulkily at Milton waved his hand towards the door and said:

“Since you were going to make tea anyway....”

Milton left the room and re-entered few minutes later holding a brown package. He looked astonished.

“It’s for you,” he said.

He threw the package clumsily towards Dan and Dan caught it valiantly in one hand.

“Thank you.”

Dan tore open the package and pulled out a small black book.

“What is it?” Milton asked.

“It’s a diary for this year.”

“Bit late isn’t it?”

Dan nodded.

“You would say so.”

“Anything in it?”

Dan opened the first page of the diary with a painful slowness. A small piece of paper burst out energetically from the front page and whistled towards the kitchen window. Milton dashed after it at a considerably lower tempo.

Just outside of the window was a roll of chicken wire that Milton had neither used nor disposed of. The piece of paper became snagged on it but continued to try to push its way through it as if it were caught by some vast wind. Milton carefully peeled the paper off the wire and, clutching it tightly in his hand, closed the window.

He sat back down in front of Dan and handed him the scrap of paper.

“You owe my chicken an apology,” he said.

3.

Alison was asleep. Without taking off his dressing gown, Gary got back into bed with her. He leaned over to take in some of her beauty. Without opening her eyes, Alison began to speak:

“Breakfast?”

“I brought some up but you were asleep. I can go and get you some more if you want.”

“No, it’s alright - it’s too late now.”

“It is quarter past ten,” Gary sighed despondently as he spoke.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you still asleep?”

“No, it’s you that talks in his sleep remember; I’m just resting my eyes.”

“What time do you have work?”

Alison rolled over and the quilt of the bed disappeared almost entirely beneath her. Gary looked down at his legs.

“No work today - Tajel’s shift. What about you?”

Gary tried to sound as upbeat as possible.

“I’m a free man till tonight.”

Alison sat up in the bed and opened her eyes.

“I hate it when you work nights.”

“I know, but it’s a much better job without the customers coming in all the time.”

“Don’t you get bored?”

“No more so than in the daytime.”

“You’re just too smart for that job.”

Gary scratched himself.

“Aphids are too smart for my job,” he said.

“You could always take your PGCE.”

Gary raised both his hands to signal that Alison should hold both her thoughts and her horses.

“Things aren’t that bad.”

“Teaching would be OK.”

“It’s too permanent. Plus, I have a humanities degree; I can’t live off whatever stipend they give you whilst you do the PGCE and I certainly can’t live off the JSA that I’ll be offered once I get one.”

“I could help you. It’s got to be better than working in an all-night garage in the middle of nowhere.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“What if we want to get married some day or have kids?”

Gary’s eyes widened in amazement:

“I thought we’d agreed not to.”

“But, I mean long term.”

“Long term, we agreed not to.”

There was a change in Alison’s eyes; her shoulders seemed to magnetically pull toward each other. It was like watching a fuse being primed.

“We didn’t agree, you agreed. Mr. Patel thinks he can get me a new job. He’s buying a marketing firm; it’s pretty far away though in Leeds. He’s getting me a new visa and everything. I’d have to move.”

“You know my work is here.”

“The fucking garage?”

“The Hunt.”

The fuse was lit, the explosion occurred:

“I’ve put up with a lot of shit from you Gary. A lot of shit. And I’ve given up everything.”

“I know. I can’t understand why.”

Gary’s lethargic sense of relaxation was a force to be reckoned with. Alison clutched the bed sheets in agonised frustration.

“Try and figure it out in the next two months.”

“That had the general ring of an ultimatum. You know that I draw the line at ultimatums.”

“I’m just letting you know. That’s all.”

4.

Milton sat behind the counter of his bookshop. Several books about Wiccan law were piled up next to the cash register. There was an orange paper star taped to the counter in

front of them that had the words, "majik bargain" scrawled on it in black marker. He looked at his friend Dan who was standing in front of him banging his fist on the counter.

"Cheer up, mate."

"I don't understand why we have to do this in the shop."

"It's opening hours, we're never going to have any customers if we don't open when we say we're going to at least once a week. Besides, all the best reference stuff is here."

"We never get any customers ever. Shakespeare's Sister only comes in because she fancies Gary and that's died down since the incident in our spare room. But I suppose you're right about the reference stuff - have you found anything?"

"As a matter of fact I have, so when I say cheer up I speak with authority."

"What did you find?"

Milton picked up a heavy and ancient looking brown covered volume.

"There's a reference to this type of thing in Karswell under rune casting. Apparently it means either someone wants you to die or someone wants you to fall in love with them."

"How do I tell which?"

"Well, according to this, the spell only works if some amount of notice is given. So, there should be some clue to which - probably in the diary. Have you looked in it?"

"No. I daren't. In case the paper gets loose again."

"We'll need to check that paper too, make sure it has a runic inscription."

Dan sighed; he drummed his finger on the counter top.

"My dad told me about this kind of spell. If the paper gets away there's nothing you can do about it."

"Well you're lucky that the paper didn't get away."

"The point is - how do we find out what exact spell it is without guaranteeing that it is inflicted upon me? Also, why didn't they give it to you instead?"

Milton thought about it and chose to the latter query.

“Simple, we get a nice bin bag out and open the diary inside the bag. That way it doesn’t have anywhere to fly to. After that, we can simply put it somewhere safe. In the bag if necessary.”

“And if it’s a death incantation?”

“You just have to give the paper back to whoever sent it to you. Then it will be enacted on them. Or give it to someone else you don’t like.”

Dan’s look of concern dissipated into one of glee.

“Anyone?”

“Supposedly.”

“Interesting, could I mail it to the department of work and pensions?”

“Let’s try and figure out who actually sent it out before you just start cursing people at random.”

“Nothing random about it. Anyway, it’s fairly safe to assume that this is a Ruthy present.”

“Best to be sure,” said Milton. “Go get the diary and a bin bag.”

Dan exited the room. When he returned he had a bin bag over his shoulder and he clutched the diary firmly with both hands.

“Alright, let’s give it a whack.”

Milton carefully took the diary out of Dan’s hands and plunged it in to the bin bag. He held the bin bag closed as if he were about to tie it or blow it full of air. He held it up to his eye and squinted at it. He shook his head at Dan.

Very carefully, he reached in with his hand and began to fumble around. The clock ticked audibly, a bead of sweat dripped down his forehead. Suddenly a bell rang.

Milton looked around in amazement; somebody was entering the shop. He pulled his hand out of the bag keeping tight hold of the small scrap of paper. The customer was dressed in neat office attire and despite the fact that her clothes were deliberately trying to prove the opposite; she was obviously a very attractive woman in her mid-thirties. She had mousy brown hair and the general air of authority that suggested she had attended more business meetings than is healthy. Milton tried to turn his look of open astonishment into a look of professionalism and keen customer service instinct.

“Erm, can I help you?”

The woman gazed at him without blinking.

“I hope so. I’m looking for a thing called the Hettford Hunt.”

The two men were dumbfounded. It took a moment but Dan responded with a gradual and cautious, “Why?”

“Well, I saw an advert and I thought it looked interesting.”

Dan shook his head in disbelief.

“An advert? Where?”

“Good old Yellow Pages.”

Dan hummed suspiciously and began to cluck his took. Milton took that as his cue to take over:

“What did you want to know?”

“What you do and how I go about joining?”

Milton winced, explaining the Hunt had never gone especially well for him.

“Erm, OK, well it would probably be best if you came to one of our meetings. There’s one tomorrow night at eight.”

“Alright, where do I go?”

“Just meet us here.”

Carrie approached Milton and held out her hand.

“Thanks, I’m Carrie by the way.”

Milton put her hand in his and the softness of her skin came as a surprise to him.

“I’m Milton. This is Dan.”

He gestured towards his friend and he did so the piece of paper he was clutching in his hand slipped from his fingers and floated upwards. Without so much as glancing at it, Carrie snatched it out of the air and handed it back to him.

“You should put that somewhere safe.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“Alright, tarra then, see you tomorrow.”

Milton recognised the underlying twinge of a Scouse accent suddenly blossom into Carrie’s voice like a rose scented air-freshener.

“See you tomorrow.”

Milton and Dan were both too busy staring at Carrie’s bottom to notice that the other was doing it. It was as though they had been caught in a trance. The doorbell rang for the second time to signal that Carrie had left and their senses returned.

“I told you we never get any customers,” said Dan.

Milton stretched out the piece of paper and told Dan to copy the runes inscribed on it. Then he placed it into the thick copy of Karswell’s *A History of The Craft*.

“We better put this in the safe.”

Dan nodded emphatically

“Can we close the damn shop now?”

“No, let’s just look at your diary first,” Milton told him.

Dan opened the diary and began to flick through the pages. Suddenly his red face paled to a sickly white.

“I’m going to need to buy bigger pants.”

“Why, Dan?”

“To contain all my shit.”

5.

Ron’s all night garage was a franchise of one of the major oil companies. However, its owner Ron had gone to some trouble to disguise the fact. Their name was on the pump, what else did they want? he reasoned.

Everything inside the shop was Ron’s responsibility, including a sign with a picture of a CCTV camera on it that read, “Big Ron is watching you.” There was no detectable CCTV camera anywhere in the shop.

Milton glanced outside at the darkness. He had been trying unsuccessfully to reach Gary on the phone since the morning and had made a special trip to catch him at work. The shop appeared empty and if it were not for the slight sound of snoring, Milton would have left.

He walked up to the counter and looked down at his friend Gary who was lying stretched out on the dirty carpet; his hands forming a makeshift pillow.

“Gary, Gary.”

Milton almost whispered at first, and then he got louder. When Gary still did not wake up, he became frustrated and abruptly banged the counter.

Gary athletically found his feet and managed to arrange his startled look of horror into one of keen alertness.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“None other. Having a nap?”

“Just trying to get a tiny bit of rest before hungry people flood out of the pub and realise that they don’t have anything edible in their fridges.”

“This village needs a chippy.”

“It would make my job easier.”

“It’s a shame we can’t pay you to work at *Occultivated*.”

“Calling it work might be an overstatement. However, if you sold some Romance or Horror books people might nip in once in a while.”

Milton shook his head in passive dismissal.

“It’s a matter of purity for me - even if the idea is terrible its honesty makes it worthwhile. You understand that, right?”

“Only too well I’m afraid. You could probably throw in a few horror books without overly diluting the shop concept though. It might even help shift some of your other stuff.”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” Milton promised. “We’re not failing shop workers, Gary, we’re struggling witch hunters. That’s how I think of it - it makes me feel noble enough not to slit my wrists.”

Gary sighed.

“It is wanting to feel noble that drives people to slit their wrists. When I feel bad about my job, I just steal a bunch of stuff. I don’t suppose the business owner has that option.”

“Stealing Dan’s things helps a little. Doesn’t Ron ever figure it out?”

“No, it’s water off a ducks back really, with the high preteen to teen theft ratio here. Plus, he says the losses would cost him less than the CCTV system. Karen’s onto it but she’s too worried that I know what she does on the side to mention it.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve no idea but I have the feeling its worse than robbing a few sandwiches. Help yourself to Scotch Eggs by the way, they’ll all be gone within the hour.”

“Thanks, but Roaster has me all egged out.”

Roaster was what Milton had named his chicken. Gary looked genuinely astonished.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” he mused, and then because he couldn’t think of anything better to say he asked, “So did you need anything?”

“Well, just a chat really. We’ve had some important developments today.”

“Sounds interesting, come round the back I’ll make you a cuppa.”

Gary let Milton through the lift up flap that allowed access to the till, then through the door marked “Staff Only.” He put the kettle on and once they both had fresh mugs of tea, Milton began to tell Gary about Dan’s death curse.

“So how can you be sure it is exactly two months?”

“The diary,” said Milton, “It was almost entirely blank except for a few entries. Things Dan had been up to, making the film for instance, his birthday, a few other little things. Anyway, on exactly September the Seventh it declares - The last day of your life.”

“That’s it?”

“No, it wouldn’t be so bad if it was but the bloody thing sets out the whole decomposition process in detail right up until February of next year. Tiny handwriting.”

“How’s Dan taking it?”

Milton simply raised one eyebrow. Gary blew air through his pursed lips.

“There has to be something we can do to stop it.”

“Well, we can either give it to someone else and become murderers. Or, we can find Ruth Bellows and shove the runes right up her decrepit arse.”

“OK, and we’ve been unsuccessfully searching for Ruth for how long? Shit Milton, this is serious stuff.”

“Yes, this brings me onto the next order of business.”

“Which is?”

“There’s a new sign up for the Hunt.”

Gary stared at Milton in intense disbelief.

“Who is he?”

“She.”

Gary’s look of intense belief morphed into a look of amused concern.

“Who is she?”

“Well, we were so caught up in everything, not to mention completely taken by surprise that I’ve completely forgotten her name. Anyway, she’s not bad looking, not bad looking at all.”

“OK, do you think this nameless good looking woman will be able to help us find Ruth?”

“I don’t know, we’re going to interview her at the meeting tomorrow. For some reason I get the impression that she knows what she’s doing but I can’t tell you why exactly.”

“Well, let’s hope so, because it’s obvious that we haven’t got the first fucking clue.”

“It’s not hopeless yet.”

“Shit man, fucking everything’s going wrong!”

“There’s time.”

“Just two months – it’s nothing.”

“Please don’t talk that way in front of Dan. I’m trying to stay positive.”

“Alright, alright, we’ll just have to fix it, one way or the other.”

“Now you’re talking sense, can I count on you to be there tomorrow night?”

“Of course you can.”

As the two of them walked back out towards the counter, they realized that the garage was now filled with people, mostly aged between sixteen and twenty-four. Some of them put the things they had stolen back on the shelves, acting on impulse like startled deer. Most of them did not.

6.

The night was giving way to the cold awareness that it was becoming the morning. Milton was not thrilled to be seeing it from that end of the day. However, no matter how he tried he had not been able to stop Dan from talking to him.

When he had agreed to a walk at 4 AM, Milton had thought Dan meant briskly around the block. Three miles of road down and despondency was racing towards him at the same pace that Dan was racing towards wherever the hell he was going.

“Look at this, good country air, that’s what it needs.”

“More caffeine is what it needs,” muttered Milton.

“Natural adrenaline, far more potent.”

“Not to sound immature, but are we nearly there yet?”

“We’re heading for the woods.”

Milton was almost jogging to keep up with Dan’s brisk strides.

“I’m going to tell her. She’s not going to scare me.”

“Jesus Christ, mate - is this what we’re out here for.”

Dan looked at Milton seriously but he did not slow his pace:

“Humour me for the next two months and I’ll never bother you again.”

Milton jogged a couple of steps to catch up.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Dan trotted briskly onwards, red faced and filled with purpose. His beard cut through the air like the prow of a tall ship.

“So I’ve been thinking about this Carrie.”

“Who?”

“The mystery girl who just suddenly pops up minutes after I receive a death incantation.”

“How can I guess where this is going?”

Dan stopped and turned his bulk to block Milton’s progress.

“I’m not being paranoid; you have to admit it is a bit of a coincidence. Turning up out of the blue and quoting some Yellow Pages ad that’s not been in the book for four years.”

“It’s online.”

“What?”

“The advert: Apparently Gary arranged it, it renews on his credit card every year.

“It changes nothing, it is still a coincidence. Too much of a coincidence; like finding a turd in your vomit. How long have we been doing this?”

“Since you were discharged.”

“Exactly how many years ago?”

“About twenty?”

“Twenty five,” said Dan. “Next month.”

“Are you sure? It doesn’t seem that long.”

“I’m still using the same papers for my disability allowance.”

“You’d have thought it would have cleared up by now.”

“Fuck off Milt, it pays the bills. Anyway, in all that time, how much actual interest have we had in the hunt?”

Dan began striding forwards once again.

“Excluding investigatory interest? There was Gary.”

“Who performed his first mission with us thirteen years ago? And after Gary was there any interest?”

“Not much.”

“None at all,” barked Dan: “None ‘a’ fucking tall.”

Milton shrugged; he didn’t have time to interject vocally.

“So, after getting one volunteer in twenty five years, our second suddenly shows up the exact day I’m cursed. Do you see my point here?”

“I take your point but I refute its validity.”

“I don’t know how you can talk like that at this time of the night.”

“What? Saying refute? Anyway, it’s the middle of the morning.”

“There’s a fine line between the two,” argued Dan. “This is evening to shift workers like Gary. Anyway, you were saying?”

“Oh yeah, you remember that I dropped your runic script.”

“I will never forget: *Et tu* butter-fingers.”

“Well, if she’d sent it, she wouldn’t have caught it would she?”

“That remains to be seen. Maybe she sent it in an effort to gain our trust. That’s why she sent it to me, because I’m the leader.”

Milton couldn’t be bothered arguing. They kept on walking until they reached a small side road that wound into the thick woodland.

“Come on down here,” Dan said.

Dan looked down at Milton from the top of a tree.

“The Taoists believe that the point of change between days is the point at which nature’s energy is at its strongest.”

Dan’s ruddy complexion glowed to match the rising sun. Milton met his enthusiasm with contempt:

“Apparently, they weren’t talking about my energy when they said that.”

Dan ignored him.

“You’ll excuse what I’m about to do.”

Dan struggled to get his leg on to a higher branch; he kept lifting his knee until he resembled a dog that couldn’t find a lamppost.

“Do you need a hand?”

Milton’s shout was in vain, the tree shuddered under Dan’s bulk, and he reached the highest point of it. Dan opened his mouth and began to below:

“Hecatus in silva non somnum. Hecatus in silva non somnum. Hecatus in silva non somnum!”

And then for good measure, he added.

“Fuck you Ruthy! Fuck you Ruthy!”

Milton peered up at him.

“Feel better now?”

“Once you’ve helped me down I will.”

Dan almost fell through the branches until he was stood about half a foot above Milton.

“No sleep for the witch in the woods?”

“I think so, it’s not particularly ominous but my Latin is crap.”

“Compared to your climbing skills it is positively masterful.”

“The climbing I can do, descent is the problem.”

“It is still climbing whether you’re going up or down. Just jump, you’re scheduled to die in two months anyway.”

Dan jumped, directly at Milton.

7.

Gary groaned as he approached Discount News Newsagents. The sight of Saul and Paul was never a welcome one. He could hear them whispering to each other as he approached.

“Are you going to do it?” Saul hissed.

“You do it.”

“You said you’d do it. You have to do it - I’m not asking.”

“Alright then.”

As he got closer, the two of them went very quiet and sullenly stared at him. He deliberately fixed his gaze on the shop door. As he passed them, Paul shouted:

“Hey!”

Gary turned to look at Paul. He recognised a once popular Phil Collins tune as Paul sang at him.

“He’s a kiwi lover.”

The two brothers burst into hysterical fits of laughter. Gary stared at them and waited for them to calm down.

“Did you stay up all night thinking of that?”

“He stayed up all night banging your mum.”

“Well, that makes a change from him banging yours.”

The two brothers stuttered to find a retort. Gary entered the shop. Alison smiled as he entered, though she was stood with her friend Tajel so he supposed it could just have been for effect. He decided to push his luck.

“Hey honey.”

“Hey babes,” said Tajel.

“Tajel, can you tell your boyfriend out there to think up some new insults?”

“Eugh, no...”

“Yes he is, that’s why he always puts on that ridiculous hat before he comes in to the shop - so you won’t find out he’s a skinhead.”

“What was it today?”

“Oh the usual 'kiwi lover' but with a musical twist - sounds of the eighties. Do they ever go away?”

“No.”

“I brought you some lunch, which I realise is redundant as you work in a convenient mini-market but I brought it anyway.”

Gary handed Alison a small bag.

“Sushi. Did you make this?”

“I may be a man of limited talent, but I can follow basic recipe directions.”

Alison actually smiled. It made Gary nervous.

“Thank you, I’m looking forward to that.”

“It’s a bit of a scam really. I’m trying to butter you up.”

“You know I’ve found that scams work best when you don’t tell the victim what they are,” Tajel observed.

“Ah, not when they’re as horribly transparent as mine are. You just have to blab away and hope the victim finds the procedure to be impishly charming.”

“You, impish?”

“In respect to my charm.”

Alison shook her head.

“Considering that it’s the most obvious double bluff in history it does work surprisingly well. The more you think about how stupid it is the funnier it becomes.”

“And that is the true essence and beauty of the scam. Even my talking about it now is just improving its effectiveness.”

”Now hang on, that depends on what I’m being buttered up for.”

“The Hunt called a meeting tonight; I really have to be there.”

“You told me that when you got back from work this morning.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, until you woke me to tell me that.”

Gary shrugged.

“Fair enough, just trying to keep the peace.”

“Well, it’s not a problem, but can you do me one favour?”

Gary’s nerves kicked up a notch.

“Probably.”

“Be in the house at three o’clock.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

“I’m very suspicious of surprises.

“Trust me, it’s a nice surprise.”

10.

Gary had never felt quite so uncomfortable on his own couch. Mrs. Fuller was a heavysset woman who had taken him for English Literature at secondary school. Back then, she had always worn rather low-cut tops that exposed her prodigious cleavage. She was wearing a low-cut top. Remembering some of the thoughts that he had had about the cleavage was not the only reason that Gary was uncomfortable. He was out of his element and faced with an old school teacher, he instinctively felt as though he were in trouble for something.

“I suppose Alison told you why she invited me here?” Mrs. Fuller asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. I didn’t even know you knew her.”

“Everyone knows Alison: from the mini-market.”

“Yes, I suppose they do.”

“So anyway, she and I were chatting and your name came up. Of course I remembered teaching you and asked what you were up to?”

“And, of course she told you?”

“Well, she told me you were working at the garage but I’ve never seen you there.”

“I mostly work nights.”

“Anyway, I thought it was strange because the last I heard you were off to Winchester to study classical lit.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you left there with a decent degree.”

“Just a two-one.”

“Which from King Alfred’s, is a very decent degree.

Mrs. Fuller emphasised the word “very.”

“It’s not been much use to me. Believe it or not, being able to compare Apollonian and Dionysian qualities within the work of Aristophanes doesn’t look all that great on a CV. You don’t get many job ads that list comparison / contrast among their required skills.”

Mrs. Fuller slurped her tea and put it back on its saucer. Gary had not been aware that he owned cups with saucers. He was a bit bemused as to how Mrs. Fuller had got hold of it.

“Not many, no,” she said pointedly.

“Anyway, it did teach me one thing that I thought was important.”

“What was that?”

“That I hate classical literature. I don’t read at all anymore. I’m with Larkin - books are a load of crap.”

“It is interesting that you quote a poem to say that.”

“It would be hard to describe the reading experience without mentioning books. Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. How can I help you, Mrs. Fuller?”

“Well actually, I was hoping I might be able to help you.”

Gary smiled broadly and sarcastically

“I wasn’t aware that I needed any help.”

Mrs. Fuller smiled and leaned forward a little. Gary pulled his eyes up and hope she had not noticed them wandering.

“Everyone needs help. And I suppose you would be helping me out too. Did you know that I was promoted to the head of the English department?”

“Congratulations.”

“Anyway, we need someone two days a week to teach A-level Lit and I thought you might be a good choice. Hettford isn’t brimming with graduates you know.”

“Alison’s a graduate and Mr. Patel has a triple Masters.”

“Yes, but you’re really ideal for the job. It would only be two days a week but I dare say it pays better than the all night garage does.”

“It would have to actively try not to.”

“And we could enrol you on a teacher training course. Do you think you’d be interested?”

“Which authors?”

“Chaucer, I’m afraid, Marlowe, Plath and appropriately enough Larkin.”

“Can I teach the filthy stuff?”

“As long as it’s in the book. They’ll all be over sixteen anyway.”

“Let me think about it. When do you need to know by?”

“Next Tuesday. I know it would make Alison very happy with you.

“Yes, you get that impression don’t you?”

“A little.”

“Tell me again how the subject of this came up.”

11.

Milton looked at his empty shop and then down at his telephone. He sighed in self-reproach.

“I can’t believe I’m actually doing this.”

He picked up the phone and dialled a number:

“Hello, warehouse. I’ll hold.”

Milton tapped his fingers in time to a bad rendering of one of his favourite pieces of music.

“Hello, yes, it’s no problem - it’s quite interesting to hear Bach’s greats reduced to two octaves. Anyway, I wanted to place an order for some books. Account Number 22108.”

The man at the other end of the line gave Milton his consent to the suggestion.

“Ok! I’m going to need all current material from the following authors:

Brown, Dan

King, Stephen

Koontz, Dean

and...”

Milton bit his lip so hard that it drew blood.

“*Rowling, J.K.*”

Milton wiped his brow and continued.

“Just two copies of each book for now. King has how many? Alright, just send me the five best selling of his, and the same for Koontz.”

The man at the other end of the line responded to the list with a question. Milton’s whole body sagged as he responded.

“Yes, all of the Rowling books.”

The man asked Milton an additional question to which Milton responded as follows:

“Twilight? We still have some dignity, thank you.”

He slammed the phone down.

11.

Alison checked her mobile phone; there was no answer to the text she had sent to Gary asking how things went with Mrs. Fuller.

Gary did own a mobile phone but he almost never charged it. On the big list of frustrating things about Gary, that was Alison’s number seven.

Discount News didn’t close until after six and the sky was beginning to darken to dusk. Alison turned a corner and as she did so, she heard a whistling sound.

The tune of the whistle was family but its tempo had been slowed. “Dah, dum, dah, dum, dah, dum, dah, dum, daddity dum, daddity dum.” It was the music to Laurel and Hardy.

It got quicker and increased in volume. Whoever was whistling it was getting closer. “Dah, dum, dah, dum, dah, dum, dah, dum, daddity dum, daddity dum. Dee dum.”

Alison looked behind her but there was nobody there. She turned a second corner and the noise continued, now at full tempo and full volume.

Alison jogged the last hundred yards to her house. As she arrived at the front door, she noticed a large stuffed kiwi bird hanging from a noose.

Alison was not impressed. She couldn't see Saul and Paul but she knew they were around somewhere.

She shouted so that everyone could hear:

“Arseholes!”

She took a breath, composed herself, and remembered her next point of business.

Gary was sat in the armchair of their front room. He did not look up as she entered. He was skimming through a paperback that he looked very cross with.

“You not at your club yet?”

“No, I'm not at my club.”

Gary emphasised the word club by making inverted comma signs with his fingers.

“Shouldn't you be at your club?”

“The meeting is not until eight.”

“What are you reading?”

Gary looked up from the book, his eyes were smouldering.

“Oh, I was just browsing through some Chaucer.”

“Seriously?”

“More seriously than anyone else would.”

“Did you speak to Jean, then?”

“Well, I spoke to Mrs. Fuller, my secondary school teacher... Who, mysteriously seems to know everything about my life in every single detail.”

“So you’re reading up on Chaucer, great.”

“I am reading up on Chaucer.”

Gary waved the book at her.

“This is *Troilus and Criseyde* by the way,

Alison nodded.

“I was hoping to see if Chaucer had any more eloquent way of describing a treacherous whore, other than simply - treacherous whore.”

Alison tilted her head to one side and smiled.

“And does he?”

Gary put the book down.

“No, nothing so interesting.”

Alison took her coat off and sat down on the sofa.

“Are you pissed off at me or something?”

“I don’t like the whole world knowing my business.”

“What does it matter? You never see the world anyway.”

“They come in to the garage and they want to talk.”

“Is this why you called me a treacherous whore? Because I told an old school teacher what you were up to?”

“You’re lucky I didn’t call you worse.”

“What did you think about the job?”

“It pays nearly four times what I get at the garage.”

“So are you going to take it?”

Gary hummed.

“If I do I won’t be able go with you to Leeds.”

“You don’t want to come anyway, at least this way you could afford to visit.”

“I never said I didn’t want to come. And, I certainly never said I was going to visit.”

Alison let herself deflate; she had just had enough for the day. She stretched out on the sofa and but her hands behind her head.

“Look, let’s not argue about it now. I’ve had such a terrible day that I’m even prepared to let that treacherous whore comment pass without remark to your own behaviour.”

“What happened?”

“I was followed home by Saul and Paul. I know they’re harmless but for a while I thought they might have been someone scary and I was actually very scared.”

“What did they do?”

“They were creeping around behind me and they’d hung up a giant stuffed kiwi from a tree.”

“It’s getting ridiculous; tomorrow I’m paying them a visit.”

“Don’t do anything that will get you arrested.”

“Do you need me to stay in tonight?”

“No you go - I’m sure I’ll be fine all alone by myself. So long as no-one breaks in.”

“OK.”

“Oh, ok. What time will you be back?”

“Should be over by nine.”

“I guess I’ll see you then.”

Gary stood up and sat back down again.

“I’ve got nearly an hour before it starts,” he stated.

“Good, ‘because I need a cuddle.”

Gary patted his lap.

“Come on then.”

Alison shook her head.

“Upstairs,” she said.

12.

Milton had unfolded a camping table into the middle of *Occultivated*. He had put a table cloth over it to make it look more official. It was a nice one with red and white checks on it. On the table sat four glasses of red wine. Milton was swilling his apprehensively and staring at Dan in irritation.

“Can we start?” Milton asked.

“Wait until Gary gets here.”

Milton gestured to their guest, who was leaning back quite comfortably but whose eyes were darting around the room as if they could take in the title of every book there.

“Poor Carrie has been waiting here for nearly half an hour.”

“The rules state quite clearly - No meeting may be begun until all the members are present.”

“Yes,” argued Milton, “but when we wrote those rules there was only us.

“Gary will be here.”

Milton glanced at Carrie apologetically.

“Gary’s having a hard time of things at the moment.”

“Gary’s having a hard time?” Dan marvelled.

“I’m just saying - we can get through all of the introductory stuff without him. You don’t mind waiting for the important stuff, do you, Carrie?”

“No, you go ahead - I’ve got all night just to sit around. I’m not even joking.”

Milton waved his hand to emphasise Carrie’s point.

“Can we start?”

Dan began:

“Very well. There is not much actually that you need to know that can be told to you. It is the nature of our occupation that experience teaches more than books or teachers. That is the first of three vital things that you should know.

“The second thing is that if you choose to join with us and eventually go with us on a hunt that anything could happen. Anything at all.

“I believe we have some information on the irregularity of experience in your starter pack.”

Dan pointed to the huge stack of paper he had given to Carrie when she had first walked into the room.

“You can look through it in your own time at home.”

Milton looked embarrassed:

“A lot of it you can just skim over,” he told her.

“It’s all important, though.”

Dan had a ring of finality when he spoke.

“OK,” agreed Carrie.

“Good,” said Dan, “any questions?”

“What was the third thing that I had to know?”

“That witches do exist and we kill them whenever we can.”

“Now that I can remember.”

Carrie finished her drink and poured another.

“You had any experience with witches?” Dan asked her.

“A little.”

“So what can you tell us?” Milton’s words came out faster than he wanted them to. He wished that he could stop looking at Carrie without it being impolite.

“Well, for a start, someone’s cast the runes on you,” she told Milton.

“Not on me, on Dan. How do you know that?”

“It happened to someone I know. Except, there was no one around to catch the script that time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s OK; sometimes these things can’t be helped.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to go in to a lot of detail. But let’s just say I learned a lot about witches very quickly; mostly how to find them and how to kill them.”

Milton’s curiosity got the better of him and he regretted the words the moment they left his mouth:

“Did you stop it?”

For a second, Carrie’s face darkened. Then it brightened up again and she spoke:
“No. I had thought it was just a load of poo until, well you know.”

Dan looked horrified. He tried to compose himself.

“Ah, well, this is our first time so anything that you know that you think might be helpful... I’d appreciate it.”

“Well, first of all, which one of you had the script last?”

“I put it in the safe.”

“The spell is a summoning one. It goes to the last person who had the script.”

Dan’s face lit up.

“You mean?”

“It passed on to Milton.”

Dan tried simultaneously to pat Milton sympathetically on the shoulder and to suppress his own broadening grin:

“At least we have a while to get it sorted.”

“Is there no way to cancel it?”

Carrie’s eyes met Milton; he wasn’t sure if he was breathless about learning that he was going to die or just because he liked her eyes. They were hazel.

“Pass it back, or pass it on,” she told him.

“Nice,” Milton sighed.

“Can you mail it?”

Dan was still plotting to pass it on to a government bureaucrat.

“It has to be hand to hand. We’ll work it out though, how long is it?”

“Two months.”

“You’ll be alright. We’ll just find the witch.”

Dan tried to put a positive spin on things:

“At least we got out to curse her back this morning, eh?”

“I looked up your Latin you were yelling - the witch in the wood doesn’t sleep.”

“I also yelled fuck you. Come on look on the bright side - at least one of us will survive.”

Milton stared his best friend hard in the face.

“If I die I’m willing you my shop and they’ll cut off your benefits.”

“Steady on, mate.”

Carrie giggled; her voice lilted the dust off the bookshelves.

“Mad one, you two are nuts.”

“You still want to join?”

“Defo, where do I sign?”

Dan put aside his glee for a moment and returned to being needlessly officious:

“It’s all in your starter pack just read through, the paper’s in there somewhere. Oh, and we’ll have to test you.”

“What for?”

“To make sure you’re not a witch.”

Milton panicked:

“Just safety reasons, it’s routine.”

“You’re not going to tie me to a chair and throw me in a river are you?”

“God, no!” Milton told her.

“It’s harmless,” said Dan, “but we can’t tell you in advance or it won’t work. If you’re up for joining we’ll have it all prepared next time you’re here.”

“OK, but your test will be my test to. If it’s too weird I’m going back to hunting alone.”

Milton smiled reassuringly:

“It’s easy - you’ll be fine.”

14.

Gary lay snoozing in bed; Alison placed a steaming mug of tea next to the clock on the bedside table. It was half past eight.

Alison gently shook Gary’s arm.

“I brought you tea, Gary. Wake up. You’re going to be late for your club.”

Gary rolled over, Alison shook him vigorously.

“Wake up. It’s time for your club.”

She continued to shake him.

“Hello Gary, it’s time for your club.”

Gary mumbled: he was obviously still asleep.

“It’s intransient,” he told her.

“What?”

“It is.”

“What’s intransient?”

“Chronology. It doesn’t work on a physical basis.”

Alison smiled.

“You’re still asleep aren’t you?”

“I..”

The end of Gary’s sentence was incoherent.

“What’s five plus ten?”

“A series of numbers, dichotomy.”

Alison sighed.

“Shall I phone them and say you’re not coming.”

Gary’s mumbling became insistent:

“Tell them it is intransient. You have to.”

“If you insist.”

“Tell them – the post man, they’re idiots.”

Alison tucked Gary into the covers.

“You go back to sleep.”

Never having been awake, Gary had no trouble with the request. Alison picked up the phone and dialled.

“Hello. Gary can’t come I’m afraid, he’s too sick.”

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Sixteen: The New Wave

‘Okay,’ said Sean. He grabbed an assault rifle from the desk, checked its magazine, and brandished it. ‘Where do you want us?’

Will grabbed a gun. The one he’d been using since he’d been in Central London must have an empty magazine by now. Sean’s automatic action made him realise that although a crack shot, he was something of an amateur in these matters. Perhaps he should have played *Call of Duty* more often.

Mercer grabbed another gun, checked the ammo. He looked up at Will. The sirens were getting closer.

‘Lad asked you a question, Will,’ he said gruffly.

Will forced himself into action.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Hunt, and you two,’ he indicated the Towers, ‘get your own guns. Plenty to choose from. Make sure they’ve got as full magazines as possible. Sean, you seem to know something about this kind of thing. Take Mr and Mrs Towers across the way. Find cover behind the nearest house. We’ll ambush the police as soon as they reach the gate. Get them in a crossfire.’ He looked ruefully round the lodge, littered with shattered glass from the broken windows, its walls riddled with bullets. ‘Hunt, Mercer, we’re going to withdraw to the cover of the back of this building. Sean, you got that? A crossfire.’

Sean sketched a salute. ‘Yessir,’ he said eagerly. Gingerly, Malory and her husband picked up rifles from the desk and followed Sean out into the open.

Will, Mercer, and Hunt, now armed, withdrew behind the lodge while Sean and the Towers hurried across the roadway and positioned themselves behind the house closest to the security gates. Hunt inspected the security guard’s corpse with a sickly cast to his face.

Mercer checked his ammunition again. Not looking at Will, he said:

‘D’you think they’ll be any good?’

Will was looking at Hunt, who held his rifle like a husband who’d been given his wife’s handbag to hold while she tried on some shoes.

‘Not like that,’ he said. ‘Hold it up. That’s right. When the police come, hold it to your shoulder, and squeeze the trigger. No, don’t shoot from the hip. There’ll be a recoil. You’ll need to keep yourself steady or you’ll be knocked flat.’

He glanced at Mercer. ‘What else can we do?’

Mercer stiffened. They could hear the sound of an engine from down the street. ‘You know what I think,’ he said absently.

Before Will could reply, a police riot van burst into sight, driving recklessly towards the gates. It smashed straight through them, screeching to a halt in the roadway just inside the security village. Out leapt figures in flak-jackets and wearing gas masks. Will heard a familiar screeching sound and a *whumph!* and suddenly choking yellow gas was billowing towards them.

Screaming with fear, Hunt leapt from cover and started firing from the hip. As Will had predicted, he was on his back in seconds.

Will crouched down by the corner of the lodge and squinted out into the pale yellow fogbank. Dark figures were dimly visible. He squeezed off a couple of shots. Some of the figures swam out of sight. Then the tear gas reached them, and he fell back, coughing and spluttering.

He felt Mercer’s strong hands seize him and drag him back. His heels scraped along the tarmac. Mercer flung him down. Blinking back tears, feeling nauseous though he’d got no more than a whiff of the gas, he struggled up.

They were in the front garden of one of the houses. Up ahead were the lodge and the gates, the riot van and the gas. Flak-jacketed figures stalked from the yellow fog like stormtroopers awaiting Darth Vader.

Gunfire opened up from the building across the way. Will saw it was Sean and the Towers, firing from behind the garage. Two riot police were cut down. More police rushed up, guns at the ready.

Then a figure rose from the yellow fog near the lodge and started firing at them maniacally, loosing off shots as if blind. Will saw that it was Hunt. More police fell before they swung round and opened fire. Hunt fell, vanishing into the fog

‘Shit,’ said Will savagely. He lifted his own rifle and, joined by Mercer, began shooting.

The police ducked into cover behind the lodge, on the far side from Will’s previous position. That and the drifting tear gas made getting a bead on them difficult, while to the police, Will and his companions were in plain sight. Bullets spanged off the brickwork in both their locations; the billowing clouds of brick dust soon formed as impenetrable a barrier to vision as the slowly dissipating tear gas.

Then the police tried a rush. Will and Mercer hailed them with bullets, as did Sean and the Towers couple. Two policemen fell, but the rest came on, protected from the gunfire by their flak-jackets. They were heading for Sean’s position.

Will leapt out. 'Fall back! Fall back!' he shouted. He saw Sean turn in his direction. 'To me!' he added, 'To me!'

He saw Sean shake Malory Towers, and point in his direction. Then Sean covered them while they sprinted across the roadway.

They flung themselves into cover beside Will and Mercer. Malory's eyes were bright and feverish, while her husband seemed rejuvenated.

Will and Mercer gave Sean covering fire as the youth pelted across the tarmac to join them. A stray shot whistled straight past his head but he didn't seem to notice it. He flung himself across the herbaceous border and joined them in the cover of the house. The Towers couple were both firing at the advancing police who were ducking into cover in their previous position. Will helped Sean to his feet. The youth's pasty face was bright.

'*Call of Duty* is pants compared with this!' he said. Will saw blood seeping from his scalp. He thought he ought to mention it but apparently, Sean hadn't noticed. What he didn't know about couldn't hurt him, Will thought.

He pointed towards the advancing police.

'Get the bastards!' he shouted, and opened fire.

For a second, he saw a pale face peering down from the first floor window of the house where the police were entrenched. Was it the girl? It vanished again, and Will concentrated on the fire fight.

Mercer emptied his magazine. He cursed, flung down the gun.

'What now?' he demanded.

'Looks like you're out of the fight,' Will panted.

'Time to fall back,' Mercer said, shouting over the roar of the Towers' guns. The noise was deafening, reminding Will of the time Caroline had persuaded him to go and see Motorhead, and he'd been deaf for days.

Will shrugged, indicating the houses and the turning circle.

'Fall back where? We're running out of places to run.'

Sean appeared, still seemingly unaware of the crimson flood of blood that slicked his brow.

'Can't we take the fight to them?' he demanded.

Will wanted to laugh. It was all getting too much like playing war at junior school.

‘There are more of them than us, and they’ve got flak-jackets.’

‘Give me that gun, if you’re not going to use it,’ Mercer demanded, trying to grab the weapon from Sean. Sean clung on to it, snarling.

‘Mercer, let go!’ Will barked. ‘Sean, get shooting.’

To his surprise, they both grudgingly did what he told them.

‘Sorry, mate,’ Mercer said humbly.

Will marvelled at the man’s humility. So this was what leadership was like. He’d never responsible for so many in his life, not even in the shop.

‘I’d better get back to the fight myself,’ he said. ‘Meanwhile, Mercer, you try to work out a way to get us out of this place. You’re right, we can’t stay here.’

‘What about the girl?’

‘It’s a bit too late to worry about her,’ Will said savagely, and went back to the corner.

The police seemed to be trying a pincer movement. Now the tear gas had almost cleared, he could see that two or three were dug in further up the cul-de-sac, while another group was crawling through the back garden of a nearby house. Sean and the Towers hadn’t noticed them. Will squeezed off a burst at them, hitting one, who collapsed into an ornamental pond while the rest flung themselves into the negligible cover of the shrubbery.

They started shooting. Will ducked back. The bricks exploded around him. policemen were shooting from another direction. Shit, they were starting to circle round! Will had hoped to get the bastards in crossfire, but now they were turning the tables.

He shouted in Sean’s ear, ‘Cover me! We’re falling back again.’

Sean glared at him through a mask of blood. He bared his white teeth.

‘Yessir,’ he snapped.

Will shouted at Malory.

‘You and your husband, go to Mercer. Tell him we’re moving back. Sean and I’ll cover you.’

Malory nodded tightly. She grabbed her husband by the shoulder and steered him. They vanished round the corner while Will fired a rapid burst at the nearest group of police.

‘Go on, sir!’ Sean shouted. ‘I’ll cover you!’

Will looked at the youth, troubled, then nodded. He lowered his gun and sprinted after the others.

‘Where’s Sean?’ Mercer asked.

Will panted. ‘Behind me.’ He looked over his shoulder. No sign of the lad. He peered round the corner and saw the police streaming across the roadway towards him. Sean’s body lay in the gutter, a red ruin where its head had been.

His mouth dry, his eyes wet with unshed tears for someone he’d hardly known, Will ran towards the others.

‘Head for the fence!’ he shouted. ‘Mercer, take Malory’s gun and cover us, then join us when we get to the far houses.’

Mercer nodded tightly and took the woman’s gun. ‘What about Sean?’

Will shook his head. ‘He’s not coming with us,’ he choked.

He led the middle aged couple at a run down the cul-de-sac, with the chatter of the guns ringing in his ears. They got into cover beside the last house in the turning circle and looked back.

Mercer came haring after them. From here, Will could see the entire security village, as far as the lodge and the gates, to one side of which the battered riot van had been parked. He was heartened to see that they had thinned the numbers of police considerably, though Hunt and Sean both lay in the street in pools of blood. Five or six police in flak-jackets pursued Mercer. One of them was limping – the sergeant? Will opened fire, but his gun sputtered and died. He’d emptied the magazine. Now they only had Mr Towers’ gun and the one Mercer had taken from his wife.

At least the police were fewer in numbers. He turned to Towers. ‘Cover Mercer!’ he shouted. The man started as if from a doze, levelled his gun, and opened fire. Will’s heart sank as he heard, over the stutter of Towers’ gun, the wailing of more police sirens.

More police were coming. And they had their backs to the wall. In fact, to a security fence topped with razor-wire.

SKULLERY by Nathan Rowark

The creep that crept below the hall, inside the sewer on urine's squall
Stalks the site it once had fell, strolls the trail of those unwell.
Digs a trench beneath the life of lives above that tortured rife;
A Shadowed soul that under sits this lighter lineage that fits.

In the larder, soiled goods, like those once stolen from the woods.
Birds a family sought to borrow, covered by a store hands sorrow.
Never forgot, the ingredients blended, to now avenge a time quick ended.
Cooks with cauldron in the kitchen, adds a spice for sour depiction.

They never had their conscience pricked, looking to this right arm kicked.
Ever faithful put to test when hiding crime at their behest;
Once saved the face of family line to end upon a thief trees twine.
Now fluffs the pillows right to keep until guilty lose their flight for sleep.

They wonder on mis-fortunes rot, why an echo sounds around this plot.
Negative, a minus hurt now floods this future co-ordinate.
Fleeing from a house ill soaked, a well of blood in throat he choked;
Was all this presence had to float, such twisted heart to drown their boat.

He follows coffins just to savour the pain avenged to win their favour;
No longer scapegoat laugh of many, but ferryman to place their penny.
Chooses heads from older tales to reside with him amongst the wails;
Companions struck by sudden death and angered so as not to rest.

The house now moans with lives he took, woman and child now forced to cook.
Insidious dish waits for she that moves to land beneath his tree.
Child eyes to soon branch hang, that branch held fast as old friend swang.
The line to come he'd once defend; now scullery shall prove to end.

ENVIRONMENTALLY UNFRIENDLY by John Jennings

The landlady looked down at the pile of dust by the wall socket and sighed. "They never learn."

Bill arrived at the little cottage in the countryside. "Ah, this is the life," he thought. Bill was a devoted nature lover. He ate the right food, used eco energy sources, and grew a little vegetable patch in his suburban garden. He reached for the door to press a doorbell, but there wasn't one. He smiled, knocked a few times and an old woman in an apron answered.

"You must be Bill," she said, and let him in.

As she showed him around the cottage, Bill noticed a lot of appliances were on standby mode and plugged in.

"You know," he said, "You should turn off and plug out those appliances when you aren't using them."

"No, we don't plug out anything. 'Tis bad luck round these parts."

"What?" laughed Bill. "Do you...."

But before he could finish talking, she growled, "And, I don't advise you to be messing with me plugs."

"Ok, Ok," sulked Bill as he went into his room.

Bill wanted to see where the cottage got its electricity. He searched around the garden for a while, and found a cable attached to the house. He decided to follow it. He walked until he arrived at a rundown cemetery. "The cable seems to stop here," he noted. Confused, he went back to the cottage.

It was dark when he arrived back, so Bill went straight to his room. During the night, Bill stared at the wall socket in his room with both a television and lamp plugged into it.

"...don't advise you" said Bill, quietly mimicking the landlady's voice. He reached out to unplug the television.

Suddenly the door swung open. "Don't do it," yelled the landlady. Bill raised both hands in surrender and returned to his bed.

Later that night Bill came up with a plan. He would leave the house early in the morning, before the landlady woke, and spend a few extra days with nature. Of course, he planned to take out every plug in the house before leaving.

6 a.m. Bill jumped up, already dressed, strapped on his backpack and began to leave. "Oh, yeah," he thought, reached down and unplugged the television. He then reached over to unplug the lamp. Suddenly, a stream of long black hair sprung out from the holes in the wall socket, grabbed Bill, and sucked him into the socket holes. Almost as soon as he vanished, a cloud of dust flew out of the socket onto the floor.

The landlady entered his room and noticed the dust. She quickly removed a cross from a chain around her neck and held it up to the wall socket. She plugged the television back in and hoovered up the dust from the floor.

She then collected Bill's backpack and dumped it in the barn with the belongings of everyone else who disappeared into the wall sockets.

PALE TAMORA by Obsidian M Tesla

In thy cool shadow I am truly blessed,
My dark oasis, answer to a prayer
Unsaid. To love, honour and cherish are
But hollow words, dried up hearts and empty
Shells... put love to thy ear and listen hard...
You'll hear no sea... honour and cherish will
But follow in Love's footsteps. Deep, bloody line
Footprints stain the sand. No foaming tide can
Wash their marks from the eye. So it is with
Others, narrow is the sphere of their world.
'Tis not so with thee, my Pale Tamora.
Blackest lips, thy soothing kiss breathes new life
Within my soul. No words or verse compare,
Our union sealed beyond a poet's trade.

FEARFUL SYMMETRY by James Rhodes

"It's easy," said Jeremy, "just go in and muck it out like you did the elephants."

That morning Kev had started work at the Birkenhead Park Wild Life Enclosure and his temp agency had made him watch an old video cassette entitled *Animals and You - Stay Safe at the Zoo*. It was twenty minutes long and the scenario that Kev was about to walk into had not been touched on (not even briefly) by it.

"But there's a tiger in there," Kev protested.

Jeremy adjusted his navy blue peaked cap so that the legend “supervisor,” boldly displayed across it, could be seen with greater clarity.

“If you’re going to work in here, you’ll have to get used to the animals. If you can’t we’ll have to get someone else in.”

It had been two long years since Kev had lost his previous job; providing for his children on Job Seekers Allowance had cut ribbons out of man he once was. He accepted the giant scooper, bin bag and brush and walked towards the enclosure with trepidation. He passed through the enclosure gate and then the security cage, typing the code that Jeremy had written on a slip of paper into their keypads with the handle of his broom so that he didn’t drop everything he was holding. Then, he stumbled into the enclosure accompanied by the iron door clanging shut with slapstick percussion.

The tiger habitat had been laid out with a dirt track around the perimeter and a large wooded section encompassing most of the centre. The logic behind arranging the habitat in that manner was that the tiger could get a bit of privacy and do some skulking around in the wooded area. But, if the tiger wanted to eat or exercise it would have to use the dirt track which, of course, made it visible to the public. The tiger had shown his contempt for the arrangement in a series of messy piles all along the perimeter.

Kev set to work collecting the piles as he went, trying to make it around the perimeter as quickly as possible. He had heard once that tigers only ever attacked from behind so he kept his back against the cage even as he walked. As he reached the halfway point of the perimeter he realised he was at his most vulnerable, but there was still no sign of the tiger. Once as he bent down to sweep he heard the sound of movement, but it could very well have been the breeze in the foliage. He began to think that Jeremy was playing a practical joke on him and that the tiger was at the vet or somewhere else. With a sigh of relief, he reached the final corner of the cage and prepared to make the short walk back outside. He reached the door and turned to punch in the code.

There was a rustle and a thud. Kev could see thick paws at his shoulders. He could feel the tips of the tiger’s claws digging into his flesh and the hotness of its breath against his neck. Kev was pinned against the bars of the safety cage. He reached up to press the panic button on the keypad but as he did so he felt the claws dig in a little tighter into his shoulders and he heard a voice say, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The tiger’s voice was a gritty rumble but there was a tiny lilt to it that reminded Kev of an aunty of his that came from Somerset. The tiger continued to speak:

“I’m going to let you go in a moment. I’ll be right here behind you, though, so don’t getting any clever ideas.”

Kev nodded.

“When I let you go, you’re going to turn around and walk into the woods. If you so much as stumble in the wrong direction, I’ll have you.”

Kev nodded again and he tried not to look at the tiger as he walked forward into the obscurity of foliage. When he reached the centre, the tiger bade him to sit down. As he did the beast began to pace ploddingly around him in a circle.

“Now,” began the tiger. “I need to ask your opinion on something. What do you make of your boss?”

“Jeremy? He’s a proper tool.”

“Good, so you wouldn’t be adverse to seeing him hurt then?”

Kev shook his head and then asked an obvious question.

“Can all tigers talk?”

“Don’t be stupid,” came the reply, “I’m not a tiger.”

“What are you then?”

“Shut up. I’ll ask the questions here, Kevin.”

The tiger paced until it came full circle locking its eyes with Kev.

“Now listen carefully. I want to kill Jeremy. I want to rend him into tiny pieces. I need you to let me out so I can hold his neck with his teeth until he stops kicking.”

Kev nodded again.

“Why Jeremy?”

“Because he is a smarmy little prick and he waves the keys at me every time he walks past my cage.”

“He’s a knob, I’ll give you that.”

“So, are you going to let me at him or not?”

Kev shook his head seriously.

“I don’t think so,” said Kev, “I’ll lose me job.”

The tiger began pacing again, this time it quickened its pace.

“I’ll kill you,” said the tiger. “What’s worse than that?”

Kev didn’t say anything, he sat there staring silently at his feet. He was thinking about his daughter’s next birthday. Furthermore, he was thinking that if he did get mauled by a tiger on his first day of work at a zoo, the compensation package would be sizable - enough that his family would never be poor again. It was the most pleasant thought he’d had in months.

The tiger kept pacing and threatening, it took swipes at him. At first, it teased him, just grazing the top layer of skin off the back of his legs as he stood to try and run. But as it got more frustrated with him, it cut four cruel stripes into his back. He fell to the ground weeping in pain but, even as the tiger stood over him threatening to finish him off, Kev could still not be moved to agree.

“OK,” said the tiger, “just get him in here and I won’t hurt you anymore.”

Kev winced as he slowly stood.

“It won’t make a difference if you do kill Jeremy,” Kev told the tiger, “they’ll just get someone new as supervisor. They’re all like that. Knobheads. I mean, all bosses are knobheads.”

“It will make a difference to me,” purred the tiger, “it will make a huge difference.”

Jeremy was waiting by the exit, tapping his watch as Kev approached.

“What kind of time do you call this?”

Kev limped onwards. The pain was excruciating and he could taste iron at his lips. Jeremy was tapping his watch at a rate of about ten taps to each of Kev’s steps.

“Come on, there’s plenty more shit in the other animal enclosures. It’ll be piling up at the rate you’re going.”

Kev clung to the bars of the safety gate and it did not stop him from swaying. He could feel the tiger’s breath on his neck, even though he knew it to be crouched on its haunches in the undergrowth behind him. He stared at Jeremy and tried to think of a way that he could keep his boss alive without enraging the predator behind him. All he could think to say was:

“Somebody’s stolen the tiger.”

Jeremy just shook his head with smug superiority.

“Did you clean its shit up?” he asked.

Kev felt the fatigue of blood loss and panic beating him into a faint. He focused on the one thing he could remember.

“Don’t come in,” whispered Kev.

Jeremy watched for about a minute before he radioed for help. In the report that he filed on the incident Jeremy stated that Kev had ignored his advice never to enter the tiger’s cage. The job agency faxed a copy of Kev’s signature to their lawyers because it proved he had watched the training video.

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LIV.
THE BURNING OF VARNEY'S HOUSE.—A NIGHT SCENE.—POPULAR
SUPERSTITION.

The officer ceased to speak, and then the party whom he had sent round the house and grounds returned, and gained the main body orderly enough, and the sergeant went forward to make his report to his superior officer.

After the usual salutation, he waited for the inquiry to be put to him as to what he had seen.

"Well, Scott, what have you done?"

"I went round the premises, sir, according to your instructions, but saw no one either in the vicinity of the house, or in the grounds around it."

"No strangers, eh?"

"No, sir, none."

"You saw nothing at all likely to lead to any knowledge as to who it was that has caused this catastrophe?"

"No, sir."

"Have you learnt anything among the people who are the perpetrators of this fire?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, that will do, unless there is anything else that you can think of."

"Nothing further, sir, unless it is that I heard some of them say that Sir Francis Varney has perished in the flames."

"Good heavens!"

"So I heard, sir."

"That must be impossible, and yet why should it be so? Go back, Scott, and bring me some person who can give me some information upon this point."

The sergeant departed toward the people, who looked at him without any distrust, for he came single-handed, though they thought he came with the intention of learning what they knew of each other, and so stroll about with the intention of getting up accusations against them. But this was not the case, the officer didn't like the work well enough; he'd rather have been elsewhere.

At length the sergeant came to one man, whom he accosted, and said to him,—

"Do you know anything of yonder fire?"

"Yes: I do know it is a fire."

"Yes, and so do I."

"My friend," said the sergeant, "when a soldier asks a question he does not expect an uncivil answer."

"But a soldier may ask a question that may have an uncivil end to it."

"He may; but it is easy to say so."

"I do say so, then, now."

"Then I'll not trouble you anymore."

The sergeant moved on a pace or two more, and then, turning to the mob, he said,—

"Is there any one among you who can tell me anything concerning the fate of Sir Francis Varney?"

"Burnt!"

"Did you see him burnt?"

"No; but I saw him."

"In the flames?"

"No; before the house was on fire."

"In the house?"

"Yes; and he has not been seen to leave it since, and we conclude he must have been burned."

"Will you come and say as much to my commanding officer? It is all I want."

"Shall I be detained?"

"No."

"Then I will go," said the man, and he hobbled out of the crowd towards the sergeant. "I will go and see the officer, and tell him what I know, and that is very little, and can prejudice no one."

"Hurrah!" said the crowd, when they heard this latter assertion; for, at first, they began to be in some alarm lest there should be something wrong about this, and some of them get identified as being active in the fray.

The sergeant led the man back to the spot, where the officer stood a little way in advance of his men.

"Well, Scott," he said, "what have we here?"

"A man who has volunteered a statement, sir."

"Oh! Well, my man, can you say anything concerning all this disturbance that we have here?"

"No, sir."

"Then what did you come here for?"

"I understood the sergeant to want someone who could speak of Sir Francis Varney."

"Well?"

"I saw him."

"Where?"

"In the house."

"Exactly; but have you not seen him out of it?"

"Not since; nor anyone else, I believe."

"Where was he?"

"Upstairs, where he suddenly disappeared, and nobody can tell where he may have gone to. But he has not been seen out of the house since, and they say he could not have gone bodily out if they had not seen him."

"He must have been burnt," said the officer, musingly; "he could not escape, one would imagine, without being seen by some one out of such a mob."

"Oh, dear no, for I am told they placed a watch at every hole, window, or door however high, and they saw nothing of him—not even fly out!"

"Fly out! I'm speaking of a man!"

"And I of a vampire!" said the man carelessly.

"A vampyre! Pooh, pooh!"

"Oh no! Sir Francis Varney is a vampyre! There can be no sort of doubt about it. You have only to look at him, and you will soon be satisfied of that. See his great sharp teeth in front, and ask yourself what they are for, and you will soon find the answer. They are to make holes with in the bodies of his victims, through which he can suck their blood!"

The officer looked at the man in astonishment for a few moments, as if he doubted his own ears, and then he said,—

"Are you serious?"

"I am ready to swear to it."

"Well, I have heard a great deal about popular superstition, and thought I had seen something of it; but this is decidedly the worst case that ever I saw or heard of. You had better go home, my man, than, by your presence, countenance such a gross absurdity."

"For all that," said the man, "Sir Francis Varney is a vampyre—a blood-sucker—a human blood-sucker!"

"Get away with you," said the officer, "and do not repeat such folly before any one."

The man almost jumped when he heard the tone in which this was spoken, for the officer was both angry and contemptuous, when he heard the words of the man.

"These people," he added, turning to the sergeant, "are ignorant in the extreme. One would think we had got into the country of vampires, instead of a civilised community."

The day was going down now; the last rays of the setting sun glimmered upwards, and still shone upon the tree-tops. The darkness of night was still fast closing around them. The mob stood a motley mass of human beings, wedged together, dark and sombre, gazing upon the mischief that had been done—the work of their hands. The military stood at ease before the burning pile, and by their order and regularity, presented a contrast to the mob, as strongly by their bright gleaming arms, as by their dress and order.

The flames now enveloped the whole mansion. There was not a window or a door from which the fiery element did not burst forth in clouds, and forked flames came rushing forth with a velocity truly wonderful.

The red glare of the flames fell upon all objects around for some distance—the more especially so, as the sun had sunk, and a bank of clouds rose from beneath the horizon and excluded all his rays; there was no twilight, and there was, as yet, no moon.

The country side was enveloped in darkness, and the burning house could be seen for miles around, and formed a rallying-point to all men's eyes.

The engines that were within reach came tearing across the country, and came to the fire; but they were of no avail. There was no supply of water, save from the ornamental ponds. These they could only get at by means that were tedious and unsatisfactory, considering the emergency of the case.

The house was a lone one, and it was being entirely consumed before they arrived, and therefore there was not the remotest chance of saving the least article. Had they ever such a supply of water, nothing could have been effected by it.

Thus the men stood idly by, passing their remarks upon the fire and the mob.

Those who stood around, and within the influence of the red glare of the flames, looked like so many demons in the infernal regions, watching the progress of lighting the fire, which we are told by good Christians is the doom of the unfortunate in spirit, and the woefully unlucky in circumstances.

It was a strange sight that; and there were many persons who would, without doubt, have rather been snug by their own fire-side than they would have remained there but it happened that no one felt inclined to express his inclination to his neighbour, and, consequently, no one said anything on the subject.

None would venture to go alone across the fields, where the spirit of the vampyre might, for all they knew to the contrary, be waiting to pounce upon them, and worry them.

No, no; no man would have quitted that mob to go back alone to the village; they would sooner have stood there all night through. That was an alternative that none of the number would very willingly accept.

The hours passed away, and the house that had been that morning a noble and well-furnished mansion, was now a smouldering heap of ruins. The flames had become somewhat subdued, and there was now more smoke than flames.

The fire had exhausted itself. There was now no more material that could serve it for fuel, and the flames began to become gradually enough subdued.

Suddenly there was a rush, and then a bright flame shot upward for an instant, so bright and so strong, that it threw a flash of light over the country for miles; but it was only momentary, and it subsided.

The roof, which had been built strong enough to resist almost anything, after being burning for a considerable time, suddenly gave way, and came in with a tremendous crash, and then all was for a moment darkness.

After this the fire might be said to be subdued, it having burned itself out; and the flames that could now be seen were but the result of so much charred wood, that would probably smoulder away for a day or two, if left to itself to do so. A dense mass of smoke arose from the ruins, and blackened the atmosphere around, and told the spectators the work was done.

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXVIII

The broken, shaggy ramparts of the giant crater rose above us. We toiled upward, out of the foothills, clinging now to the crags and pitted terraces of the main ascent. An hour had passed since we turned from the borders of Mare Imbrium. Or was it two hours? I could not tell. I only know that we ran with desperate, frantic haste.

Anita would not admit that she was tired. She was more skillful than I in this leaping over the broken rock masses. Yet I felt that her slight strength must give out. It seemed miles up the undulating slopes of the foothills with the black and white ramparts of the crater close before us.

And then the main ascent. There were places where, like smooth black frozen ice, the walls rose sheer. We avoided them, toiling aside, plunging into gullies, crossing pits

where sometimes, perforce, we went downwards, and then up again. Or sometimes we stood, hot and breathless, upon ledges, recovering our strength, selecting the best route upward.

In tumbled mass of rock, honeycombed everywhere with caves and passages leading into impenetrable darkness, there were pits into which we might so easily have fallen; ravines to span, sometimes with a leap, sometimes by a long and arduous detour.

Endless climb. We came to the ledge with the plains of the Mare Imbrium stretching out beneath us. We might have been upon this main ascent for an hour; the plains were far down, the broken surface down there smoothed now by the perspective of height. And yet still above us the brooding circular wall went up into the sky. Ten thousand feet above us.

“You’re tired, Anita. We’d better stay here.”

“No. If we could only get to the top—the ship may land on the other side—they would see us.”

There was as yet no sign of the brigand ship. With every stop for rest we searched the starry vault. The Earth hung over us, flattened beyond the full. The stars blazed to mingle with the Earthlight and illumine these massive crags of the Archimedes walls. But no speck appeared to tell us that the ship was up there.

We were on the curving side of the Archimedes wall which fronted the Mare Imbrium to the north. The plains lay like a great frozen sea, congealed ripples shining in the light of the Earth, with dark patches to mark the hollows. Somewhere down there—six or eight thousand feet below us now—Miko’s encampment lay concealed. We searched for lights of it, but could see none.

Had Miko rejoined his party, left his camp and come here like ourselves to climb Archimedes? Or was our assumption wholly wrong: perhaps the brigand ship would not land near here at all!

Sweeping around from the Mare Imbrium, the plains were less smooth. The little crater which concealed the Grantline camp was off in the crater-scarred region beyond which the distant Apennines raised their terraced walls. There was nothing to mark it from here.

“Gregg, do you see anything up there?” She added, “There seems to be a blur.”

Her sight, sharper than mine, had picked it out. The descending brigand ship! A faintest, tiny blur against the stars, a few of them occulted as though an invisible shadow were upon them. A growing shadow, materializing into a blur—a blob, a shape faintly defined. Then sharper until we were sure of what we saw. It was the brigand ship. It was dropping slowly, silently down.

We crouched on the little ledge. A cave mouth was behind us. A gully was beside us, a break in the ledge; and at our feet the sheer wall dropped.

We had extinguished our lights. We crouched, silently gazing up into the stars.

The ship, when we first distinguished it, was centred over Archimedes. We thought for a while that it might descend into the crater. But it did not; it came sailing forward.

I whispered into the audiphone, "It's coming over the crater."

Her hand pressed my arm in answer.

I recalled that when, from the Planetara, Miko had forced Snap to signal this brigand band on Mars, Miko's only information as to the whereabouts of the Grantline camp was that it lay between Archimedes and the Apennines. The brigands now were following that information.

A tense interval passed. We could see the ship plainly above us now, a grey-black shape among the stars up beyond the shaggy, towering crater rim. The vessel came upon a level keel, hull down. Slowly circling, looking for Miko's signal, no doubt, or for possible lights from Grantline's camp. They might also be picking a landing place.

We saw it soon as a cylindrical, cigarlike shape, rather smaller than the Planetara, but similar of design. It bore lights now. The ports of its hull were tiny rows of illumination, and the glow of light under its rounding upper dome was faintly visible.

A bandit ship, no doubt of that. Its identification keel plate was empty of official pass code lights. These brigands had not attempted to secure official sailing lights when leaving Ferrok-Shahn. It was unmistakably an outlaw ship. And here upon the deserted Moon there was no need for secrecy. Its lights were openly displayed, that Miko might see it and join it.

It went slowly past us, only a few thousand feet higher than our level. We could see the whole outline of its pointed cylinder hull, with the rounded dome on top. And under the dome was its open deck with a little cabin superstructure in the centre.

I thought for a moment that by some unfortunate chance it might land quite near us. But it went past. And then I saw that it was heading for a level, plateaulike surface a few miles further on. It dropped, cautiously floating down.

There was still no sign of Miko. But I realized that haste was necessary. We must be the first to join the brigand ship.

I lifted Anita to her feet. "I don't think we should signal from here."

"No. Miko might see it."

We could not tell where he was. Down on the plains, perhaps? Or up here, somewhere in these miles of towering rocks?

“Are you ready, Anita?”

“Yes, Gregg.”

I stared through the visors at her white solemn face.

“Yes, I’m ready,” she repeated.

Her hand pressure seemed to me suddenly like a farewell. We were plunging rashly into what was destined to mean our death? Was this a farewell?

An instinct told me not to do this thing. Why, in a few hours I could have Anita back to the comparative safety of the Grantline camp. The exit ports would doubtless be repaired by now. I could get her inside.

She had bounded away from me, leaped down some thirty feet into the broken gully, to cross it and then up on the other side. I stood for an instant watching her fantastic shape, with the great rounded, goggled, trunked helmet and the lump on her shoulders which held the little Erentz motors. Then I hurried after her.

It did not take us long—two or three miles of circling along the giant wall. The ship lay only a few hundred feet above our level.

We stood at last on a buttelike pinnacle. The lights of the ship were close over us. And there were moving lights up there, tiny moving spots on the adjacent rocks. The brigands had come out, prowling about to investigate their location.

No signal yet from Miko. But it might come at any moment.

“I’ll flash now,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

The brigands had probably not yet seen us. I took the lamp from my helmet. My hand was trembling. Suppose my signal were answered by a shot? A flash from some giant projector mounted on the ship?

Anita crouched behind a rock, as she had promised. I stood with my torch and flung its switch. My puny light beam shot up. I waved it, touched the ship with its faint glowing circle of illumination.

They saw me. There was a sudden movement among the lights up there.

I semaphored:

I am from Miko. Do not fire.

I used open universal code. In Martian first, and then in English.

There was no answer, but no attack. I tried again.

This is Haljan, one of the Planetara. George Prince's sister is with me. There has been disaster to Miko.

A small light beam came down from the brink of the overhead cliff beside the ship.

Continue.

I went steadily on: Disaster—the Planetara is wrecked. All killed but me and Prince's sister. We want to join you.

I flashed off my light. The answer came:

Where is the Grantline Camp?

Near here. The Mare Imbrium.

As though to answer my lie, from down on the Earthlit plains, some ten miles or so from the crater base, a tiny signal light shot up. Anita saw it and gripped me.

“There is Miko's light!”

It spelled in Martian, Come down. Land Mare Imbrium.

Miko had seen the signalling up here and had joined it! He repeated, Land Mare Imbrium.

I flashed a protest up to the ship: Beware. That is Grantline! Trickery.

From the ship the summons came, Come up.

We had won this first encounter! Miko must have realized his disadvantage. His distant light went out.

“Come, Anita.”

There was no retreat now. But again I seemed to feel in the pressure of her hand that vague farewell. Her voice whispered, "We must do our best, act our best to be convincing."

In the white glow of a searchbeam we climbed the crags, reached the broad upper ledge. Helmeted figures rushed at us, searched us for weapons, seized our helmet lights. The evil face of a giant Martian peered at me through the visors. Two other monstrous, towering figures seized Anita.

We were shoved toward the port locks at the base of the ship's hull. Above the hull bulge I could see the grids of projectors mounted on the dome side, and the figures of men standing on the deck, peering down at us.

We went through the admission locks into a hull corridor, up an incline passage, and reached the lighted deck. The Martian brigands crowded around us.