

Schlock! webzine

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

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

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

This Edition

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



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

[Crash](#) by Alana Schwartz - Smiling at strangers is never a good thing...

[From Darkness, They Came : Part Two of Two](#) by Pete Clark - the prophecy is fulfilled...

[Super Duper: Part Eleven](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - In which Smith responds to a crisis...

[Babbage Must Die - Part Eight](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Brian fulfils his vocation...

[The Dark Place: Part Five](#) by [James Talbot](#) - Isobel finds herself questioned by a creepy detective...

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance: Chapter Seven](#) by Rex Mundy - Arthur pursues the insurgents...

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 8\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *The arrest of Johnson had caused considerable discussion among the passengers....*

[Witches and Barbarians - Part Five](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Sacalasta rises! *Sixth in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! Classic Serial: [Carmilla - Part Six](#) by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - A Very Strange Agony...

Crash

Every time I stop at red lights, I crane my neck to see who is in the car next to me. My friend Lauren and I always invent stories about the people who stop next to us, some stories ranging from ridiculous to somewhat accurate. Anyway, one night we were driving an hour away to visit some friends in the next town. As we began driving out of town towards our destination, the roads became increasingly dark, and the stores on the roadsides disappeared. Only the streetlights and stoplights provided faint, unreliable illumination on the darkened streets. Lauren looked over to the black car next to us, and a creepy looking man with a shaggy dark bangs hiding his eyes looked back at her.

“He’s an escaped convict,” she joked, smiling.

He smiled back, shaking his bangs from his eyes, which remained fixed on her face. His eye contact became menacing.

He began following us when the light turned green, swinging behind us as we turned left.

“Oh, my God,” Lauren screamed, freaking out. “Oh my God, lose him!”

I sped up, and so did he, skillfully switching lanes until he was on the driver’s side – my side – of the car, peering in at us. There were only a few cars on the road, their headlights fading away in the distance. He continued swerving closer and suddenly pulling away, a grin spreading across his face.

“Speed up!” Lauren shouted.

Without thinking, I pressed hard on the gas, speeding up until he dropped farther and farther behind.

The road became darker as we went further out, and after a few minutes Lauren looked behind her.

No one was there.

A light rain began to fall, and the road that stretched out in front of us slowly began to disappear in the mist. Our hearts began to beat faster – just because we couldn’t see him didn’t mean he wasn’t just staying out of sight.

We heard a car speeding up behind us, and we both shrieked. We turned our heads to see a magenta car fly past ours.

“Ok, maybe we’re just being paranoid,” Lauren said calmly.

I slowed down. There was nothing to worry about.

Lauren and I laughed shakily. “Okay, let’s never do that again,” she said, mostly to

herself.

“I guess smiling at strangers is never a good thing,” I said, and immediately regretted it. It reminded me of something my mom would say.

We continued driving in silence for a while, the slight mist from the road accumulating through the spattering rain.

Out of nowhere, the black car appeared next to us so suddenly that I hardly had the chance to take a breath. The last thing I remember is the driver’s cruel red eyes and sadistic smile, his car bearing down on us, maintaining the same speed until he smashed into us at full speed.

Crunch.

Faint laughter echoed in the air as our air bags imploded and we slipped into unconsciousness. The last glimpse I had was of flickering headlights attached to the black car, spinning out of sight. The driver’s seat of the car zoned in and out of my vision, and I realized with horror that there was no one in it.

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From Darkness, They Came

Part Two

Darkness rose from his vision like a drowning man to the surface of a lake. He gasped air, tore at the tubes connecting him to the drugs. He pulled the numerous connection hoses from the ring of ports around his neck. The last to come free was the cable that connected him to the computer drives in the lining of his AG suit, upon which he had downloaded his prophecy.

He prayed that what he had seen was not the whole truth of the matter. His hands still shook from the shock of it. The terror. The death. The betrayal. And lastly, that face. Had he truly seen it? It was as if he had grasped its identity at the last minute and then lost it again. He sighed. He saw flashes of content, not always accurate to the final report. It was as if he might see one version of events, and the report finalised another. The outcome was always the same, but the road to the end could vary wildly. He may see something in the vision that had no bearing on the outcome, and sometimes miss the most vital part. He never interpreted, but this time hoped he was wrong.

Using the control panel set into the wall near a window aperture, he opened the opaque glass iris. He studied the swell of Earth as if it were completely alien to him. He felt a sudden urge to protect the fragile planet however he could, and raised a hand to the window to cup the globe in his palm.

Darkness drew himself out of this meaningless thought. What was done, was done. What was finalised in his report, could not be changed. He would leave the analysis of it to Farson. Still the face kept haunting him as if he should know it but couldn't grasp its identity.

*

Farson had not left the office since the Council meeting. His skin was drawn and grey, etched with worry and malnourishment. It seemed he had not eaten for two days at least, and the guards' olfactory sensors picked up minute traces of disease in the air around him.

He pressed the intercom and spoke to First Officer Williams.

'Send for the Prophet,' he croaked, his voice grilles and filters straining to make his words heard.

He came an hour later. Farson noted how the Prophet's eyes seemed sunken and black, how his skin had lost its glow.

'You don't look at all well, Darkness,' he said, all too aware of the irony of that

comment in the light of his own condition.

‘The report, Farson. I have it here. It will be my last.’

He slung the report disc onto Farson’s table, and at the soft chime it made hitting the leather surface, the two droid guards opened their eyes and straightened. Farson stood.

‘Tell me about it, Darkness. Did you learn anything new?’

‘It is the same, Farson. The creatures swarm and lay waste. I see no way of stopping them, and again I see no definite clue as to the time of their arrival. As I said to you three days ago, they may be outside the ship as we speak.’

‘So you did,’ said the Councillor, his voice strengthening. ‘And yet you were wrong that time, were you not? Is it not possible that you are wrong this time?’

‘Perfectly,’ the Prophet replied. ‘And yet you and I know it shows the truth. Or some form of it. The only way I can see this thing ending is to evacuate and send the crew and passengers to Earth in the life-ships. And do it now. Before...’

‘And leave the Darkness Falls in the hands of these demons? You know I cannot do that. There must be another way.’

‘I see no other way.’

Farson appeared to consider this for a moment, and then he reached for the disc. He inserted it into the slot to the side of the monitor and began playing Darkness’ final prophecy.

There was blackness. A piercing white light began in the centre of the screen, growing in size and brightness until Farson was sure it would burn right through the monitor. He darkened his face shield. The light changed colour, slowly, almost imperceptibly, until it was a faint throbbing red. A split appeared. It seemed that black water rushed in, and it took Farson a few seconds to recognise the split as a tear in the ship’s hull. The black water was not water at all but a rush of Harii’s demons, innumerable and senseless.

He cried out and leaned back away from the monitor.

The creatures continued to pour in, and as terrible as the sight was, Farson started scanning the edges of the vision for sight of the cowled figure in the previous report. The vision moved throughout the ship, room upon room filling with the creatures as if with liquid night. Farson began to see indiscriminate killing, thousands of corpses. He also saw men and women, their faces obscured by the darkness, herded into the hold, into any available space, and held there by terror.

And suddenly, there amid the bloodshed and the gore, he saw the shadowy figure,

scarred chin bleeding fresh blood. The identity again was maddeningly out of reach.

‘I KNOW!’ he screamed at the monitor.

In the background, the cloud-veiled orb of Earth began to change. A shadow drew across it, darkening it until the globe was a black ball. Farson knew what that meant. The demons had reached Earth.

He bowed his head.

‘So they have reached Earth,’ he said.

‘It would appear that is their destination, yes.’

‘Have you no idea who the figure is? Is he leading them, controlling them?’

Darkness turned away. ‘He may be leading them, but as I have always said, my prophecies are not always literal. He has a pivotal responsibility in all this, but perhaps knows nothing of it. His is shown there because of his importance, perhaps not directly because he causes all this, or because of his literal geography. He may not even be aboard. Perhaps the presence of the demons on board is nothing more than a mirror for the attack on Earth. I cannot say. The visions are over, Farson. This was my last. I have no control over them anymore. I do not even trust them. We should warn contact Earth and make ourselves ready to face whatever we have to face.’

‘You are not in control here, Darkness. I am.’

Darkness spread his arms and allowed Farson the decision. The First Councillor summoned his Council.

They arrived as one, and Darkness presumed they had been waiting for this summons. Wendall and Crask sat in their customary chairs, while the symbiotic organism of Haron and Harin stood, their heads inclined, hands clasped in a worrying show of intimacy.

‘We have it?’ the symbiot inquired.

‘We do,’ replied Farson. Darkness did not like the calm in his voice.

They watched in silence.

Wendall was the first to speak.

‘But this shows nothing new! Nothing of our escape, our salvation. It shows no hope!’

‘Then perhaps there is none,’ said Haron and Harin in unison.

‘I cannot accept that!’ spluttered Wendall. Crask, fingers knotted tightly in the hem of his Council robes, said nothing. He had gone the pale grey of old cheese.

‘Accept it we must, Councillors. I propose to contact my counterpart on Earth and convey this report to him. They must take whatever action they feel necessary. And yet, to discover the identity of the figure and prevent him from calling his minions? Perhaps...’

‘As I said,’ Darkness began, ‘there is nothing to say he is instrumental in all this.’ He turned to the Councillors. ‘I cannot vouch for the validity of this latest prophecy. It was too soon after the previous one, and my mind has not recovered fully.’ He implored the Council, hating the sound of his voice but saying it anyway.

Before the others could speak, Farson asked, his voice amplified slightly and sounding stronger by the minute, ‘Is it the case, Darkness, that you cannot prophesise a lie?’

‘That is true, Farson, yes. It is also the case that when a Prophet is ordered to perform a prophecy, and one so soon after another, that the results might not be trusted as they should. The report is accurate inasmuch as it shows an event that will happen. But exactly this way?’ He gestured to the monitor, still playing out the report. ‘I cannot say.’

‘So although this person may not be the cause, he is somehow connected? I feel that if we know his identity, we can prevent this!’ Crask blurted. ‘We must.’

‘Are you all so proud as to refuse a total evacuation? There are other ships. There are other worlds than yours. And perhaps an abandoned ship will not send the Harii’s demons scurrying so readily for its place of origin.’ Haron and Harin spoke softly.

‘Yes,’ said Wendall, dreamily. ‘Evacuate.’ He began to rise.

‘SIT!’ screamed Farson, his bulk towering over the Second Councillor, his voice distorted by the grille and the volume to which he had raised it. Wendall sat immediately.

Farson spoke quieter.

‘We must go from here and think hard, Councillors. If there is a plan to survive then I am confident we will find it. If there is no plan, then it matters little how much we discuss around this table. Go now, and pray we have the time.’

The Council looked at one another aghast at Farson’s apparent lack of concern. Little did they know he was exerting all his considerable strength not to reduce every one of them to a bloody pulp. He glowered at Darkness, remembering his comment that he was merely a messenger. Farson truly wondered. He darkened his face shield further to hide the blood seeping into the corners of his eyes. The irrigators there sprayed constantly to keep the blood away. Farson was sure that the pressure in his head had finally burst a vein there. He sat motionless as the Councillors stood. He shut off the sound into his ears and the Councillors’ protests and whines began to quieten. He closed his eyes finally and the last thing he saw was Darkness imploring him silently. And then he saw darkness.

The first explosion, an hour later, rocked the ship and tore a huge gaping hole. Two hundred crew and passengers died in this first attack. There was no fire, but a blinding white light and then black rolling plasma that scorched everything it touched. Those who saw the initial attack were not alive long enough to think about it. Those that saw the destruction on monitors abandoned their posts and fled. Some died in the rush, others of panic. The huge ship's engines thrummed and whined in protest as they struggled to keep it stable.

Darkness was in his quarters. A few seconds later, the shock wave threw him from his bed and across the room. He hit the wall hard, and lay for a moment, stunned. He switched on his communication port and saw nothing but white snow. The sound had gone too. He tried another, less secure channel, and saw snatches of terrified faces, heard screams and shouting. Then that too was gone. He slammed a fist into the glass display and it shattered. Cursing as blood ran from his knuckles, he managed to stand and make his way to the door, damaged and open perhaps two feet. It was enough for him to squeeze through and he snatched at a heavy woollen robe as he left. If the communication had gone, then surely the heating had too. Their control rooms were on the same floor. He had to find his way to the main communications floor, or as close to it as he could manage.

People rushed by him, screaming, bloody. He pulled the robe around him and made his way to the stairs. He was met at the head of the stairs by Spane and First Officer Williams, who seemed to gravitate toward him like he was their salvation.

'Is this it, then?' Spane said, barely loud enough to be heard over the panic.

'It would appear so, Councillor,' Darkness replied, looking at neither of his companions.

They reached the communications floor after some fifteen minutes. The stairs were crowded, the main flow with them rather than against, but the sheer mass of bodies made the journey slow. Darkness barged into the control rooms and stood aghast.

Control panels were scorched and smoking. There was a sound like a great dying beast that Darkness took to be the engines failing. Indeed as he watched, the final control screen showed the last dying moments of a huge engine as it sparked and burst into flames. Darkness went cold. The end seemed perilously close now, and yet he felt there was something he could do. Perhaps if he made it to the escape life-ships, he could at least aid those left alive. He turned suddenly, Spane and Williams following, the blank shock showing vividly on their pale faces.

The escape deck was in a state of pure panic. The Harii's demons had yet to breach this area, and everywhere were groups of people fighting for access to the life-ships. Darkness strode swiftly across the deck, seeing desperately few red gold officers' collars. As he thrust himself through a crowd of people struggling to board a life-ship, a second explosion rocked the escape deck. People screamed as one, and Williams fell against him, clutching at his robe. Fire and shards of white-hot hull casing swept

through the deck, reducing the number of living bodies by a third.

Darkness saw his first real glimpse of the Harii's demons. They swarmed thickly like black treacle through the gaping wound in the ship's hull. In doing so, effectively blocking it, they dramatically reduced the venting of atmosphere through the hole, and temporarily saved hundreds of crew and passengers from being swept into the void. Blood and bodies flew as the demons coursed through the remaining survivors. Fear had yet to take hold of him, and he gathered Williams to him tightly.

'Follow me,' he said, the depth of his voice rather than the volume of it sufficient so that she understood. He forced himself against the flow of bodies, actually towards the glowing rent in the hull, towards the nightmare influx.

The demons were flowing harder than ever, and the first cold pinches of fear gripped him as he watched them rise up the curved walls to continue their progress unhindered across the ceiling. Darkness ran to one wall, on the opposite side to their original attack and made for a life-ship. He drew up the hood of his robe, and held Williams out in front. His breath came in ragged gasps now, and the life-ship drew close.

Suddenly a violent blow to his right side sent him tumbling alarmingly towards the wall. He had time to turn his cowled face upwards before a dully chromed foot came crashing into it.

Farson watched as his guards cleared the way. He was dimly aware of his Prophet struggling to rise, as the guards kicked into him again. He felt a measure of regret, but that was soon overshadowed by a desire to escape his death. He reached the Prophet and mentally ordered his guards to leave him. The least he could do was give the man a fighting chance.

And then he saw.

Darkness rose, aided by First Officer Williams, leaning heavily on her. All sounds of screaming and the sizzling crackle of the chitinous invaders running over one another ceased. Darkness lifted a hand to his face and wiped blood from a fresh cut on his chin. Suddenly the memory of the cowled figure in the Prophet's reports came to him and he recognised him at last. It was Darkness then, in those reports. Darkness standing in the shadows, chanting, controlling or leading these creatures. Confusion clouded his mind, for was not Darkness fleeing as he was? Perhaps he had lost control of the mindless black horror. His face shield, already at its most protective, darkened further as his rage doubled, trebled. He screamed again, and at this last his ears became deaf to it, blood poured into his throat from ruptured vessels there, and he sank to his knees. In his anger and confusion, he failed to send kill orders to his guards, and as Darkness saw at last what Farson had, as he wiped the blood on his robes, realisation hit him. He ceased to think, rushed to the prone Councillor, and drew a weapon from his robe. It was a twin-handled razor, the blade fashioned from light and dark, so that to be cut with it at once created a wound and its exact opposite. This disparity effectively caused the affected area to cease to exist. Darkness threw it almost carelessly. He watched the weapon cut through Farson as if through air, saw it

increase in size until the void was fully four feet across. The Councillor became unravelled at its touch, and in the spilling of organs and synthetic blood, flashes of light and darkness played like the rippling fire across the edges of a burning piece of paper in a soft breeze. Farson fell in two. All this took no more than ten seconds, and Darkness retrieved the weapon quickly, comforted by the warm thrum in his hand.

He grabbed onto Williams and made for the life-ship. He glanced once at the influx of Harii's demons, and seeing the sheer scale of numbers, ran faster. He had perhaps fifteen seconds before they reached him.

When they were twenty feet from the life-ship, sensors set into the floor instructed the doors to swing open.

'RUN!' Darkness roared and pushed Williams harder. She reached the life-ship and rushed on board. By activation of those same sensors, its engines were warming up, a low throb that pulsated through the tiny craft. Darkness withdrew his razor once more and as he turned, falling into the life-ship, a single demon, slightly ahead of its fellows, reached him. The stench from its glistening mouth overwhelmed him and he barely had time to throw his weapon before the translucent teeth sliced through the air, inches from his face. The demon fell in two, as did several of its companions directly behind it. Darkness' fall came to his aid, for his momentum carried him briefly out of their reach and the door hissed shut firmly. Darkness dared not open his eyes until he felt and heard the powerful roar of the escape thrusters jettisoning him from the stricken ship. As the life-ship tumbled from the Darkness Falls, Darkness watched in horror as the swarm of Harii's demons coated it like tar, shadowing the brief explosions from within.

'You killed Farson,' Williams said, shocked.

'He knew,' said Darkness holding his head in his hands. 'I brought this.' Even as he said it, he could not understand. He had had no part in bringing the creatures, in fact had been fleeing them. Confusion wracked him, and he felt a portion of his mind collapse under the pressure.

'You killed him,' she said again.

Darkness approached her, meaning to comfort her, when she fell suddenly silent. Blood bubbled from her mouth. She coughed and her eyes grew wide. Darkness looked on, paralysed, and watched as a spot of blackness appeared between her breasts. The spot grew, until it appeared to push through the fabric of her AG suit. She slumped forward, as if held up by the black rod that was now forcing its way out of her, and in an instant Darkness knew.

The Harii's demon on board the life-ship pushed it whip-tail all the way through First Officer Williams' lifeless body. It whipped from side to side, and the body fell, lacerated and torn. Darkness stood facing his own death, all insectile mandibles and black glassy carapace, razor edged, as the prophecy cleared. His part of the Prophecy seemed not to bring the creatures to the ship, nor yet to control them. He longed for

death, approached the creature, willed it to destroy him as it had his companion. He prophesised one last time.

He saw his life-ship tumbling through space, its destination pre-programmed and unchangeable. He saw the first soft glows, like a red dust storm around its pointed hull as it breached Earth's atmosphere. He saw it crash-land into desert, its cargo of two dead and one living spill out on to the hard packed sand. The final view, before the razor tipped spear of a tail pierced the life from him, was of a shadow swarming over the surface of the Earth like a spill of oil over the surface of a ball. His part of the Prophecy was not to bring the creatures to the Darkness Falls then, nor to master them.

It was merely to bring them to Earth.

He screamed as his blood spilled within the life-ship. He grew cold and still as his guilt and sorrow bled out with it. The Harii's demon feasted on the corpses, and had it known such things, would have recognised the red dust storm around the pointed hull. It would also have recognised the feelings of birth it experienced as it shed razor sharp scales in the form of black glassy larvae that quickly burrowed into the hull casing to feed on the organics there. And when it landed, it found that its claws and jointed limbs worked equally well in gravity and on hard-packed sand as they had in the void of space.

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Super Duper

Chapter Eleven

The sound that woke Smith up went something like:

“? prh, pah ha ha ha ha.”

It was the muted sound of children playing, dampened by concrete and glass. He looked at the clock. It was ten thirty, about an hour and a half before he would have preferred to wake. He hadn't seen much of The Don for two days because The Don spent all of his time helping Nicola. Smith did what he could, of course, but he preferred to focus on events that occurred after he had eaten lunch.

After three days of deliberation The Don had decided that they would set out again first thing the next day, which, Smith hoped, meant at about one in the afternoon.

The sound continued.

“Ghhhw, heught, la ha ha.”

Smith got up and showered. The day outside was surprisingly bright. Days were always surprisingly bright from Smith's perspective. However, today seemed unusually and ridiculously bright. He glanced over the car park and realised that it was also surprisingly quiet. The he saw why.

At the far end of the car park, a policeman was stood talking to six of the children. He was saying,

“[?...] at least three counts of theft, looting and public disorder.”

It was the same policeman that had pulled them for not having insurance. He looked thinner and madder than he had four days before. There was a bloodstain on the front of his uniform. Smith wished that The Don was there.

The policeman was holding one of the girls by her arm, she was about six. The girl was struggling against his grip.

“Let her go!”

One of the boys hit the policeman on the back of the leg with a cricket bat. The policeman kicked him firmly in the stomach; the boy dropped into a ball, gasping for breath; eyes filled with tears.

The other children began to take steps backwards, every one of them silent for a second. One of them turned and ran towards the service station. Good thinking, mused Smith. The policeman unclipped his handcuffs.

Shit, thought Smith. He was still a few hundred yards away from the action, not close enough to do anything and not sure what he could do even if he were close enough. Smith tried walking quickly and when that let him down, he tried running. It wasn't as hard as he remembered or as fast.

By the time that Smith got to the girl, the policeman had her fully handcuffed and over his shoulder. He spotted Smith and with the girl struggling frantically, the policeman ran towards the slip road.

“Don!” Smith shouted once, barely able to grasp his breath.

“Don!”

The remaining four children, their faces dark with horror looked at Smith.

The boy who had been kicked to the floor, looked accusingly at Smith.

“He's taking her away.”

Smith had no other option. He began to run after her. The policeman was already mounting the first car as Smith began his pursuit.

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Eight

‘Welcome, me hearties,’ said the broad-shouldered man in the short-waisted blue jacket who had introduced himself as the boatswain. ‘Welcome to ‘is Majesty’s Frigate *Mars*.’ The light of a storm lantern hanging from the low ceiling flickered around his pockmarked face.

Brian stood in line with the other pressed men. The boatswain and several other sailors sat at a table beneath the single lantern illuminating this space below decks. Joists and beams held up the ceiling, and all around the place was shrouded in gloom. The deck creaked monotonously as it rocked back and forth. Brian shivered in revulsion, seeing a rat scuttle into the shadows.

‘Name?’ the boatswain rapped.

‘Keane,’ said the man whose feet Brian had vomited on. ‘Joe Keane, merchant seaman.’

‘Able seaman?’ the boatswain asked.

‘Aye sir, thirteen years behind the mast,’ Keane rumbled. ‘My ship, the *Laughing Dog*, is at anchor in Hoylake. They’ll want to know what’s become of me...’

‘Shut your trap!’ the boatswain roared. ‘You’re in ‘is Majesty’s Navy now. Won’t hear any more lip out of you. Shilling a day. Huxley!’ A sailor stepped forward. ‘Show this man where he’ll be messing.’

One by one the other pressed men stepped up to the table and gave their names. A lot of them were from the merchant navy, but by no means all. When it came to Brian’s turn, he felt he had to say something.

‘Look, I don’t think I’m qualified for this job at all,’ he told the boatswain when he asked Brian’s name. ‘I’ve got no relevant experience...’

One of the sailors clouted him round the ear.

‘Answer the question!’ he bellowed.

Rubbing the side of his head, Brian said, ‘Brian Wells, okay?’

‘Seaman?’ asked the boatswain.

‘Beg your pardon?’ Brian said.

‘What’s your profession, Wells?’ the boatswain demanded.

Brian stammered a little. ‘Well, I don’t really have one,’ he said.

‘Beggan, then,’ said the boatswain. ‘Well, you’ve come up in the world, Wells. What

do you say to going aloft?’

‘What?’ Brian asked, bewildered. ‘Going in the loft?’

‘Aloft, ye landlubber!’ the boatswain replied. ‘Up in the rigging.’

Brian felt his face go white. He had seen how high up those sails were when he’d come aboard. He was supposed to climb up the mast? Why? How? Didn’t this ship have a health and safety policy?

‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘Is it part of the job?’ He had felt quite chuffed, in a way, at getting a job so easily. Now he was starting to have second thoughts. This sounded like hard work.

The boatswain got up. There was a nasty expression on his face.

‘You want to be a mariner, don’t you? I hear you took the king’s shilling willing-like. Let’s see what you’re made of! Got it in you to be a topman?’

The sailors roared with laughter. ‘Get up the rigging! Go on, ye lubber!’

Brian looked around him in horror. The boatswain grabbed him and dragged him towards a companionway. The sailors followed, chattering and laughing.

They came out onto the deck. It was still dark but lanterns near the back of the ship shed some light. He looked at the three masts that rose high above and the rigging that criss-crossed the intervening space and he felt like wetting himself.

‘Get up there!’ the boatswain ordered, pointing towards the nearest mast, the one closest to the front of the ship. The sailors bellowed with laughter.

‘But...’ said Brian. He bit his lip, and approached the mast. He was supposed to get up into the rigging? Suppose it was like climbing a tree, except there were no branches. He wrapped his arms and legs round the mast and tried to heave himself up, getting a few feet off the ground before slithering back down the slippery wood. The boatswain kicked him up the arse, much to the amusement of the other crewmen.

‘Get up there!’ the boatswain repeated.

Brian tried again, and found that if he heaved himself up and clung with his thighs, he could reach up further, hug the mast, and haul himself up again. His breath came in short pants, and cold sweat pooled on his skin. Again, he pulled himself up, then heaved his legs up, and gripped the mast with his thighs. The sailors jeered and catcalled.

‘Get moving!’ the boatswain shouted. ‘What would you be like if the Frogs were attacking? Get up there in an instant!’

Sighing heavily, Brian tried to pull himself up another foot or so. The night wind cooled the sweat on his neck.

‘Belay there!’

Brian craned his neck and looked down to see the deck several feet below. The sailors looked abashed and a youth in officer’s uniform was glaring down from the quarterdeck.

‘What’s the meaning of this, boatswain?’ the officer demanded. ‘Why’s that man climbing the mast?’

The boatswain stumbled forward, his hat in his hands. ‘Sorry sir,’ he called. ‘Just ‘avin’ a bit of fun with the new recruits.’

‘Get down from there!’ the officer shouted at Brian. Brian let go and slithered back down the mast to fetch up with a bump on the deck as the officer came down from the quarterdeck, followed by two more.

‘Is this man an able seaman?’ the first officer demanded. He looked haughtily at Brian, who saw a tall, thin youth with a curled lip and a long nose.

The boatswain shook his head. ‘Says he’s a beggar, sir.’

‘Then what are you doing sending him up aloft, boatswain? What’s the place for inexperienced men?’

‘The waist, sir,’ the boatswain replied.

‘Aye, boatswain, the waist of the ship,’ the officer snapped. ‘If we take on men without experience, they become waisters, not topmen. Now show the men their berths and I want to see no more hi-jinks, Boatswain Stevens, understood?’

‘Aye aye, sir!’ Stevens nodded to the sailors. ‘You heard the lieutenant. Get them below.’

As Brian hurried down the companionway, he felt immense relief. He didn’t much fancy frigging in the rigging. Turned out this job was one he’d been in training for all his life. If what the lieutenant said was right, he was going to be a waister.

Well, he knew how to be one of them.

It turned out that being a waister mainly consisted of ‘holystoning,’ which was the Navy’s way of saying getting down on your knees on the deck with a bucket and scrubbing brush and scrubbing the boards like you had an OCD. He was introduced to this at an unearthly hour of the morning, eight bells of the middle watch or what Brian would call 4 am, when he was roused from sweat-soaked nightmares in his hammock and told to go out and scrub the deck.

Keane was with him, despite being an able seaman; so were the other members of the mess to which they’d both been assigned.

‘You think this is bad, Wellsie,’ the big man told him as they scrubbed and scrubbed. ‘Wait till we’re at sea. There’ll be plenty to keep us busy when we’re fighting the Frogs. Won’t there, Yankee Doodle?’

He was addressing another of Brian’s messmates, a short, swarthy man from Baltimore in America. Brian had been surprised by this. He didn’t know much history, not like Ada, but he thought America was independent by now. He commented on this.

‘So did I,’ drawled the American, Adams. ‘I’m not here of my own free will, Wellsie.’

‘Neither am I,’ Brian replied, scrubbing harder as he saw a lieutenant passing. ‘I was in a pub and some guy dropped a coin in my drink. Next thing I know, I’m here.’

‘At least you were pressed by your own country!’ Adams exclaimed. ‘I’d come ashore on leave in Port Royal, Jamaica, and then they came and pressed me. I’d heard rumours about the English pressing American citizens but I didn’t think it would happen to me. Your Navy needs all the men it can get against Boney, but they can leave us out. We fought you once. We’ll fight you again, if this goes on.’

Keane growled. ‘Blasted rebels!’ he said. ‘Nothing more than pirates and robbers, you American colonists. Worse than the Frogs. You’ll be back under control as soon as we’ve settled Boney’s hash.’ Offended by the American’s words, he concentrated on scrubbing the deck.

Brian moved closer to Adams.

‘Can you swim?’ he muttered.

Adams shook his head. ‘No point learning to swim if you’re a mariner,’ he said. ‘If you’re wrecked, there’s only one way you’ll go – down. Why do you ask?’

‘I’m no happier to be on this ship than you are,’ Brian replied. ‘They were saying last night that we’re going to set sail for Spain as soon as the captain comes aboard. Spain’s not my scene. I was thinking of jumping ship. Sneak over the side when it’s dark and swim ashore. No one will notice.’

‘Desert?’ Adams said, his voice low. ‘Crazy talk. You know the penalty for desertion, don’t you?’

‘They have to catch you first.’ Brian shrugged. ‘What do they do, flog you? Put you in irons?’

Adams’ face was serious. ‘They hang you from the yardarm, Wellsie. For desertion, you swing.’

Brian turned away and started scrubbing furiously at the deck. Well, that was a real pain in the arse. Obviously they’d have to catch him if they wanted to hang him, but all the same... He had been thinking of nipping over the side that evening, as soon as

he had the chance. The novelty of having his first job was beginning to pall. For the first half hour or so he'd surprised himself by revelling in the dignity of labour, and what had surprised him even more was how easy the navy lark was. But hard tack and grog seemed like a pretty dull diet, and anyway he didn't want to stay in this century; he ought to find Ada at the first chance, sort out this whole Babbage business, and get back to the future. But she must be miles away now, and the discovery that escape meant risking his neck seriously curbed his enthusiasm.

Shit, it was like a prison! Was he going to have to spend the rest of his life scrubbing this same bit of deck? He had to get back to that cellar by this time next year or he'd be stuck in the nineteenth century forever. And if this ship was going to Spain, well, it wouldn't be much better than being transported. How could he hope to get back to the cellar in time?

'All hands on deck!'

Brian boggled at the order, shouted out by one of the officers from the quarterdeck. Bizarre! He dropped the scrubbing brush and placed both his hands on the deck. Really, the Navy had some funny ideas. What was the point of him putting all his hands on the deck? All hands, indeed. He only had two.

'What are you doing?' Keane demanded. 'The first lieutenant's given the order for all hands on deck. Cap'n Martin's coming ashore!'

'Get your arse moving, Wells,' the boatswain shouted, rushing past, 'if you don't want to be kissing the gunner's daughter afore the morning's out.'

Suddenly the deck was swarming with sailors. The officers lined up at the top of the gangplank and as Brian joined Keane, Adams and the rest on the upper deck, the boatswain produced a whistle and began piping. A group of men came up the gangplank led by a craggy-faced man in late middle age who wore a long-tailed navy blue coat trimmed with gold braid and a cocked hat like Nelson's.

He glowered at the boatswain and snapped:

'Stop that atrocious noise!'

Stevens stopped piping and stood still, eyes ahead, unmoving. Captain Martin stalked across the deck towards the quarterdeck, followed by the lieutenants and the younger officers – midshipmen, who all looked to Brian like they were about twelve.

Captain Martin took his place on the quarterdeck, flanked by his officers. He frowned balefully down at the assembled crew and gripped the rail in both hands.

'I see a few new faces in the crew,' he said in a strong, gritty voice that carried to all corners of the deck. 'Lieutenant Forester has been sending out the press gang again, I understand. A grubbier gaggle of villains I've never seen. Thought you'd get away from all those girls you'd got in trouble, all those angry husbands and the parish constable? Thought you'd escape the gallows by joining my ship? I'll have none of your thieving, rascally ways, you landlubbing scum!'

‘Today we set sail for Spain, where the Frogs are still up to their knavish tricks while Boney himself bothers the Ruskies. We’re guarding a convoy transporting wages to our troops in the Peninsula and I don’t want this vital mission jeopardised by the scum we have to take on. So many good mariners have been lost to this damned endless war.

‘This is His Majesty’s Frigate *Mars*, named after the Roman god of war, as all you classical scholars will know, and war is our trade. As a frigate, we are permitted to take enemy vessels as prize, and all crewmembers are entitled to their share of the prize money. So bear that in mind when you’re fighting Froggy, and maybe that will inspire thieves and villains like you to do the duty England expects.

‘We set sail at two bells of the afternoon watch.’

Curtly, Captain Martin dismissed them and stalked off to the wardroom, followed by his lieutenants.

Brian trailed back to the section of deck where he and his shipmates had been holystoning. Looked like they’d have a lot more duties now, if they were setting sail in a few hours. As he continued to scrub, he looked longingly towards the shore. It was now or never. Leap over the side, swim to the dockside, scramble ashore, vanish into the maze of streets and alleys... Find Ada.

But where was she? He wasn’t even sure he could find the way back to Chester. Things were so different here in the nineteenth century. And was she still there? Maybe he should just go back to the cellar and wait for Percy to open the wormhole. That would take the best part of a year. How was he going to survive in the meantime?

‘Come on, Wellsie!’ Adams clapped him on the shoulder as six bells rang out. ‘Time for the grog ration.’

With a despondent sigh, Brian took his eyes away from the dockside and followed the American up the deck.

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The Dark Place

Chapter 5

Wednesday dawned crisp and cold. The weather had changed overnight and a thick white frost covered the ground. Martin woke at 7.00 am after an uneventful night's sleep. As he lay in bed looking at the ceiling, he hoped the day would be over quickly, he wanted Thursday to be here so he could see Isobel again.

Isobel was also awake and she was thinking about Martin. The previous evening she had fallen asleep on the settee and had woken up at just after midnight. She had thought about staying in front of the fire but knew she would be more comfortable in bed. Isobel switched off the lights and the fire and took her dishes out to the kitchen.

She put them in the bowl in the sink and thought to herself, 'I'll wash them in the morning.'

The heating had gone off at just after eleven and Isobel shivered as she made her way upstairs to her bedroom. Taking off her dressing gown and removing the towel from her hair Isobel slipped under the duvet on her bed. The cold bed brought her skin out in goose bumps and her nipples hardened from the cold. Isobel pulled the duvet up under her chin, pulled it close around her body and was asleep within minutes.

When Isobel woke the next morning, she hugged her pillow and thought, 'Only one more day until I see Martin.'

The morning passed quickly for Martin and as he made his way to the dining room at lunchtime to get a cup of coffee, he hoped the rest of the day would go by as quickly.

Mary Johnson smiled her nicest smile and wished she'd left another button on the front of her white uniform undone as she saw Martin come through the double doors.

'Hello,' said Mary as Martin came to the counter. 'What would you like?'

Martin smiled back and Mary felt her stomach turn over. 'I'd like a coffee, please,' said Martin.

'Milk, two sugars?' said Mary as she started to pour coffee into a white mug.

Martin raised an eyebrow as he paid for the coffee and said, 'You've been paying attention, haven't you, Mary? Remembering how I like my coffee.'

Mary laughed as she said, 'I like to pay attention to my customers and remember what they like.'

Martin grinned at Mary and said, 'Well, thank you very much.'

As Martin walked away Mary was all smiles, 'He spoke to me and he remembered my name,' her inner voice shouted happily.

Further down the counter Mary's older colleague Maureen brought her down to earth when she said to her, 'He only bought a coffee, you know. It wasn't like you've been on a date.'

Mary turned towards the other woman and said sweetly, 'He smiled at me, though, didn't he?' Then she added with a hint of venom, 'And he called me by my name, but maybe he only remembers the young women.'

'Your name's on the badge on the front of your uniform,' said Maureen gently.

The morning had dragged for Isobel. The shop had been quiet and Karen hadn't been her usual cheerful self. Isobel had finally asked Karen if everything was all right, as she didn't seem herself.

'I wish I knew what was wrong with Tom,' replied Karen. 'Monday night was strange. Tom had cooked a meal then there was all that drama with the McGuires.' Karen raised her eyebrows as she said, 'Tom and I, you know, did something we haven't done for a while, which was great, but then last night when we got back to the house he was all quiet again. I just wish I knew what was wrong with him,' she said again.

Isobel didn't know what to say to Karen about what was happening between her and Tom. She'd seemed so happy yesterday. 'All I can say is you need to talk to Tom about it,' said Isobel. 'You can't have your feelings going up and down like this all the time. It's just not good for you.'

'I know. You're right,' said Karen. 'I'll try and talk to him tonight.' The rest of the day passed quite quickly. There were a few customers and Karen seemed to cheer up.

'Maybe deciding to speak to Tom about things has made her feel better,' thought Isobel.

When Isobel and Karen left the shop that night the temperature had dropped sharply. Isobel offered to give Karen a lift but she said she needed to pick up some milk and bread so would get the bus home.

'I hope you can sort things out with Tom,' said Isobel.

Karen smiled and said, 'So do I.'

Martin left the hospital at just after 10.00 pm. It was bitterly cold and he pulled the collar of his overcoat up against the chill as he made his way to his car. The frost was already forming on the car windscreen and he had to wait a few minutes for the heated screen to clear.

'I'm glad I put the heating at home on the timer,' thought Martin as he drove home. Arriving back at the house Martin could hear Spook meowing in the kitchen.

'I'll bet he's starving,' thought Martin smiling.

‘Hi, Spook,’ said Martin as he opened the kitchen door and walked into the room. Spook immediately ran over to the cupboard where he knew the cat food was kept and began circling round in front of the door meowing.

‘I know, I know,’ said Martin. ‘But there was nothing I could do. I had to work late tonight.’ Martin emptied the food into the bowl; Spook buried his head in the bowl and began eating as fast as he could. Martin made himself a coffee and a sandwich and went through into the lounge. The heating was on but the room still felt chilly so he lit the fire as well. As he relaxed in front of the fire, Martin was looking forward to his few days off work but he was especially looking forward to seeing Isobel.

As Isobel made her way home, she was thinking about lunch the next day with Martin.

‘I wonder where we’ll go,’ she thought. ‘The local wine bar does nice salads at lunchtime.’ When she got home the house was cold and dark.

‘I really must leave the heating on the timer all the time now,’ she thought to herself. Isobel switched on the lights and the heating and went into the kitchen to make a drink. Isobel decided to have a cup of Earl Grey tea so filled the kettle and switched it on to boil. As the kettle heated up, she thought about Martin and hoped she would see more of him this weekend.

‘I wonder if he’d like to come over here on Friday,’ she thought. ‘I’ll be here on my own waiting for the delivery van and he could see the new pieces I’ve bought.’

‘He’s probably already got something organised,’ Isobel’s inner voice countered. ‘Why would he want to spend the day waiting round with me anyway?’ Isobel walked back into the lounge carrying her tea and a plate with a couple of digestive biscuits on it. She lit the fire and the table lamps and relaxed on the settee. She flicked on the TV but the early evening quiz shows and news digest programmes did little to entertain her. Isobel decided to have a shower and listen to some music instead. The house had warmed up now that the heating was on and the bedrooms and en suite were much more comfortable. Isobel switched on the shower and took off her white blouse and black skirt. She hung up the skirt but the blouse, along with her panties and bra went into the wash basket. As she showered Isobel thought about Karen and wondered if everything was OK, with her and Tom tonight.

At 10.30, Isobel jumped as the ringing of the phone startled her. She had been thinking about Martin and wondering if he would call. She answered the phone hoping it was Martin.

‘Hello,’ said Isobel.

‘Hi Isobel, it’s Martin.’

‘I was just thinking about you,’ said Isobel.

‘I was just sitting here thinking about you too,’ said Martin. ‘I was wondering where you’d like to go for lunch tomorrow. I don’t think the weather is going to improve.’

Perhaps we should make it somewhere close to the shop?’ Martin suggested.

‘It has gone really cold, hasn’t it?’ said Isobel. ‘I was thinking we could go to the local wine bar. They do a nice lunchtime menu and it’s only round the corner.’

‘That sounds great,’ Martin replied. ‘Is it still OK to pick you up at 12.30?’

‘That will be lovely,’ said Isobel. ‘I’m really looking forward to seeing you again.’

Martin and Isobel chatted for another half an hour about little things that had happened during the day. When they both said good night to each other and hung up the phone, both of them felt as though they would have liked to carry on talking to each other for hours.

Thursday morning was bitterly cold and the frost was once again thick on the ground. Martin woke at just after seven and even though he loved his job, he delighted in the fact that he didn’t have to get up and go to the hospital today.

Isobel was woken by her alarm at 6.30am and lay in bed listening to the radiators expanding as the warm water from the boiler flowed through the pipes. She was looking forward to her day and her lunch with Martin. After another ten minutes, Isobel decided it was warm enough to venture into the en suite bathroom.

She drew the duvet back and shivered as the cool air touched her naked body. Wrapping her dressing gown tightly round herself Isobel made her way into the en suite and turned on the shower. The water soon warmed up and as clouds of steam began to gather, Isobel slipped the dressing gown from her shoulders and stepped into the pleasing warmth of the water cascading from the showerhead.

Later as she dried herself on the large white Egyptian cotton towel Isobel wondered what she should wear today. She decided on a pair of stylish, well cut grey trousers, black blouse and a red pullover. Isobel walked through into her bedroom and used the hair dryer to remove any moisture from her hair before pulling it back and tying it in a ponytail.

As she took her clothes from the wardrobe, Isobel was contemplating which underwear she should wear. Eventually she decided on a matching pair of lacy black panties and bra. As she dressed, Isobel checked herself in the full-length mirror. She thought the grey trousers, black blouse and red pullover went well with her dark hair. A pair of black shoes with a small heel completed the ensemble. Isobel chose her long grey coat and a white scarf, which she wound around her neck before she left the house.

It was cold in the shop when Isobel arrived there at just before 8.00 am. She opened the shutter on the front door and turned on the lights and the heating before she opened the steel shutters on the windows. She went into the rear of the shop and filled the kettle with clean water before switching it on to boil. Isobel noticed that they had run out of milk so decided to go to the local newsagent’s and buy a pint of milk. As she returned to the shop, Isobel saw a man peering into the shop through the glass window on the door.

‘Can I help you?’ she said as she walked up to the door. The man turned around and it was Detective Constable Jones.

‘Good morning, Miss Stevens,’ he said. ‘I was just passing on my way to the station and I saw the light’s on so thought maybe I could have a word with your manager.’

‘I’m afraid she’s not here yet,’ replied Isobel, ‘but she should be here soon. You’re more than welcome to wait. I’m just about to make some tea, if you’d like some?’

‘That would be lovely,’ said the police officer as Isobel unlocked the door and went into the shop. The heating had taken the chill off the shop and Isobel took off her coat and hung it up. As Isobel turned her back on Detective Constable Jones and reached up to hang her coat he looked appreciatively over Isobel’s shapely hips and pert, round bottom.

‘I’ll bet she looks great without any clothes on,’ thought the detective. He quickly looked away when Isobel began to turn towards him.

‘Would you like tea or coffee?’ Isobel asked.

‘I’d prefer a coffee, if that’s OK,’ replied Detective Constable Jones.

‘Of course,’ replied Isobel. ‘Do you take milk and sugar?’

‘Milk and two sugars please,’ answered the detective. As Isobel turned away the detective once again allowed his eyes to wander over her body as he mentally undressed her.

Ten minutes later Karen arrived at the shop. She was wearing a dark coloured parka type coat with a white fake fur trim around the edge of the hood, which was pulled up over her head. As she walked into the shop Karen pulled the hood down and shook free her auburn hair.

Hearing the front door open, Isobel came into the shop from the back room. ‘Hi Karen,’ she said. ‘It’s freezing today, isn’t it? Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Karen as she took off her coat and followed Isobel into the back room. Karen was surprised to see the man leaning against the sink unit drinking from a cup as she walked into the room.

‘Karen, this is Detective Constable Jones,’ said Isobel as Karen entered the room.

‘Good morning,’ said the detective as moved away from the sink unit then placed his cup on the drainer. He retrieved his notebook from his jacket pocket and smiling at Karen said, ‘It’s Karen Small, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ replied Karen. ‘And you are?’

‘Detective Constable Jones,’ said the policeman as he opened the small black wallet

to show Karen his warrant card. He went through the same set of questions he had asked Isobel the previous Tuesday. The detective made a couple of notes before finishing his coffee, thanking them for both for all their help and leaving.

‘He was a bit creepy,’ said Karen as soon as the two women were alone.

‘I know,’ said Isobel. ‘I felt as though he was staring at me every time I turned my back on him.’

‘He probably was,’ said Karen. ‘You’re looking very nice today, meeting someone or something?’ she said laughing. Isobel felt the colour rise in her cheeks as she smiled at Karen. ‘Those trousers fit you really well and your hair looks lovely with that jumper,’ Karen continued.

‘Thanks,’ Isobel replied. ‘I wanted to dress up a bit but keep it smart. So do you think I look alright?’

‘You look lovely,’ said Karen, ‘and he won’t be able to keep his eyes off you.’ Isobel was pleased with what Karen had said and she was glad she had chosen to wear the clothes she had. ‘Do you think we’ll see Detective Constable Jones again?’ said Karen.

‘I hope not,’ Isobel replied. ‘I was so glad you arrived when you did. He was making me feel nervous just talking to him.’

The rest of the morning passed uneventfully. There were few customers and this gave Karen and Isobel time to dust the pieces and make sure each was displayed in the best way. As midday approached, Isobel could feel she was becoming more and more excited.

Martin lay in bed until nearly eight o’clock before he decided to get up and make himself a drink. The heating had been on for an hour and the house was pleasantly warm. Martin went into the kitchen and Spook jumped down from his chair and began to rub himself against Martin’s ankles while meowing. Martin bent down and stroked the cat’s head and Spook started to purr loudly.

‘Got your engine going then, Spook,’ said Martin as he rubbed the cat between its ears. ‘I’ll bet you’re hungry, aren’t you?’ he said as he went to the cupboard where the cat food was stored.

Spook followed Martin across the kitchen and then ran in front of him towards his bowl as Martin took the cat food from the cupboard. Martin emptied the food into the cat’s bowl and Spook carried on purring as he contentedly ate his food. Martin washed his hands and made himself some tea and toast before walking through into the lounge and switching on the TV to watch the morning news.

The news was full of stories of financial catastrophes from the world’s stock markets and the effects this was having on the oil and gold prices. ‘Nothing changes,’ thought Martin to himself as he watched the tanned perfectly coiffured newsreaders blandly report stories of billions being wiped from the value of the world’s markets.

‘I wonder where all this will end,’ he thought as he sipped his tea. Spook wandered in from the kitchen, jumped up on the settee next to Martin, and started rubbing his head against Martin’s leg. Martin stroked Spook and thought briefly about checking his emails then decided against it. He knew the post would be arriving soon and he wanted to get that out of the way before he met Isobel for lunch.

Martin’s attention was suddenly drawn back to the news broadcast when he heard the word “exsanguinated.” As he watched, the newsreader was giving details of what the local police were calling a multiple murder. The screen shifted to an image of a large three-story house set against a backdrop of tall dark pine trees and snow-covered ground. The voice over told the story of the remote manor house outside the village of Kallaste on the western shores of Lake Peipsi in Estonia, where police had found the bodies of twelve individuals who had all been completely drained of blood. All the corpses were in varying stages of decay but the cold weather had helped slow down the decomposition. The police were hopeful that this would lead to early identification of the individuals involved and aid their investigation.

The corpses included men, women and children and the police were baffled as to how they died or how they came to be in such a remote location. Martin listened to the news report with a feeling of dread. He wondered how any human being could harm another, let alone knowingly extinguish their life force. Martin heard the rattle of the arriving post on the floor of the porch and this broke the dread fascination he had with the drama that was playing out on the TV screen. Martin switched off the TV and made his way to the porch to retrieve his post.

The post was the usual mix of research publications and journals as well as bills and statements. Martin quickly worked through the most important items and filed the journals and publications away to be read when he had more time. At twelve o’clock Martin made his way from the front door of his house across the brittle white grass towards his garage. Even though it was lunchtime, the temperature had hardly risen at all and Martin’s breath made white clouds in front of his face as he walked.

He’d showered, shaved, and dressed in blue jeans, his favourite brown boots and a crisp white casual shirt underneath which he wore a white t-shirt. Martin had his leather jacket on as well as a striped scarf, which he thought contrasted well with his brown jacket. Martin smiled as he got into his car and turned the ignition key and started the engine. The car took a few minutes to warm up and as he sat in the garage, Martin thought about Isobel.

‘I wonder if she would like to come round here for something to eat tonight,’ he thought.

‘She’ll just think you’re after one thing,’ his conscience argued back.

‘Well, I’m going to ask her anyway,’ Martin countered as he drove out of the garage.

Twenty-five minutes later Martin parked his car in a side road close to Isobel’s shop and walked the short distance to the shop front. He had checked his reflection in the windows of the shops he passed as he neared his destination and hoped he looked OK.

Taking a deep breath Martin opened the door to Stevens' Antiques and made his way inside.

Karen looked up as she heard the door open and a tall good-looking man wearing a leather jacket and jeans walked into the shop.

'Can I help you?' she asked.

'I'm here to see Isobel,' said the man before he extended his hand and said, 'You must be Karen. I'm Martin; nice to finally meet you.'

Karen smiled as she shook hands with Martin and said, 'It's nice to be able to put a face to the name.'

As they shook hands, Isobel came out of the back room. Martin felt his stomach turn over when he saw her. Isobel smiled at Martin and walked over to him. She took both his hands and kissed him on the cheek.

'Hi, Martin,' she said.

'Hi, you look lovely,' answered Martin as he gazed into Isobel's emerald green eyes. Time seemed to stand still for both of them until Karen broke the spell by asking where they were going for lunch.

'We're going to the Corner House,' said Isobel.

'That will be nice,' said Karen. 'They do a lovely lunch time menu.'

'I'll just get my coat,' said Isobel as she went into the back room. Martin watched her walk away and thought she was gorgeous. Isobel came back into the shop wearing her grey coat. She'd turned up the collar and tied the white scarf round her neck. They left the shop and strolled hand in hand to the wine bar.

As they left the shop, Karen watched them go and envied their obvious closeness. She smiled as she thought about the way Martin and Isobel had stared at each other as they held each other's hands.

'I hope it works out for them,' she thought, as she concentrated on arranging the display of Victorian lace napkins on an unusual octagonal shaped walnut side table. The table was dated 1890 and its near perfect condition more than justified its seven hundred pound price tag. Karen thought the delicate lace napkins looked lovely set against the rich coloured tabletop.

At the wine bar, Martin and Isobel were enjoying lunch. The wine bar was warm and comfortable and the food was delicious. Martin had chosen a steak baguette while Isobel was having a Caesar salad. They were chatting about how they had spent the last few days. By some unspoken agreement, they both avoided the unfortunate incident on Monday with the young girl in the pink coat.

Martin looked at Isobel and thought she looked stunning. Her red pullover set off her

dark hair perfectly and the grey trousers showed off her long legs.

‘I was wondering,’ began Martin, ‘if you’d like to come over to my house tonight for something to eat.’

‘That would be lovely,’ said Isobel smiling. ‘What are you going to cook for me?’

‘I was thinking of cooking a chicken with roast potatoes and vegetables,’ said Martin.

‘A roast dinner on a cold evening sounds fantastic,’ said Isobel happily. ‘I’ll bring some wine and some chocolates for afters. What time shall I come over?’

‘Is half past seven too early?’ asked Martin.

‘Of course not,’ said Isobel. ‘I’m looking forward to it already but you’ll have to tell me what number house you live in,’ she said smiling.

‘Forty two,’ said Martin.

Isobel clapped her hands. ‘The answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything,’ she said laughing.

Martin grinned at her and said, ‘That’s what convinced me to buy the house.’

After they had finished their lunch, they walked back to the shop happy in each others’ company. As they neared the shop, Isobel stopped and turned towards Martin. She put her arms around his shoulders and pulled him close. As they kissed, Martin circled his arms round Isobel and he could feel her firm breasts pushing against his chest as he held her tight. They parted and each was a little breathless with passion. They looked into each others eyes and Martin gently kissed Isobel’s lips.

‘I’ll see you later,’ he whispered.

Isobel kissed him back and nodded in agreement. They held hands tightly as they walked the last twenty yards to the shop. At the door, Isobel kissed Martin on the cheek and squeezed his hand as she moved away towards the door. She gave Martin a little wave and went into the shop. Martin turned away and felt like he was walking on air as he made his way back to his car.

As Isobel came into the shop, Karen laughed and said, ‘Look at you.’

Isobel looked puzzled and asked, ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s that look again,’ said Karen, grinning. ‘All doe-eyed and vulnerable.’

‘Oh,’ said Isobel smiling. ‘That look. I can’t help it, though he makes me feel all funny inside like I’ve got butterflies or something.’

‘Tom used to make me feel like that,’ said Karen sadly. ‘Never mind. I’m sure he’ll make me feel like that again soon.’ Karen smiled at Isobel and said, ‘I’m glad Martin

makes you feel like that, he seems really nice. So when are you seeing him again?’

Isobel felt a little guilty as she said, ‘He’s invited me over to his house for something to eat tonight.’ Here she was talking about going out on a date when Karen was having problems at home.

‘That’ll be nice,’ said Karen. ‘What’s he going to cook, or will it be a takeaway?’

‘He said he’d do a roast dinner,’ said Isobel.

‘Sounds good,’ said Karen as Isobel took off her coat and walked towards the back room.

‘Would you like a drink?’ said Isobel as she folded her coat over her arm.

‘A cup of tea would be nice,’ Karen replied. Isobel made her way into the back room where she hung up her coat and started to make two cups of tea.

Martin was driving back towards his house and in his mind he was already preparing the evening meal. He stopped at the large Sainsbury’s store in Prescott Road, close to Old Swan, and bought a large organic chicken, some Maris piper potatoes and some sweet peppers, parsnips and tomatoes. He planned to put garlic butter under the skin of the chicken breast and roast the vegetables with garlic, thyme and rosemary, which he already had at home. Martin also bought a nice bottle of Chardonnay and a bottle of Barolo. He knew the dry red wine would complement the savoury herbs he was going to roast with the vegetables but Isobel might prefer the lighter Chardonnay with the chicken.

As he was about to leave the store Martin noticed a large bunch of white longiflorum lilies on the flower display. He thought the flowers would look good in the middle of the dining table so bought them. Arriving back at the house Martin quickly dusted the lounge before vacuuming the carpet. He tidied the coffee table and put the pile of CD cases back in the rack. He then repeated the dusting and vacuuming process in the dining room. Martin cut the bottom from the stems of the lilies and added the feed to the water in the vase before arranging the lilies and placing the vase in the centre of the dining table. Stepping back to admire the table decoration Martin suddenly remembered his daydream about Isobel walking towards him naked and carrying large bouquet of white lilies in her arms.

‘I wonder what made me think of that,’ he thought as he made his way into the kitchen to start preparing the meal.

Isobel and Karen left the shop at just before 5.30pm and it was bitterly cold. The temperature had barely risen above freezing all day and because of the weather Isobel was giving Karen a lift home. They walked to Isobel’s car through the freezing night air and both were glad when they reached it. As they sat in the car waiting for the engine to warm up, Isobel reminded Karen that she would be at home all day Friday waiting for the delivery of the pieces she had ordered the previous weekend.

‘I’ll be OK, tomorrow,’ Karen said. ‘It’s never very busy on a Friday anyway, is it?’

‘Well, all you need to do is give me a ring if there are any problems,’ replied Isobel. The drive to Karen’s took longer because of the icy roads and it was after six when Isobel stopped the car outside Karen’s house.

‘You’d better be getting home,’ said Karen, ‘if you’re supposed to be at Martin’s house for 7.30.’

‘He’s only ten minutes from me so I’m sure I’ll be in plenty of time,’ replied Isobel. ‘Did you talk to Tom last night?’

Karen looked out of the window before she replied. ‘I tried but I couldn’t really say what I wanted to say. I thought everything was OK, the other night but nothing seems to have changed.’

Isobel took hold of Karen’s hand and said, ‘I’m sure if you talk to Tom about how you feel you can sort things out.’

Karen squeezed Isobel’s hand and said, ‘I hope so.’ Karen turned towards Isobel and awkwardly put her arms round her and hugged her.

‘Thanks Isobel,’ she said. ‘Have a great night with Martin. I’ll see you on Saturday.’ Karen got out of the car and waved as Isobel drove down the road.

As she made her way home, Isobel hoped Karen and Tom would sort out whatever was wrong between them. She didn’t like to see Karen troubled and upset. She stopped at the off-licence and bought a bottle of white wine and a box of assorted milk and white chocolates. When she arrived home, she quickly took off her coat then made her way to the kitchen and put the wine in the freezer to chill it quickly.

She ran upstairs to the bedroom, switched on the lights and closed the blinds before going into the en suite and turning on the shower. Isobel quickly undressed and hung her trousers and pullover in her wardrobe before putting her blouse and underclothes into the wash basket. As she showered, Isobel wondered what she would wear and couldn’t decide between a skirt or trousers.

‘I had trousers on today,’ she thought. ‘So I think I’ll wear a skirt tonight.’

Once out of the shower Isobel dried herself then walked naked into her bedroom. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror. Standing on one leg and half turned towards the mirror, she lifted the heel of her other foot while leaving the toes on the floor, and looked at her reflection.

‘Not looking too bad for your age,’ she thought smiling.

Isobel turned to face the mirror and examined herself. Her breasts were firm and she had trimmed her pubic hair leaving just a small dark triangle shape, the apex of which seemed to point downwards. Isobel took a long dark skirt and a pale blue pullover from her wardrobe as well as a white t-shirt with a low cut neckline, which she laid on the bed before taking a pair of black hold ups and a matching white bra and lace thong

from her chest of drawers.

Isobel dried her hair and dabbed herself with perfume then slipped on the thong and bra. She pulled the stockings on and adjusted the elasticated tops until they were comfortable before pulling the t-shirt over her head and fastening the skirt round her waist. She applied a small amount of make-up and some red lipstick before choosing a pair of black high-heel shoes from the wardrobe. Isobel took the blue pullover from the bed and made her way downstairs.

At 6.45, Martin put the roast potatoes on the top shelf of the oven and after turning the chicken over to brown the breast returned the roasting tray to the middle shelf. The garlic butter he had pushed under the skin of the breast had melted into the meat and the chicken smelt fantastic. On the bottom shelf, Martin placed the tray of vegetables. He'd coated the vegetables with oil and the chopped herbs as well as a drizzle of chilli oil. He checked the temperature before closing the oven door and making his way upstairs to shower and change before Isobel arrived. As he showered, Martin thought about Isobel and wondered if she felt the same as he did.

'You haven't even known her for a week,' his inner voice pointed out and he had no answer. He had never felt the way he did about Isobel about anyone else before and he wondered if he was falling in love. Martin dressed in a pair of dark blue jeans and a grey shirt. He slipped on a pair of thonged sandals and made his way downstairs to wait. Martin chose a CD from the rack, put it into the CD player, and pressed play. As the distinctive voice of Chris Carrabba filled the room, Martin lost himself in the music as he sat and waited.

At just before 7.30 Isobel rang the doorbell at Martin's house. She was shivering and it wasn't just from the cold. Martin opened the door and brought her into the house.

'I've brought some wine and some chocolates,' said Isobel, handing both to Martin who put them on the table next to the answer phone. He took Isobel's coat and hung it up then taking the wine and the chocolates ushered her into the lounge where the fire was lit.

'This is lovely,' said Isobel as she walked into the lounge and warmed herself by the fire. Martin thought she looked absolutely stunning. Her dark hair was loose and Isobel swept it back from her face and over her shoulder as she turned towards Martin.

'You look stunning,' said Martin as he moved towards Isobel and kissed her gently on the lips. They held each other for a few seconds before Martin asked if she would like a glass of wine.

'Yes, please,' said Isobel. 'I'd like a glass of white wine.'

Martin went into the kitchen to open the wine while Isobel made herself comfortable on the settee. Martin came back into the room with two glasses of wine and handed one to Isobel. Isobel stood up as she took the wine and they touched glasses.

'Cheers,' said Martin.

‘Cheers,’ replied Isobel. ‘Thank you for asking me to dinner.’

As he looked into Isobel’s stunning green eyes Martin felt his stomach turn over. The spell was broken when Spook came into the room and walked over to where Martin and Isobel were standing and started to rub himself round their ankles. Isobel laughed delightedly as she bent down.

‘You must be Spook,’ she said as she stroked the cat’s head. Spook was purring loudly and rubbing himself against Isobel’s ankles.

‘You’ve got a friend for life there,’ said Martin laughing. ‘He’ll let you do that all night.’

‘He’s lovely,’ said Isobel as she rubbed Spook’s head.

‘I’m going to put the food out,’ said Martin.

‘Can I help?’ asked Isobel.

‘You can bring the wine into the dining room if you like,’ replied Martin. Isobel followed Martin into the well-equipped kitchen.

‘Something smells lovely,’ she said as they walked into the kitchen. Martin had already taken the chicken out of the oven to cool so he quickly carved the breast and laid the golden chicken slices on two plates. Martin put roast potatoes and spoonfuls of the roasted vegetables next to the chicken and both he and Isobel walked through into the dining room. Martin had lit two large white candles at either side of the vase of flowers. The lilies seemed to reflect the candle light, making them look an ethereal white.

‘That was lovely,’ said Isobel as she finished the last piece of chicken and placed her knife and fork on the plate. She dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin before taking a sip of her wine. ‘You really are a good cook, Martin. I’ll let you cook for me more often.’

‘I’d like that,’ said Martin, as he reached across the table and took Isobel’s hand. ‘Let’s go and sit in the lounge,’ suggested Martin. They walked hand in hand into the lounge and stopped in front of the fire. Isobel turned towards Martin. Her face was softly illuminated by the red and yellow glow of the firelight and they moved into each other’s arms and kissed. Their lips parted and Isobel rested her head on Martin’s shoulder and held him close.

Martin’s hand was in the small of Isobel’s back and as he kissed her hair and breathed in the smell of her, he pulled her towards him. Isobel lifted her face and her lips found Martin’s, her mouth opened and their tongues met as they passionately kissed. Isobel could feel Martin’s erection pushing against her and she felt nervous and excited in equal measures.

As the kiss ended and their lips parted, she put her index finger on Martin’s lips and

whispered, 'I've not had a boyfriend for three years, Martin, so I'm a bit out of practice.'

Martin cupped Isobel's face with his hands and gently kissed her lips. 'Let's sit down,' he said as he guided Isobel to the settee.

They sat next to each other and as Martin put his right arm around Isobel's shoulders, she rested her head against his shoulder and seemed to mould herself to him. Isobel slipped her shoes off and folded her legs underneath herself as she relaxed against Martin. It felt so comfortable and natural to her to be sitting like this as she rested her head on Martin's shoulder she felt wonderful.

Martin stroked Isobel's upper arm as they sat on the settee. The only illumination came from the glow of the fire and the flames created shadows that flickered and moved around the room. The hi-fi was playing quietly in the background.

'Would you like a coffee or a brandy?' asked Martin.

'I think I'd like a brandy but I'm driving,' said Isobel.

'You could stay,' volunteered Martin.

'I know,' replied Isobel, 'but we've only known each other a few days, Martin. I need to be sure before I commit to someone again. I've been hurt before and my emotions have been going up and down since we met last week.'

Martin stared at the fire lost in thought. 'I've been feeling exactly the same,' he said. 'I've been thinking about you every day and wondering how you feel about me.'

'Well, let's just take things slowly shall we?' said Isobel. 'We both need to be sure before we get ourselves involved with something that isn't right for both of us.' Isobel lifted her head from Martin's shoulder. She looked into Martin eyes and kissed him. As they kissed, the music played quietly in the background.

Martin held Isobel close and knew he didn't want to lose her from his life.

'My new pieces are being delivered sometime between eight and five tomorrow,' said Isobel. 'I was wondering if you'd like to come to my house and help me unpack them.'

'I'd love to,' said Martin. 'I was hoping we could spend some more time together.'

'That's great,' said Isobel. 'I can make us some lunch and if you're not doing anything tomorrow night I could make us some dinner?'

'I'd like that,' said Martin, smiling.

Isobel looked at her wrist and checked the time on her watch. 'It's getting late,' she said. 'I'd better be going.'

She slowly stood up and Martin stood with her. They held each other and kissed in the glow of the firelight. They walked hand in hand to the hall and Martin held Isobel's coat for her as she slid her arms into the sleeves.

'I've had a lovely evening, Martin, thank you. Just come over in the morning when you're ready,' said Isobel as she kissed Martin goodnight then turned towards the door. Martin opened the door for her and watched as she made her way over the frost-covered grass to her car. As she left the driveway, Martin waved and then closed the front door. The hi-fi continued to play in the background.

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Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE THOUSAND POUNDS.—THE STRANGER'S PRECAUTIONS.

Varney moved not now, nor did he speak, but, like a statue, he stood, with his unearthly looking eyes rivetted upon the door of the apartment.

In a few moments one of his servants came, and said—

"Sir, a person is here, who says he wants to see you. He desired me to say, that he had ridden far, and that moments were precious when the tide of life was ebbing fast."

"Yes! yes!" gasped Varney; "admit him, I know him! Bring him here? It is—an—old friend—of mine."

He sank into a chair, and still he kept his eyes fixed upon that door through which his visitor must come. Surely some secret of dreadful moment must be connected with him whom Sir Francis expected—dreaded—and yet dared not refuse to see. And now a footstep approaches—a slow and a solemn footstep—it pauses a moment at the door of the apartment, and then the servant flings it open, and a tall man enters. He is enveloped in the folds of a horseman's cloak, and there is the clank of spurs upon his heels as he walks into the room.

Varney rose again, but he said not a word and for a few moments they stood opposite each other in silence. The domestic has left the room, and the door is closed, so that there was nothing to prevent them from conversing; and, yet, silent they continued for some minutes. It seemed as if each was most anxious that the other should commence the conversation, first.

And yet there was nothing so very remarkable in the appearance of that stranger which should entirely justify Sir Francis Varney, in feeling so much alarm at his presence. He certainly was a man past the prime of life; and he looked like one who had battled much with misfortune, and as if time had not passed so lightly over his brow, but that it had left deep traces of its progress. The only thing positively bad about his countenance, was to be found in his eyes. There there was a most ungracious and sinister expression, a kind of lurking and suspicious look, as if he were always resolving in his mind some deep laid scheme, which might be sufficient to circumvent the whole of mankind.

Finding, probably, that Varney would not speak first, he let his cloak fall more loosely about him, and in a low, deep tone, he said,

"I presume I was expected?"

"You were," said Varney. "It is the day, and it is the hour."

"You are right. I like to see you so mindful. You don't improve in looks since—"

"Hush—hush! no more of that; can we not meet without a dreadful allusion to the

past! There needs nothing to remind me of it; and your presence here now shows that you are not forgetful. Speak not of that fearful episode. Let no words combine to place it in a tangible shape to human understanding. I cannot, dare not, hear you speak of that."

"It is well," said the stranger; "as you please. Let our interview be brief. You know my errand?"

"I do. So fearful a drag upon limited means, is not likely to be readily forgotten."

"Oh, you are too ingenious—too full of well laid schemes, and so apt and ready in their execution, to feel, as any fearful drag, the conditions of our bargain. Why do you look at me so earnestly?"

"Because," said Varney—and he trembled as he spoke—"because each lineament of your countenance brings me back to the recollection of the only scene in life that made me shudder, and which I cannot think of, even with the indifference of contempt. I see it all before my mind's eye, coming in frightful panoramic array, those incidents, which even to dream of, are sufficient to drive the soul to madness; the dread of this annual visit, hangs upon me like a dark cloud upon my very heart; it sits like some foul incubus, destroying its vitality and dragging me, from day to day, nearer to that tomb, from whence not as before, I can emerge."

"You have been among the dead?" said the stranger.

"I have."

"And yet are mortal."

"Yes," repeated Varney, "yes, and yet am mortal."

"It was I that plucked you back to that world, which, to judge from your appearance, has had since that eventful period but few charms for you. By my faith you look like—"

"Like what I am," interrupted Varney.

"This is a subject that once a year gets frightfully renewed between us. For weeks before your visit I am haunted by frightful recollections, and it takes me many weeks after you are gone, before I can restore myself to serenity. Look at me; am I not an altered man?"

"In faith you are," said the stranger "I have no wish to press upon you painful recollections. And yet 'tis strange to me that upon such a man as you, the event to which you allude should produce so terrible an impression."

"I have passed through the agony of death," said Varney, "and have again endured the torture—for it is such—of the re-union of the body and the soul; not having endured so much, not the faintest echo of such feelings can enter into your imagination."

"There may be truth in that, and yet, like a fluttering moth round a flame, it seems to me, that when I do see you, you take a terrific kind of satisfaction in talking of the past."

"That is strictly true," said Varney; "the images with which my mind is filled are frightful. Pent up do they remain for twelve long months. I can speak to you, and you only, without disguise, and thus does it seem to me that I get rid of the uneasy load of horrible imaginings. When you are gone, and have been gone a sufficient lapse of time, my slumbers are not haunted with frightful images—I regain a comparative peace, until the time slowly comes around again, when we are doomed to meet."

"I understand you. You seem well lodged here?"

"I have ever kept my word, and sent to you, telling you where I am."

"You have, truly. I have no shadow of complaint to make against you. No one, could have more faithfully performed his bond than you have. I give you ample credit for all that, and long may you live still to perform your conditions."

"I dare not deceive you, although to keep such faith I may be compelled to deceive a hundred others."

"Of that I cannot judge. Fortune seems to smile upon you; you have not as yet disappointed me."

"And will not now," said Varney. "The gigantic and frightful penalty of disappointing you, stares me in the face. I dare not do so."

He took from his pocket, as he spoke, a clasped book, from which he produced several bank notes, which he placed before the stranger.

"A thousand pounds," he said; "that is the agreement."

"It is to the very letter. I do not return to you a thousand thanks—we understand each other better than to waste time with idle compliment. Indeed I will go quite as far as to say, truthfully, that did not my necessities require this amount from you, you should have the boon, for which you pay that price at a much cheaper rate."

"Enough! enough!" said Varney. "It is strange, that your face should have been the last I saw, when the world closed upon me, and the first that met my eyes when I was again snatched back to life! Do you pursue still your dreadful trade?"

"Yes," said the stranger, "for another year, and then, with such a moderate competence as fortune has assigned me, I retire, to make way for younger and abler spirits."

"And then," said Varney, "shall you still require of me such an amount as this?"

"No; this is my last visit but one. I shall be just and liberal towards you. You are not old; and I have no wish to become the clog of your existence. As I have before told

you, it is my necessity, and not my inclination, that sets the value upon the service I rendered you."

"I understand you, and ought to thank you. And in reply to so much courtesy, be assured, that when I shudder at your presence, it is not that I regard you with horror, as an individual, but it is because the sight of you awakens mournfully the remembrance of the past."

"It is clear to me," said the stranger; "and now I think we part with each other in a better spirit than we ever did before; and when we meet again, the remembrance that it is the last time, will clear away the gloom that I now find hanging over you."

"It may! it may! With what an earnest gaze you still regard me!"

"I do. It does appear to me most strange, that time should not have obliterated the effects which I thought would have ceased with their cause. You are no more the man that in my recollection you once were, than I am like a sporting child."

"And I never shall be," said Varney; "never—never again! This self-same look which the hand of death had placed upon me, I shall ever wear. I shudder at myself, and as I oft perceive the eye of idle curiosity fixed steadfastly upon me, I wonder in my inmost heart, if even the wildest guesser hits upon the cause why I am not like unto other men?"

"No. Of that you may depend there is no suspicion; but I will leave you now; we part such friends, as men situated as we are can be. Once again shall we meet, and then farewell for ever."

"Do you leave England, then?"

"I do. You know my situation in life. It is not one which offers me inducements to remain. In some other land, I shall win the respect and attention I may not hope for here. There my wealth will win many golden opinions; and casting, as best I may, the veil of forgetfulness over my former life, my declining years may yet be happy. This money, that I have had of you from time to time, has been more pleasantly earned than all beside. Wrung, as it has been, from your fears, still have I taken it with less reproach. And now, farewell!"

Varney rang for a servant to show the stranger from the house, and without another word they parted.

Then, when he was alone, that mysterious owner of that costly home drew a long breath of apparently exquisite relief.

"That is over!—that is over!" he said. "He shall have the other thousand pounds, perchance, sooner than he thinks. With all expedition I will send it to him. And then on that subject I shall be at peace. I shall have paid a large sum; but that which I purchased was to me priceless. It was my life!—it was my life itself! That possession which the world's wealth cannot restore! And shall I grudge these thousands, which have found their way into this man's hands? No! 'Tis true, that existence, for me, has

lost some of its most resplendent charms. 'Tis true, that I have no earthly affections, and that shunning companionship with all, I am alike shunned by all; and yet, while the life-blood still will circulate within my shrunken veins, I cling to vitality."

He passed into an inner room, and taking from a hook, on which it hung, a long, dark-coloured cloak, he enveloped his tall, unearthly figure within its folds.

Then, with his hat in his hand, he passed out of his house, and appeared to be taking his way towards Bannerworth House.

Surely it must be guilt of no common die that could oppress a man so destitute of human sympathies as Sir Francis Varney. The dreadful suspicions that hovered round him with respect to what he was, appeared to gather confirmation from every act of his existence.

Whether or not this man, to whom he felt bound to pay annually so large a sum, was in the secret, and knew him to be something more than earthly, we cannot at present declare; but it would seem from the tenor of their conversation as if such were the fact.

Perchance he had saved him from the corruption of the tomb, by placing out, on some sylvan spot, where the cold moonbeams fell, the apparently lifeless form, and now claimed so large a reward for such a service, and the necessary secrecy contingent upon it.

We say this may be so, and yet again some more natural and rational explanation may unexpectedly present itself; and there may be yet a dark page in Sir Francis Varney's life's volume, which will place him in a light of superadded terrors to our readers.

Time, and the now rapidly accumulating incidents of our tale, will soon tear aside the veil of mystery that now envelopes some of our dramatis personae.

And let us hope that in the development of those incidents we shall be enabled to rescue the beautiful Flora Bannerworth from the despairing gloom that is around her. Let us hope and even anticipate that we shall see her smile again; that the roseate hue of health will again revisit her cheeks, the light buoyancy of her step return, and that as before she may be the joy of all around her, dispensing and receiving happiness.

And, he too, that gallant fearless lover, he whom no chance of time or tide could sever from the object of his fond affections, he who listened to nothing but the dictates of his heart's best feelings, let us indulge a hope that he will have a bright reward, and that the sunshine of a permanent felicity will only seem the brighter for the shadows that for a time have obscured its glory.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Seven: Triumph and Disaster

Arthur watched in amazement as more and more Breton troops appeared from the woods, infantry following in the wake of the tanks that even now were shelling the insurgent's main position. The newcomers spread out into two wings, in between which the infantry advanced, firing as they came. Now Lot's forces had been flanked; they were faced by Arthur and his tired troops coming from the south, and the Breton newcomers advancing from the east. They were also outnumbered.

Ulfin shouted from his own tank nearby, 'Your majesty, you seem to have run into trouble. Join me!'

Shortly after, Arthur was in Ulfin's tank, watching as the Breton advance forced the insurgents back up the motorway.

'Bedivere must have got through,' Ulfin said.

Arthur nodded. 'And Kay must be out there,' he added hopefully. It seemed like forever since he had last seen his brother. He rose decisively. 'We need to get this minefield cleared, and then we can come to our allies' aid,' he said.

By the time the forward approach was cleared of mines, Lot's forces had disappeared into the woodlands with the Bretons hard at their heels. All Arthur knew of the battle was the thump of grenades, the whistle of shells, the distant flash of muzzles and occasional explosions. He gave the command for his forces to renew their advance up the deserted motorway.

Had Kay and Bedivere got through to Brittany? Surely that was the only explanation for the Breton appearance. But why had he heard no word from them since they set out? And Merlin – what had happened to him?

The roar of battle grew louder as they turned a corner. They found the area ahead of them littered with corpses and bombed-out vehicles. Clearly, there had been quite a fight here while Arthur's forces were clearing the minefield. Inspection revealed that most of the dead were insurgents, but by no means all. The trail of devastation led away into the forest on the left hand. Arthur led his forces into the trees towards the distant struggle.

'The intervention of the Bretons was timely,' said Ulfin. 'Do you think we will be able to count on assistance from them in the future?'

'Maybe,' Arthur replied. 'But unless they've defeated Claudas once-and-for-all, we'll be obliged to return their aid.' He gazed out from the turret as the conifers passed on either side.

If the Bretons helped him put down Lot's insurgency he would be grateful, but he had misgivings about making himself beholden to foreigners. Lot's forces, the lords of the north, posed a threat to the stability of the country. But if Arthur were to allow the Bretons influence over him it could be disastrous. He had no relish to throw away lives and money in wars that didn't concern him.

The trees ended and the track led out into an area of open heath. Immediately ahead was a contingent of Breton tanks, under heavy attack from the insurgents, who had dug in among the trees on the far side of the clearing. As Arthur approached, he saw two tanks go up in flames.

'Fire on the insurgent position!' Arthur ordered. 'Get the infantry up there – into the trees and flank them!'

The tanks began to reinforce the Bretons' bombardment of the insurgent position. Arthur turned to the radio operator.

‘Get our allies for me,’ he said. A moment later, they were through.

‘Your highness?’ a voice crackled. It had a French accent. ‘Do I have the honour of speaking to King Arthur?’

‘This is the king,’ Arthur replied. ‘Who am I addressing?’

‘My name is Ban,’ the Breton replied. ‘With my brother Bors De Vannes, I have been coordinating the Breton struggle against the French. Your messengers offered aid in our struggle if we would intervene here...’

‘Yes, my messengers,’ Arthur said hurriedly. ‘One of them is my foster-brother. Are they with you?’

There was a pause, and Ban said, ‘Putting them through.’

After another pause, Arthur heard Kay’s breathless voice. ‘Arthur? Is that you? I’m glad to hear you again.’

Arthur closed his eyes. The feeling was unequivocally mutual.

‘I heard nothing from you!’ Arthur said. ‘What happened? You set off, then we heard nothing.’

Kay explained that he and Bedivere had been captured by Claudas’ troops then liberated by the Breton freedom fighters.

‘It took a bit of negotiating,’ Kay added. ‘But Bedivere took charge of that. We, er, promised that you would help them against their enemies.’

Arthur frowned. ‘You had no right to promise that,’ he snapped.

‘Sorry.’ Bedivere’s voice broke in. ‘The responsibility’s mine, your majesty. But our allies would settle for nothing else.’

Arthur was about to reply with a stinging rebuke, but his pleasure at hearing Bedivere’s voice was too great. ‘Why didn’t you get in touch with us once you’d come to an agreement?’ he asked.

‘We meant to,’ Kay broke in, ‘but Merlin persuaded us to maintain radio silence. Didn’t want Lord Lothian to get wind of our coming.’

‘Merlin!’ Arthur exclaimed. ‘You’ve seen Merlin? Where is he?’

At that moment, Ulfin turned to him. ‘Your majesty!’ he cried. ‘The insurgents are retreating!’

Arthur looked at him in surprise. He barked ‘Out!’ into the mike, replaced it, and scrambled up the turret. Ulfin was right.

Under attack on two sides from Arthur’s infantry, the insurgents were pulling back from their position at the edge of the trees. Seemingly demoralised, they streamed into the forest in disorganised groups. Arthur punched the air.

‘Forward!’ he shouted to his men. ‘We’ll chase them straight back to Scotland!’

Ban and his brother had apparently had the same idea, since the Breton tanks were starting up again. They advanced in the vanguard as Arthur’s own forces pursued the fleeing insurgents. Lot was done for, Arthur told himself. His men had broken and run, the cowards!

The army entered the trees, which were mainly beech and oak here, more widely spaced than the conifers Arthur had encountered earlier on. Stragglers from Lot’s retreat were visible running desperately beneath the trees a few hundred yards ahead. Some of the Breton infantry opened fire, and Arthur saw two of the running figures fall. There was a second burst of fire. The rest of the fugitives vanished into the trees.

Arthur radioed back to base for air support and soon choppers were thundering above the treetops, searching for escaping insurgents. He listened to reports over the radio as he rendezvous’d with the Breton leaders.

‘Your highness,’ greeted him as he ascended from his tank to join the two brothers. They stood beside a small stream, amongst several men dressed in fatigues and forage caps. Ban was a large, blond haired man in his early thirties, who smoked incessantly as he spoke to his young ally. Bors was younger, slimmer in build, with quite long hair and angelic blue eyes.

‘It’s an honour to meet our ally at last,’ said Ban. Bors added something in broken, incoherent English. ‘We sent your insurgents running for the hills,’ Ban added.

‘My thanks,’ said Arthur. ‘Whenever I can spare the men, I will be glad to help your fight for independence from the French. How is the situation in Brittany?’

Ban looked at Bors quickly. Then he smiled. ‘We have sent Claudas packing too,’ he said. ‘Thanks, in part, to the aid you sent us.’

‘I sent no aid...’ he began. Kay and Bedivere appeared from among Ban’s soldiers. Kay rushed forward to clap Arthur over the shoulders.

‘We did help them at one point,’ said Kay, strutting arrogantly. ‘Popped off a few shots at Claudas’ men. It helped Ban agree to join us.’

‘But it was Merlin who did the real persuading,’ said Bedivere. He looked around him. ‘Where’s he got to now?’

‘I’d like to know,’ said Arthur grimly. ‘He abandoned us before the battle...’

‘Flew to Brittany,’ Bedivere explained. ‘Without him, we’d have been in trouble.’

‘Ban and Bors were suspicious of us at first,’ Kay said. ‘Even after we’d helped fight Claudas, they said they had too much to do to fight other people’s wars. But Merlin changed their mind.’

‘He’s well known in Brittany,’ Ban broke in. ‘We knew we could trust him...’

He was interrupted by a whistling roar and an explosion. Arthur fell against the nearby tank, and clutched it for support.

‘Your insurgents return!’ Ban bellowed.

Arthur grabbed an assault rifle and began to fire towards the trees. All around him, his men were opening fire at the unseen attackers. Bodies were scattered across the glade, smoke rose from gutted tanks. The clearing that had seemed so idyllic was a scene of carnage.

Angry, he continued to blaze away. Ban seized his arm. Arthur stopped firing and looked at the Breton.

‘This won’t do, your majesty,’ Ban told him. ‘You can’t just fire blindly at them. We need strategy.’

Arthur’s anger had got the better of him. They ducked into the cover of a tank. ‘What do you suggest?’ he said.

‘Withdraw your infantry,’ Ban said. ‘Use our armour to clear the way.’

Arthur should have thought of this, but in the heat of battle and anger it hadn’t occurred to him. He turned away to issue orders.

Moments later, the infantry had withdrawn while Arthur’s tanks were advancing on the forest where the insurgents were based.

‘Get me air cover,’ Arthur was shouting down his mike as the tanks began to fire on the insurgent position. Retaliatory rockets whooshed through the trees. Explosions blossomed around the advancing tanks. Arthur winced at the damage his war was creating, but it made him more ardent to hunt down the fleeing insurgents.

Two planes zoomed over, and opened fire on the enemy. More explosions tore the forest apart. Suddenly they were out of the trees, advancing across an open space that Arthur recognised as the campsite he had attacked in the choppers – was it only

last night? Lot's forces were leaping into land rovers, leaving tents and equipment behind as planes swooped overhead, tearing up the grass with their gunfire.

'Pursue!' Arthur shouted over the radio. 'Hunt them down! I don't want to see a single insurgent escape us!'

The tanks barraged the fleeing insurgents before rumbling after them as the survivors drove down the track towards the motorway. As Arthur surveyed the battle from his turret, a beat-up old hackney cab shot out from the woods and came bumping up the track to intercept him. Arthur watched it in wonder. What were civilians doing in a warzone?

'Who's that fool?' he shouted. 'Get him out of here!'

Before anyone could react, the hackney cab pulled up with a screech directly in front of Arthur's tank.

'Stop! Stop!' Arthur yelled. 'Stop the tank!'

To his horror, they rumbled remorselessly onwards. He shot down the ladder and shouted at the driver, who was doing his best to halt the tank. Slowly but surely they came to a halt.

Arthur climbed up again to see they had stopped bare inches from the civilian vehicle. As he rubbing the sweat from his face, Arthur saw a familiar figure climb out of the cab and look up at him disapprovingly.

'Really, Arthur,' Merlin complained. 'Driving without due care and attention!'

'But Merlin!' Arthur was saying shortly afterwards. The army had halted while the insurgents fled scot-free up the motorway. 'We need to wipe them out! They'll only try again.'

The Battle of Bedegraine had reached an abrupt end. Smoke hung over the churned up countryside and fires blazed among the trees. Gunsmoke was in everyone's nostrils. The wounded were being cared for; the dead were being placed into body bags and airlifted out of there. Arthur and Merlin were arguing.

'Will you never be done?' Merlin demanded. 'Look at the number of men you've lost—mainly through your own foolish actions. Going into battle at the front, risking your life and your cause...'

'Shouldn't I risk my life when my men risk theirs?' Arthur demanded, flushed with anger rather than shame.

'What would have happened if you had been killed?' Merlin scolded him. 'I didn't bring about your coronation to see you throw your life away. This battle is over. You've had enough fun. And you've successfully proved to your supporters that you can crush the insurgency.'

'Merlin's right,' said Ban, stepping up to join them. 'That last attack was no more than a dying spasm. Your insurgents are not coming back.'

'Certainly not,' Merlin said. 'Lord Lothian has something especially nasty waiting for him when he gets back home. Something that will keep him occupied.'

'What have you done?' Arthur demanded.

Merlin shook his head. 'Not my doing; perhaps a side effect of the war. The heathens in the north have risen up, and they're reinforced by mercenaries from Germany and Scandinavia. They're targeting Lot's lands because they know Lot hates them...'

Arthur stared at the old man. 'How long before they come south?' he demanded. 'Does that mean we have to fight the heathen now?'

Merlin shook his head. 'I think we can trust Lord Lothian and his fellow insurgents to keep the heathen occupied; one side or the other will win out in the end, but they will be weakened by the struggle, and then you can crush the victor with greater ease. In the meantime, however, your staunchest ally needs your assistance. Leodegrance is still under attack from Rience.'

Arthur slumped. 'More fighting? I thought you disapproved of war.'

'I disapprove of needless slaughter,' Merlin corrected him. 'You will have to fight for your country, Arthur. I suggest you go to Leodegrance's aid as soon as your men are rested: he will provide you with the forces you need to defeat the heathen. But you may permit yourself some time for celebration. You're the victor.'

Arthur looked around him wonderingly. It was true. He was victor. This time last year he had been just a young lad, growing up in an obscure corner of the country with vague ideas of going into the Church. Now he was king, commander-in-chief, vanquisher of the insurgency. Yes, he had better go and help Leodegrance, particularly if war with the Germans was in the offing. But he was going to party first!

'We'll have a day of celebration, in Castle Bedegraine,' he said. 'We'll have Archbishop Brice up here, and we can begin with a church service for the dead. Then we'll have a ball! Kay, I made you Lord High Steward; I'll be depending on you to organise the catering.' As Kay grimaced, Arthur turned to Merlin. 'What do you think?'

'Enjoy yourself while you can,' Merlin replied grimly. 'But don't forget your duty. I shan't be attending, I'm afraid. I must go to my master Blaise, in Northumberland. He's a recluse; he'll need to know about the heathen invasion. But I'll be back, Arthur.'

'Without prior warning, no doubt,' Arthur said ruefully, grinning at Bedivere and Kay. 'You come and go at your own accord, don't you, Merlin?'

But Merlin was gone.

Archbishop Brice came up from London, accompanied by other non-combatants, including Ector, who had remained in London while Arthur led his forces against Lord Lothian. Arthur's pride, somewhat dented by Merlin's disapproval, was renewed by his foster-father's effusive congratulations.

Next morning, the Archbishop of Canterbury held a service for the dead in Castle Bedegraine Abbey, and once again Kay held the sword from the stone before his foster-brother as they processed down the nave. Arthur saw the eyes of all were upon him as he went to take his seat, resplendent in the uniform of commander-in-chief. Along with the officers under Arthur's command and the Bretons Ban and Bors, all the Lords who had remained loyal to him were present, except of course for the embattled Lord Cameliard, and they were accompanied by their families. Arthur's eyes briefly met those of an attractive young girl standing at the side of an ermine-draped lord, and he felt a tingle, a frisson.

After the service came a state banquet, and after the banquet, a ball held in the town's function rooms. Here Arthur circulated among his guests, some of whom he had met before, such as Archbishop Brice, others were strangers to him. One of these was Sevain, Earl of Cardigan.

'I don't believe you've met my daughter, the Lady Lisanor,' Earl Sevain said, as the band struck up a waltz. The earl was the ermine-draped lord Arthur had noticed in the abbey; the girl he was introducing was the one he had seen at her side.

‘Your majesty,’ Lisanor said, curtsying prettily. She had a very pretty Welsh lilt to her voice, too.

‘Hello,’ said Arthur, unable to take his eyes off her. ‘Er, shall we?’

They danced under the eyes of all, and Arthur felt grateful as he gazed again into Lisanor’s eyes, of the dancing lessons his father had insisted he take they had seemed irrelevant two years ago, in a country ravaged by banditry and civil war. He’d not expected such a civilised art to out him in good stead. But now he had saved his country from its worst oppressors, now maybe his people had time to think of more cultured pursuits than uprisings and murder.

‘You’re very quiet, your majesty,’ Lisanor said with a giggle. She had a fine, equine face that lit up when she smiled, and those eyes were like skies in summer, like still blue lakes... All Arthur could think of when he looked at her were clichés, such as her perfection. He’d never make a poet.

‘I was thinking,’ he replied, a little awkward.

‘You’re the hero of your country! You must have a lot to think about, your majesty,’ Lisanor replied.

‘Please!’ he said. ‘Call me Arthur.’

Lisanor glanced away, then favoured Arthur with the full force of her gaze. ‘Such an honour,’ she lisped. ‘Few girls have been so favoured by their king! First name terms, so soon! That’s very naughty.’

Arthur flushed again, and Lisanor laughed throatily.

‘I... I’m sorry,’ Arthur stammered. ‘I didn’t realise... Etiquette... Look, I don’t like all this bowing and scraping. I was brought up in a normal family.’

Lisanor laughed again. ‘Meaning I wasn’t?’ she teased. Arthur was crushed.

‘I’m not making a good job of this, am I?’ he said, as the dance came to an end. He led her towards the buffet. ‘It’s all a bit new to me. I never expected to become king.’

‘You did such a good job of defeating your enemies,’ said Lisanor. ‘Surely a strong man like you isn’t afraid of a girl like me?’

Arthur flushed again. With great self control he said:

‘I’m not afraid of you. It’s just... I haven’t known many girls in the past. I was thinking of going into the Church...’

‘Then it looks like I’ve got a thing or two to teach you,’ Lisanor murmured, leaning close.

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Brigands of the Moon

VII

"But, Miss Prince, why are you and your brother going to Ferrok-Shahn? His business—"

Even as I voiced it, I hated myself for such a question. So nimble in the humble mind that mingled with my rhapsodies of love, was my need for information of George Prince.

"Oh," she said. "This is pleasure, not business, for George." It seemed to me that a shadow crossed her face. But it was gone in an instant, and she smiled. "We have always wanted to travel. We are alone in the world, you know—our parents died when we were children."

I filled in her pause. "You will like Mars. So many interesting things to see."

She nodded. "Yes, I understand so. Our Earth is so much the same all over, cast all in one mould."

"But a hundred or more years ago, it was not, Miss Prince. I have read how the picturesque Orient, differing from ... well, Greater New York or London, for instance—"

"Transportation did that," she interrupted eagerly. "Made everything the same—the people all look alike ... dress alike."

We discussed it. She had an alert, eager mind, childlike with its curiosity, yet strangely matured. And her manner was naïvely earnest. Yet this was no clinging vine, this Anita Prince. There was a firmness, a hint of masculine strength in her chin and in her manner.

"If I were a man, what wonders I could achieve in this marvelous age!" Her sense of humor made her laugh at herself. "Easy for a girl to say that," she added.

"You have greater wonders to achieve, Miss Prince," I said impulsively.

"Yes? What are they?" She had a very frank and level gaze, devoid of coquetry.

My heart was pounding. "The wonders of the next generation. A little son, cast in your own gentle image—"

What madness, this clumsy, brash talk! I choked it off.

But she took no offense. The dark rose-petals of her cheeks were mantled deeper red, but she laughed.

"That is true." She turned abruptly serious. "I should not laugh. The wonders of the next generation—conquering humans marching on...." Her voice trailed away. My

hand went to her arm. Strange tingling something which poets call love! It burned and surged through my trembling fingers into the flesh of her forearm.

The starlight glowed in her eyes. She seemed to be gazing, not at the silver-lit deck, but away into distant reaches of the future.

Our moment. Just a breathless moment given us as we sat there with my hand burning her arm, as though we both might be seeing ourselves joined in a new individual—a little son, cast in his mother's gentle image and with the strength of his father. Our moment, and then it was over. A step sounded. I sat back. The giant gray figure of Miko came past, his great cloak swaying, with his clanking sword ornament beneath it. His bullet head, with its close-clipped hair, was hatless. He gazed at us, swaggering past, and turned the deck corner.

Our moment was gone. Anita said conventionally, "It has been pleasant to talk with you, Mr. Haljan."

"But we'll have many more," I said. "Ten days—"

"You think we'll reach Ferrok-Shahn on schedule?"

"Yes. I think so.... As I was saying, Miss Prince, you'll enjoy Mars. A strange, aggressively forward-looking people."

An oppression seemed on her. She stirred in her chair.

"Yes they are," she said vaguely. "My brother and I know many Martians in Greater New York." She checked herself abruptly. Was she sorry she had said that? It seemed so.

Miko was coming back. He stopped this time. "Your brother would see you, Anita. He sent me to bring you to his room."

The glance he shot me had a touch of insolence. I stood up and he towered a head over me.

Anita said, "Oh yes. I'll come."

I bowed. "I will see you again, Miss Prince. I thank you for a pleasant half-hour."

The Martian led her away. Her little figure was like a child with a giant. It seemed, as they passed the length of the deck, with me staring after them, that he took her arm roughly. And that she shrank from him in fear.

And they did not go inside. As though to show me that he had merely taken her from me, he stopped at a distant deck window and stood talking to her. Once he picked her up as one would pick up a child to show it some distant object through the window.

Was Anita afraid of this Martian's wooing? Yet was held to him by some power he might have over her brother? The vagrant thought struck me.

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Witches and Barbarians

Part Five

They hurried into the detention centre. Five bikers had the custody officer under guard, pointing flick-knives at his throat. Eric approached him.

‘Where is the tunnel to the temple?’ he demanded. The custody officer, a jovial, ruddy-faced man, laughed.

‘What?’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about! This is nonsense!’ But his laughter sounded insincere.

‘Come on, you must know!’ Eric cried aggressively. ‘My men have treated you pretty well so far, but let me tell you, we won’t hesitate to kill. And we won’t do it pleasantly.’

Eloise moved up to Osborne and looked to him for reassurance. He glanced down and took her hand.

‘Sorry about this,’ he said. He looked shift. ‘And, about the other night. I’m really sorry. I was drunk and... I suppose I took advantage of you. Look, I’m sorry, okay? Can I make it up to you?’

Eloise smiled blindly up at him, her eyes wet.

‘That’s... that’s alright,’ she said hoarsely. She gazed up into his eyes, hoping that he would kiss her.

There was a cough from behind them. Eloise looked round to see Hamish glaring balefully at them, nursing his spear. Eloise sighed.

‘Alright, alright!’ the custody officer cried suddenly. Eloise saw that Roald was threatening to slit his throat. ‘I’ll tell you!’ he gurgled. ‘It’s through there!’

To their right, the passage ended at a large metal door. After chaining the custody officer to a table with his own handcuffs and gagging him, the bikers hurried over.

Behind the door was a long, stone-walled tunnel, which led into the blackness.

‘What time is it?’ asked Eric.

‘Quarter to twelve,’ said Eloise. ‘That gives us a quarter of an hour to get there.’

‘Come on, then!’ Eric shouted. He hurried through the door. Eloise, Hamish, Nick, Mary and the other bikers followed.

The passage widened out after a while. In the flickering light of lighter flames held aloft, the group could make out ancient carvings writhing along the walls beside them; crude, primitive scratchings representing a female figure bursting out of a pit to swallow little stick figures, then more naturalistic etchings that looked Roman to Eloise, depicting much the same thing but in gut-wrenchingly realistic detail. Mary moved closer to her.

‘I’m scared,’ she whimpered. ‘Where’s Mark?’

Eloise put a comforting arm around her. ‘Don’t worry,’ she murmured. ‘There’s sixteen or seventeen of us and most of us are armed. We’ll easily rescue your brother.’

‘I’m not sure I’m not more afraid of these bikers,’ Mary replied in a small voice, as they continued down the passage. ‘And have you seen these carvings?’ They had reached the sixteenth or seventeenth century now, as far as Eloise could make out. The walls now bore the same designs, but in a style reminiscent of the wood-cuts from the *Maleus Maleficarum*. Eloise shuddered to herself, reflecting that they had not been carved by witch-hunters, but witches whose actions would have justified the worst excesses of the Witchfinder General.

‘Come on, we’ll be alright,’ Eloise said and gave Mary another hug. Gods, she really was wet, she thought again. Surely she hadn’t been this bad when they’d known each other back in Sussex? Then Eloise realised how much her experiences of the last ten months or so had hardened her. She had seen death many times since becoming a traveller, both the deaths of people she cared about and of people who meant nothing to her, but had all diminished her somehow.

Nearby, Nick was making his way through the darkness, also deep in thought. He too had changed during the year since he ran away from home; he’d come out of himself a great deal for one thing and he had seen and experienced all kinds of wonders. Britain had always seemed dull to him when he was younger, what he’d seen on the news, what he’d seen around him in Liverpool; a grey country of grey people, going about their dull, grey business, occasionally enmeshed in sordid, undramatic events. But now it seemed to him that there was always something else going on, somewhere, perhaps in the next street, perhaps behind closed doors, perhaps beneath the earth - something sinister, impossible, wonderful. It had opened his mind in a way that acid and ecstasy had never done.

Still, as he followed his companions through the shadow-hung passage towards the ancient temple, his heart quaked. He felt like he was being dragged part way between excitement and terror. Would they survive this one? This was bigger than anything they’d experienced yet...

Hamish marched through the dark with his heart singing, his spear over one shoulder, ready to get to grips with the monsters, ever hopeful of impressing Eloise and

regaining her affection for him, stolen as it had been by that keech Osborne. His experiences of the previous year had not affected him half as much as they had his two companions; he came from a much rougher background than Eloise and he'd always been more outgoing than Nick.

And to be honest, he had to admit that he didn't have much of an imagination, preferring to blank out everything that failed to fit into his idea of what should be, or else kick the shit out of it until it ceased to offend him. But that was another way in which he had changed; he was rather more tolerant of people.

Oh, he still hated and distrusted anyone who wasn't Scottish, especially if they were wogs, or English. But take these bikers, for example. Twelve months ago, he'd have avoided them like the plague, the long-haired degenerate twats. But now, though he still wanted to get even with that Osborne bawbag, he didn't mind the others. They weren't even as smelly as popular legend claimed - in fact, after a year of sleeping under the stars, he reckoned he must smell worse. But these were people he wouldn't mind fighting alongside. Like him, they were men and that was what mattered.

His internal monologue broke off suddenly, as Eric, up ahead, turned round and motioned to everyone to stop. Beyond him, ruddy light glowed from round the corner.

'We're there!' Eric hissed. 'Just round here is the temple. But it's full of worshippers; there's about forty Pigs around the edge and in the middle twelve men and twelve girls.'

'Girls?' asked Osborne uneasily. He went up to take a look.

Returning, he seemed even more queasy. 'It's the girls from the brothel,' he said. 'With a load of middle-aged men - one of them is the mayor, I recognise him. They're all around a pit in the centre of the temple and lashed to posts around it are eleven men. Karl's there.'

'Is my brother there?' Mary squealed. 'Oh, let me see!'

'What time is it?' Eric asked. Eloise glanced at her watch; it seemed she was the only one who had one.

'Two minutes to midnight,' she said urgently.

'Oh, shit,' said Osborne. 'No time to fuck around - let's just get in there and save them! From what you say, they'll be sacrificing them on the stroke of twelve.'

He pulled out a blade one of the others had leant him and charged round the corner.

'Wait!' Eric shouted, as the others stampeded after him. 'What about a plan...! Oh, Frigg.' He turned and sped after the rest.

Eloise ran with the others, Mary beside her, caught up in the rush. As they spun round the corner and poured down into the cavernous temple, the congregation of police constables turned.

From the pit, a woman called out; 'Where is the final sacrifice?'

Eloise caught a glimpse of Miss Heath, completely naked, standing dominantly over the orgy of civic dignitaries and child prostitutes as they completed the Calling of Sacalasta. She - the High Priestess, presumably - turned to watch in horror as the bikers charged down into the mass of police.

In seconds, the temple echoed to the noise of riot. The bikers forced their way through the police, hacking and stabbing around them, but the police were armed for the occasion with heavy truncheons. Eloise, at the back with Mary, felt her gorge rise as two police set on one of the bikers, a girl called Astrid and beat her to the ground, where she lay unmoving. Astrid's boyfriend, a man called Seward, rushed forward and bloodied his bayonet in one of the men's ribs, shouting out the name of Odin, the Viking war-god, as he did so.

But then another Pig - Eloise could find no other word for them now, this was bloodier than the Battle of the Beanfield - another Pig brought his truncheon down on his skull and sent him to the floor to lie blood-laced beside his woman.

Osborne was struggling with the Chief Constable at the head of the biker column, lashing at the man with his bike-chain. The Chief Constable caught him a glancing blow against his shoulder and his flail went flying out of his hand. The man was about to brain him when another biker came bursting out of the fray and dragged the Chief Constable to the ground.

Meanwhile, at the pit, something was happening. Doing her best to ignore the fracas, Miss Heath was padding around the edge of the pit, hurriedly despatching the sacrifices. Eloise, cowering at the back with Mary, feeling as pathetic as her friend, saw Miss Heath pull back one man's head and slit his throat open. Beside her, Mary gasped.

'That's my headmistress!' she cried. 'What's she doing?'

'I don't know, but if she finds you here, you'll get something worse than six of the best,' Eloise said grimly. Mary burst into tears again. 'Oh, for goodness' sake,' Eloise said unsympathetically, but then she leaned forward and hugged the girl.

Nick found himself against the wall, surrounded by a ring of Pigs. He'd cut two down already, but the bikers were falling around him. He wrenched a truncheon out of the hands of one of his attackers and flung himself at them, knife in one hand, truncheon in the other. He hadn't wanted to fight, but now he was, the warrior spirit of the Robinsons was in him. He sent Pigs flying.

Hamish, not far away, was chasing three Pigs across the battlefield. He was the best armed of all the fighters, with his ancient Celtic spear and he had felled more than he could count. He caught up with his prey and stabbed the nearest in the back. The man groaned and collapsed. Hamish caught sight of two Pigs bearing down on Thora, who'd lost her knife. Hamish charged in and stabbed one on the guts, then turned to face the other.

At the pit, nine of the sacrifices were already dead, their blood gushing out into the dark pit beneath their feet. Miss Heath moved round to slit the throat of the youngest of her sacrifices, a teenage lad. The boy looked back with terror in her eyes.

There was a piercing cry from the far side of the temple.

‘Mark!’

The boy glanced round desperately and caught a glimpse of someone who looked like his sister, though it was hard to judge in the flickering torchlight. He glanced back at the naked woman heading for him with a knife.

‘Please...’ he whimpered weakly. Miss Heath loomed over him, the dagger raised high. Mark’s face went white. The dagger began to fall.

At the last moment, a biker forced his way out of the raging riot and cannoned into the headmistress, wrenching the dagger out of her hand. She fell back, almost sliding into the pit.

‘That’s enough of that, witch!’ the biker snarled. ‘I am Harold Osborne! In my veins runs the blood of the Norse kings who ruled York a thousand years ago! And I’ll let no black witch raise up her filthy demon goddess!’

From the floor, Miss Heath chuckled demurely, as if she was taking tea with the bishop rather than lying naked in a pool of blood at the centre of a prehistoric temple.

‘You’re too late!’ she said in an exultant voice. ‘It only took the blood of six men. See! Sacalasta rises!’

Osborne raised his head to see the darkness of the pit rushing up towards them. He stared in horror as the darkness seeped over the edge in tentacles of gloom, stinking like rotting corpse, rising itself to tower above them. It resolved itself into the figure of a woman, black and filthy as if she had lain in a peat bog for hundreds of years; giant, ghastly, terrible and awesome. The dark figure closed around the giant statue beside the pit. Then the stone eyes opened and glared down with awful, glittering intelligence.

Eloise gaped at the demonic figure.

‘What is it?’ hissed Mary.

‘It is the Dark Goddess,’ Eloise said, her tones vibrant with fascination. ‘A quintessence of all the evil in woman! Not the Goddess of my grannie’s coven, kind and loving, the mother of all living; this is a strong, assertive Woman, declaring her right to reign over puny, whimpering man!’

Mary looked at her, worried. ‘Eloise, are you feeling alright?’ she asked.

Eloise turned on her. ‘Look!’ she shouted, indicating the temple before them, where,

one by one, the brawling, struggling men were sinking to their knees in awe and fear. 'The Dark Goddess makes all men kneel before her! She is the Sow Who Eats Her Own Farrow, the Night-Mare, the Queen of Air and Darkness! Not the gutless Goddess of the Neo-Pagans, but life and death, Mother Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw.'

'I must go to her,' she mumbled feverishly, as her New Age naivety fell from her like a cloak. 'I must worship.'

'Oh no you don't,' said Mary firmly, grabbing Eloise by the arm. 'I haven't the faintest idea what's going on here, but it's got to stop.'

Eloise slapped her. 'Traitress!' she shrieked and she flung herself at Mary with tooth and nail.

Osborne's mouth was dry, but his eyes and his crotch were wet. He stared up at the Dark Goddess with tears of fear trickling down his face, remembering the women who had scorned him over the years, how he'd tried to impress them, how he'd joined a biker gang to look tough... but his mother had laughed at him, even then... And then he remembered his grandmother, how she had died one night in her granny-flat downstairs and his mother had sent him to wake her in the morning and he'd found her dead and grinning...

The Dark Goddess sent her thought tendrils rushing through his mind, violating every hidden crevice, bringing back every hidden memory of shame and fear and humiliation. It fed on his fear.

But then he remembered the nine noble virtues of Norse Paganism. He'd become an Odinist when he was twenty; it had been compulsory for entrance into the biker gang that he now led. Honour, Fidelity, Justice, Industriousness and all the other positivistic virtues that had finally made a man of him. But the one that the Godhis, the Priests of the Odinist Religion, spoke of most was Courage!

He wiped away the tears, he wiped away his fears, he ignored his urine-soaked jeans and he grinned hardily up at the face of the Dark Goddess. Seizing the sacrificial dagger, he was about to fling it at the demon, when a hand rose up from the floor to catch him.

He turned slightly to see Hamish, gazing fiercely at him.

'Ah hate you,' the Scot growled. 'And it's ma hate for you that had kept me gaun, while everyone else has fallen to their knees. You're not gaun to defeat this! You couldn't anyway, not with that dagger.' He shook his spear. 'Remember the saga? The spear the old man gave Ingunn? This is the Spear of Lugus, god of the Celts who forced this evil underground. Ah was given it on the Isle of Abalos by ma ancestor, Esus the Mighty. And it will kill Her!'

He turned, at a grinding sound from above them. It sounded like a cascade of rocks on a mountain slope. The statue was moving!

The Dark Goddess loomed over them, bending down to grasp them in its stone arms. Hamish pushed Osborne aside with a scornful shove, then turned and flung the Spear like a javelin.

It disappeared deep within the Goddess' stony heart.

Silence fell over the temple. Nick stared towards the Dark Goddess, his jeans fouled in a fear that had fled him now. In the arch, Eloise stopped struggling in Mary's arms and looked around her as if she didn't know where she was. She saw the statue of the Dark Goddess begin to topple and fall apart and the darkness that had animated it sank down into the pit with a whistling scream. It vanished into the darkness, as the statue crumbled away. Then silence fell once more.

The Spear came flying back out, to land in Hamish's hands. He stared at it in bewilderment. Beside him, Osborne gazed around the temple, his eyes wide.

'That's it, then,' he said, his voice loud in the crystal clear silence.

That was when they felt the first tremors.

Half an hour later, they were standing in the road outside Westchester Castle watching as the medieval ruin collapsed in on itself before them; those of them who had survived the destruction of the temple as the Dark Goddess sank into her pit and the statue and the cavern had crumbled around her. Eloise's face was pale. She remembered that mad dash for the exit; seeing Eric die as a huge chunk of rubble flattened him, seeing most of the police swallowed by a great crack that had split the temple floor from side to side...

The civic dignitaries and school children had disappeared behind great clouds of dust and in the final rush for the stairs, they had lost sight of many of the bikers.

She glanced around at her companions. Their faces were all pale, haggard and drawn; Nick's eyes were wide, Hamish stared at his feet, Mary clung desperately to her brother Mark, who stared around at everyone with wide, uncomprehending eyes that spoke of months of terror. Osborne, Karl and Thora were the only bikers who had escaped the ruin.

The castle settled. All around, people were appearing from houses and buildings, drifting up the street, their eyes wide as their castle sank into the earth, though on the faces of all was an identical expression; of relief, as if freed from the chains of centuries of slavery. The evil old order was gone, swallowed up by the grim old earth and now they were left to pursue their lives without living in fear of the Dark Goddess.

'What now?' asked Osborne softly.

Eloise turned to him. 'Nick, Hamish and me have no choice,' she said. 'We're heading for Wales. There's something we have to do there. I don't think it would be a

good idea if you lot stay in Westchester. You'll have a lot of awkward questions to answer if you do.'

'I must stay here,' said Mary. 'My school!'

Eloise shrugged. 'You'll be needing a new headmistress,' she said.

'Maybe...' said Mark slowly. 'Maybe we should both have a holiday, Mary. Go back to our parents. We've seen a lot recently and I don't think we'll be up to anything for a long time.'

'Och,' said Hamish uncomfortably. 'If any of you want to avoid the Pigs, you could join up with us. Ah think we'll need all the help we can get when we go to Wales. Who wants to come with us? Anyone can.'

'Even me?' Osborne asked. At first he had resented Hamish's actions in the temple, but now he realised that the skinhead had not robbed him of his real victory - that had been over himself.

Hamish glared at him. He looked at Eloise, who was staring softly at the biker. He looked back at Osborne.

'Och, shite,' he said. He shrugged. 'Yeah, okay.'

'Anyone else?' asked Nick. 'The more the merrier, like.'

Karl shook his head. He was a taciturn man, it seemed, but his experiences had affected him more than any words could convey.

'I'm off back to York,' he said. Thora nodded.

'Aye, me too,' she said. She grasped Osborne's wrist. 'Looks like the old gang's gone to glory, anyway.'

'Remember what we used to say?' asked Osborne. 'Last one in Valhalla's a sissy!'

Thora grinned ruefully.

'Want us to look after your bike?' she asked. 'We're gonna need some kind of transport to get all the bikes back home.' Osborne nodded, regretful at leaving his bike behind, but looking forward to new experiences with Eloise and the others.

'Mary?' asked Eloise. 'Mark?'

Mary shook her head. 'Me and my brother need a rest,' she said. 'You lead too fast a lifestyle for us, Eloise. We're not coming, but I hope you'll drop in again sometime.'

'So it's just Osborne, then?' asked Hamish, looking sadly at Mary. 'Well, we'll be seeing you lot some time.' He shook everyone's hand. A general orgy of farewells followed. When it was complete, Eloise, Nick and Hamish, with Osborne behind

them, walked quietly away down the bewildered street.

Mary and Mark added their farewells, leaving Thora and Karl standing alone.

‘I’ll miss that greasy bastard,’ Thora said, nodding after Osborne.

‘Come on,’ said Karl. ‘Live fast, die young, eh? But let’s do it somewhere else.’

They turned and headed towards where they’d left their bikes.

As they vanished round the corner, a figure appeared from behind a lump of rubble, a man in the tattered remnants of a pinstripe suit. DI McCavity looked after their retreating backs.

He’d followed the bikers and their companions in the rush from the cavern, but had stayed hidden while they watched the castle sink into the hollow hill. He had listened to their conversation and now he knew what he had to do. When the travellers reached Caer Pedryfan, he would be waiting for them.

And by the Great Architect! he would not be alone.

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Carmilla

VI

A Very Strange Agony

When we got into the drawing room, and had sat down to our coffee and chocolate, although Carmilla did not take any, she seemed quite herself again, and Madame, and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, joined us, and made a little card party, in the course of which papa came in for what he called his "dish of tea."

When the game was over he sat down beside Carmilla on the sofa, and asked her, a little anxiously, whether she had heard from her mother since her arrival.

She answered "No."

He then asked whether she knew where a letter would reach her at present.

"I cannot tell," she answered ambiguously, "but I have been thinking of leaving you; you have been already too hospitable and too kind to me. I have given you an infinity of trouble, and I should wish to take a carriage tomorrow, and post in pursuit of her; I know where I shall ultimately find her, although I dare not yet tell you."

"But you must not dream of any such thing," exclaimed my father, to my great relief. "We can't afford to lose you so, and I won't consent to your leaving us, except under the care of your mother, who was so good as to consent to your remaining with us till she should herself return. I should be quite happy if I knew that you heard from her: but this evening the accounts of the progress of the mysterious disease that has invaded our neighborhood, grow even more alarming; and my beautiful guest, I do feel the responsibility, unaided by advice from your mother, very much. But I shall do my best; and one thing is certain, that you must not think of leaving us without her distinct direction to that effect. We should suffer too much in parting from you to consent to it easily."

"Thank you, sir, a thousand times for your hospitality," she answered, smiling bashfully. "You have all been too kind to me; I have seldom been so happy in all my life before, as in your beautiful chateau, under your care, and in the society of your dear daughter."

So he gallantly, in his old-fashioned way, kissed her hand, smiling and pleased at her little speech.

I accompanied Carmilla as usual to her room, and sat and chatted with her while she was preparing for bed.

"Do you think," I said at length, "that you will ever confide fully in me?"

She turned round smiling, but made no answer, only continued to smile on me.

"You won't answer that?" I said. "You can't answer pleasantly; I ought not to have asked you."

"You were quite right to ask me that, or anything. You do not know how dear you are to me, or you could not think any confidence too great to look for. But I am under vows, no nun half so awfully, and I dare not tell my story yet, even to you. The time is very near when you shall know everything. You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me. and hating me through death and after. There is no such word as indifference in my apathetic nature."

"Now, Carmilla, you are going to talk your wild nonsense again," I said hastily.

"Not I, silly little fool as I am, and full of whims and fancies; for your sake I'll talk like a sage. Were you ever at a ball?"

"No; how you do run on. What is it like? How charming it must be."

"I almost forget, it is years ago."

I laughed.

"You are not so old. Your first ball can hardly be forgotten yet."

"I remember everything about it--with an effort. I see it all, as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium, dense, rippling, but transparent. There occurred that night what has confused the picture, and made its colours faint. I was all but assassinated in my bed, wounded here," she touched her breast, "and never was the same since."

"Were you near dying?"

"Yes, very--a cruel love--strange love, that would have taken my life. Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood. Let us go to sleep now; I feel so lazy. How can I get up just now and lock my door?"

She was lying with her tiny hands buried in her rich wavy hair, under her cheek, her little head upon the pillow, and her glittering eyes followed me wherever I moved, with a kind of shy smile that I could not decipher.

I bid her good night, and crept from the room with an uncomfortable sensation.

I often wondered whether our pretty guest ever said her prayers. I certainly had never seen her upon her knees. In the morning she never came down until long after our family prayers were over, and at night she never left the drawing room to attend our brief evening prayers in the hall.

If it had not been that it had casually come out in one of our careless talks that she had been baptised, I should have doubted her being a Christian. Religion was a subject on which I had never heard her speak a word. If I had known the world better, this particular neglect or antipathy would not have so much surprised me.

The precautions of nervous people are infectious, and persons of a like temperament are pretty sure, after a time, to imitate them. I had adopted Carmilla's habit of locking her bedroom door, having taken into my head all her whimsical alarms about midnight invaders and prowling assassins. I had also adopted her precaution of making a brief search through her room, to satisfy herself that no lurking assassin or robber was "ensconced."

These wise measures taken, I got into my bed and fell asleep. A light was burning in my room. This was an old habit, of very early date, and which nothing could have tempted me to dispense with.

Thus fortified I might take my rest in peace. But dreams come through stone walls, light up dark rooms, or darken light ones, and their persons make their exits and their entrances as they please, and laugh at locksmiths.

I had a dream that night that was the beginning of a very strange agony.

I cannot call it a nightmare, for I was quite conscious of being asleep.

But I was equally conscious of being in my room, and lying in bed, precisely as I actually was. I saw, or fancied I saw, the room and its furniture just as I had seen it last, except that it was very dark, and I saw something moving round the foot of the bed, which at first I could not accurately distinguish. But I soon saw that it was a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat. It appeared to me about four or five feet long for it measured fully the length of the hearthrug as it passed over it; and it continued to-ing and fro-ing with the lithe, sinister restlessness of a beast in a cage. I could not cry out, although as you may suppose, I was terrified. Its pace was growing faster, and the room rapidly darker and darker, and at length so dark that I could no longer see anything of it but its eyes. I felt it spring lightly on the bed. The two broad eyes approached my face, and suddenly I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast. I waked with a scream. The room was lighted by the candle that burnt there all through the night, and I saw a female figure standing at the foot of the bed, a little at the right side. It was in a dark loose dress, and its hair was down and covered its shoulders. A block of stone could not have been more still. There was not the slightest stir of respiration. As I stared at it, the figure appeared to have changed its place, and was now nearer the door; then, close to it, the door opened, and it passed out.

I was now relieved, and able to breathe and move. My first thought was that Carmilla had been playing me a trick, and that I had forgotten to secure my door. I hastened to it, and found it locked as usual on the inside. I was afraid to open it--I was horrified. I sprang into my bed and covered my head up in the bedclothes, and lay there more dead than alive till morning.

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