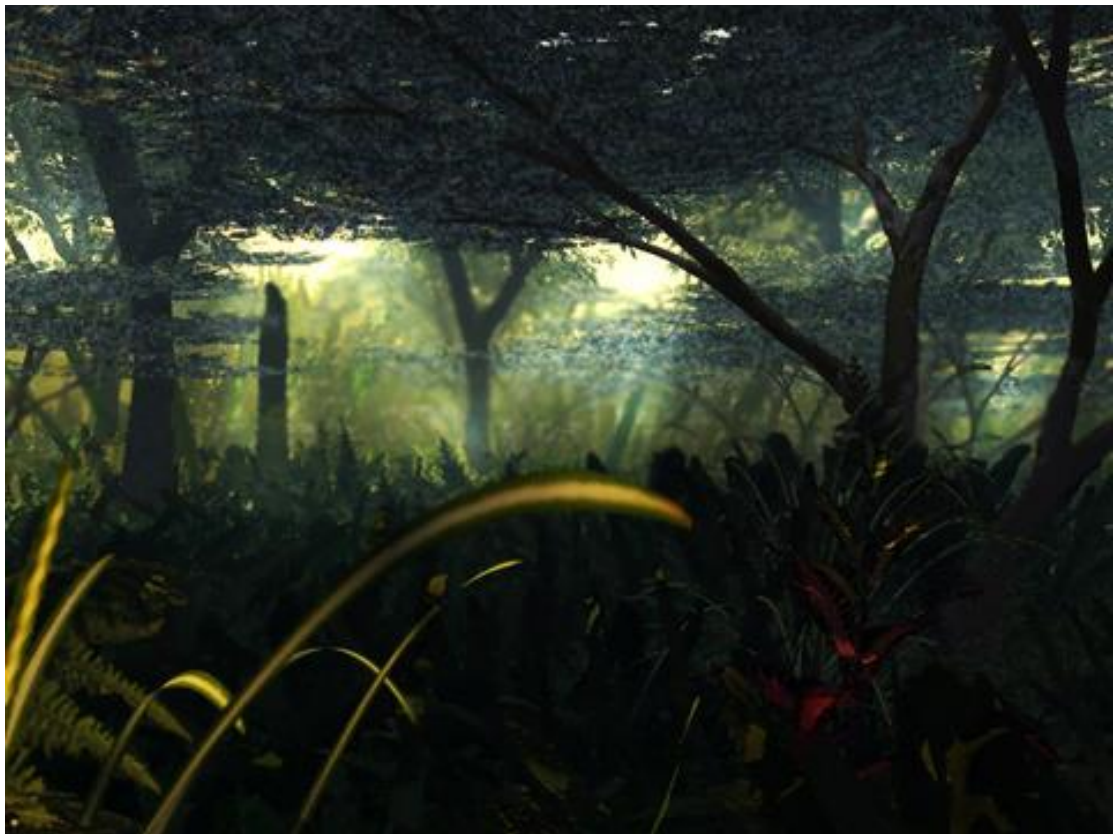


Schlock! webzine

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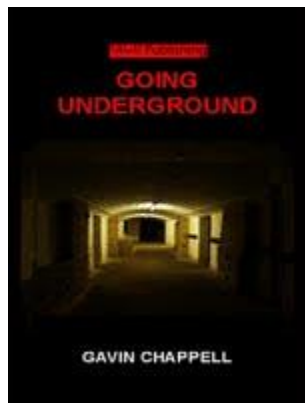
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Saving Souls

The Priest was standing on the corner of Market and Montgomery Streets waving about a thin blue book and shouting his sermon at the crowd. Distributing flyers beside him were two bedraggled homeless men in matching blue sweaters and brown sports coats like the Priest himself. One was a tall thin fellow, the other a short square-faced guy in a crumpled fedora. Throngs of business people in pinstripe suits were pounding past or queuing into columns before the great chrome and glass skyscrapers of the downtown core.

The Priest had visions of these skyscrapers, likening them to the great temple-cities of Babylon and Egypt where all acts were ceremonial acts. He wanted to stop the people here from becoming hieroglyphs and insects of a world divided into neat symmetrical castes. He wanted a distributed world in which all parts were equal and everyone shared in a common vision. While he was composed of six alien beings from outer space and didn't expect everyone to immediately find the same diversity that he did, he hoped his sermons would help them see the way.

In one profile the Priest, Philo, was a stern young man with dark short-cropped hair, while from another he resembled an old man. Jake and Todd had at first been astonished at the liquid properties of Philo's features, but given the fiery tone and odd pronouncements of his sermons they'd grown to accept it. This switch occurred during certain times of day or angle of the sunlight, and even the weather. Oddly, his changing demeanor added a peculiar weight to his sermons.

The blue book Philo was basing his recent sermon on was a collection of essays: "Religio Medici", written by a Sir Thomas Browne around 1635. Philo was trying to explain the relevance of Browne's essays on 'Urn Burial' for a higher understanding of his notion of the Distributed System . . . how beliefs in the subterranean world of the dead were not unlike the Babylonian temple-cities of the past or the current business practices surrounding them. The currency of darkness was the same as that of money, lighter in some places, and darker in others. Yet whatever he railed on about, whenever Jake and Todd walked around for collection, tourists and bike messengers and a weird assortment of oddballs gave generously to what they thought was a street performance.

As Philo raised the book high, his face undulating with the liquid presence of first a young man then an old, his voice taking on the Shakespearean hues of what many thought might be a speaker being channeled from the 16th century, a hush fell over the crowd.

"To subsist in lasting Monuments in the ecstasy of being ever."

Philo closed the book and bowed his head, as did Jake and Todd for the requisite moment of silence. But keeping to the attention span of their listeners, Jake quickly removed his fedora and solemnly made the revolution around the crowd. Todd and Philo remained bowed until he had finished the collection, and then all three picked up their stuff and moved off to another location. They would do this all day, with Philo reciting the same sermon until the area had been blanketed. After a few days they would return with yet another sermon and repeat the process.

The Hotel Albatross was not a pretty place but it was cheap, and after trudging around the streets all day, a relief. They were Philo's first homeless converts and thus his wards, though neither understood what that meant exactly. Maybe more like mutual aid.

The flat was divided into two rooms, a living room and kitchen area, and a bedroom. Philo had the bedroom while Jake and Todd alternated nights on the couch and floor in the main room. The bathroom was at the end of the hallway and shared by all Albatross residents for each floor. Even with the peeling antique wallpaper, the cracked sodden plaster, and the tile floors caked with years of hair and sludge, for Jake and Todd this was paradise compared to the street.

At first they tried to understand Philo's philosophy by studying the stuff in the main room. Besides drawings of flying saucers filled with various shaped blobs there was a series of self-portraits with parts of his face and shoulder visible, the rest shrouded in gray light. And then he had that missing finger. There was an odd collection of objects on the large study table in the corner, from a white mother of pearl mask, to an Indian headdress with colored beads and eagle feathers, to a cheap pocket novel called Swill's Chaos. A row of Zippo lighters and half-pint tumbler glasses were arranged just so and not to be touched.

The smaller room where Philo spent most of his time composing sermons was a mystery. He always retired there immediately following their return to the Albatross and never came out until sometime after both men had finished their meal. They often discussed the arrangement they had with Philo, each time coming to the conclusion that not only did they benefit materially from it, but Philo's philosophy intrigued them as well. Jake looked to Todd on matters of philosophy because Todd had been a Math teacher in a Junior college before ending up on the street.

Initially both had been skeptical of Philo's ideas and had considered leaving him to his insanity. But one day while they were quietly debating their options he emerged from his room and handed Todd the formula for a new mathematical system. Todd had been working on it ever since and was thoroughly convinced of Philo's celestial origins. He paid strict attention to everything Philo said now, even finding that Thomas Browns 'Urn Burial' might furnish him with some new keys to Philo's mathematics. Jake for his part considered himself Todd's protector, imagining that in preserving Todd from harm he was also preserving some higher part of himself. So although he was still skeptical of the man he was willing to stick it out for Todd.

They were using their favorite balled up slices of bread to clean up the remaining bits of a macaroni and cheese dinner when Philo stepped into the room. He seated himself in the shaggy armchair opposite the couch while they completed the operation. He wore his older face now, the one of discussion and compromise. There was a serious look on it they hadn't seen for some time, which caused Todd to hurry his scraping movements. Only Jake took his time.

"That looks good," remarked Philo, a half-smile on his lips.

"Would you like some?" Jake asked, annoyed about having to rush through his favorite part.

“No that’s fine, Jake. Thank you though.”

“Maybe later?”

“You won’t need any yourself later, Jake,” Philo said somberly.

“Are you going to test us now?” Todd asked excitedly, rising from the couch.

“In a manner of speaking yes, but first to clarify my philosophy so you guys will be ready for the transformation.”

“You mean today?” Todd was beside himself with anticipation.

Philo nodded gravely, then swung toward Jake.

“But are you ready, Jake?” he asked, face rippling slightly.

The face always unnerved Jake, and he turned to Todd. There was a glow in Todd’s eyes he hadn’t seen since the formula. “Yes,” Jake replied, swinging back toward Philo. “If Todd’s ready then so am I.”

“Good boy, Jake. I’ll do my best to assist you in this change. But first, would you both recite the nine principles for me?”

Both men stood up and gazed at each other, then began to intone the nine principles, their voices muffled and flat in the airless void of the Albatross room.

They paused to recall the third. Then began again.

Jake felt like a fool, Todd an acolyte of universal truth. While Jake was mumbling halfheartedly, Todd crooned like a Romeo toward a balcony. Both took a very long breath for the final bit, which again began in a jumble, ran into a drone, then finally finished with Todd’s impassioned warbling.

They sat back down on the couch.

“Now where is that from?” Philo asked.

“The Tabula Smaragdina of Hermes Trismegistos,” recited Todd dutifully.

“Very good, Todd.”

Jake raised his hand to speak, interrupting Philo.

“But how does Hermes Trismegistos relate to Thomas Browne, sir?”

Philo’s head spun toward Jake, his face a mirage for a moment, which then tightened into the features of the stern young man.

“That was my next question, Jake. You answer it for me.”

Jake felt put on the spot. He struggled for the answer.

“Well, if below is above, doesn’t this mean the dead share much with the living, and that God is in each of us?”

“But what is it the dead share with us, Jake, and how does God come to reside in each of us?” Philo pressed.

Jake reverted to his manly grin, with the addition of some fissuring along his bullish forehead. “Well, just as all things proceed from the One they proceed from God. If this One breaks into many, doesn’t God then reside in each of us and each of us in God . . . as below so above, as above so below?”

“And the Dead . . .” Philo asked. “What about the Dead?”

“They are with God,” Jake blurted, unable to think of anything else.

The young man in Philo’s face was frustrated, and he turned to Todd.

“Does he have it right, Todd?”

Jake girded himself and turned to Todd.

Todd was serene and self-assured as he answered Philo’s query. “Not entirely. The dead are within us just as concretely as the living are with the dead. But for the living to be with the dead they must be with God. Except that the dead are one, the living many. So if God is one – meaning he is dead – but he cannot be dead, he becomes the many in us. Only through transformation does the Distributed System arise and we recognize the dead and the living inside each of us,” Todd finished gleefully.

“Yes, that’s it,” Philo proclaimed proudly. “You are ready for the transformation!” And as Philo swung back to Jake, Jake averted his gaze for a moment, and then glanced sideways at the old man now staring at him.

“Do you understand, Jake?” Philo asked.

“No sir, I guess not everything yet,” Jake mumbled self-consciously, trying to look ashamed. But it didn’t quite work and Todd sighed, glanced away.

“You see Jake; I’m not just one person, but many people. Inside of me are an old man called Om, and old woman called Ow, a young man Yom, a young woman Yow, and my parents Sci and Art. Occasionally each of them comes into this face and looks at you. They are the different faces you sometimes see here. Each is associated with one of the objects on the altar-table over there,” he said, pointing to the table with its mask, feathers, Zippos, and tumblers.

“When I am in charge, they are dead. When they are in charge, I am dead. So you see, sometimes each of us is dead and sometimes alive. It’s a Distributed System with some parts active, others inactive, each part readily exchangeable with every other part. The change we are speaking of will give you the ability to be part of each other as well as a part of me. You can join me and Om, Yom, Ow and Yow in our transformation of society.”

This was news to Todd too. There was something shamanistic about it. He struggled with the schizoid quality of it for a minute, trying to square it with the formula Philo had given him. The formula quickly won out and the shine returned to his face. But Jake’s doubts redoubled, and he glanced nervously at Todd, and then swung back to Philo.

“What is this transformation you are talking about Philo, what does it do?”

“It’s highly personal, Jake, I can only show one of you at a time.”

“Have you ever tried it on anyone else?” Jake pressed.

“No I haven’t Jake, you are my first disciples,” Philo declared proudly, his features again shifting as he turned to Todd. “And this is my star pupil, with whom I will share everything.”

Todd swelled with elation.

“All aspects of the formula will be revealed to you now Todd, and never, never shall you have to struggle again in our company.”

Jake suddenly felt as if he was losing Todd behind the incomprehensible veil of words. He turned to Philo with a question he would never have asked him before.

“Philo, are you really an alien?”

“Yes Jake, I am the messenger you seek.”

Philo abruptly rose, signaling Todd to rise also, and pointed to the private room in back.

Philo turned to Jake. “Don’t worry Jake, I’ll look after your friend. All of this metaphysical talk means nothing when it comes down to the actual transformation itself. It’s really only a meeting of minds,” he added, a friendly little something shimmering in his face.

Todd turned to Jake also. “This is what we’ve been waiting for, Jake. Have faith.”

Todd entered Philo’s quarters and the door closed behind them.

Although he had received assurances from both, Jake was still feeling unsettled and alone. Who was this Philo, really? Neither knew. Although the man had fed and housed them the entire month through his preaching of Hermes Trismegistos and Thomas Browne, they knew absolutely nothing about him. They only knew what he chose to tell them . . . which was some pretty weird shit. And now Jake’s only street buddy had entered the room to undergo some sort of a transformation. It was scary and disturbing, and he was a bit angry with himself for letting it happen.

He peered about the room looking for an explanation, and walked over to the altar table with the stuff Philo said belonged to the people inside him. Shot glasses? Sure. What about the feathered headband and the mother-of-pearl mask? Sure. He was feeling anxious for his friend. That shifting, undulating face wasn’t natural. It left him feeling sick and shaken every time. He walked back to the couch and resealed himself. He needed to calm himself, to . . .

What was that sound? Something like a pinched off sigh had come from inside. He stood up and walked quietly over to the peeling wood door. He heard a heavy thud as if someone had collapsed on the floor, followed by a sort of gurgling.

He knocked on the door, and waited.

“Just a minute, Jake, I’m almost through . . .” came Philo’s muffled voice.

“Todd, are you okay?”

There was no response, and he waited a minute longer.

A strange feeling suddenly flashed through Jake as he grabbed the doorknob. The room was locked. He pounded hard on the wood. A moment later he stepped back and slammed his heel into the faceplate. The latch-bolt ripped free of the wooden frame and the door flew open.

There in a pool of blood on the floor before him was Todd’s headless corpse. Philo was kneeling beside it with one arm plunged up to his shoulder inside the spouting neck cavity, reaching for something.

He slowly turned to Jake, his blood spattered face rippling back and forth between a troubled old man and a confused young man.

“I’m sorry Jake, I can’t find his other people.”

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Lot and the Reckoning

In times of reckoning, there are always those that feel that they have been cheated; that the path hewn for them through the mountains and valleys and plains of destiny is not theirs. It belongs to some other, some more or less worthy soul, depending upon the trials they have to face along that path.

Carson was one such, believing himself better. Better than all by a long way. He had killed, he had hurt and defiled in his time, believing it his right, his destiny. He had the blood of many on his conscience, if such a man can be said to have one. He had the utter surety that only his kind possess; arrogant, righteous and utterly without remorse.

His own reckoning, then, was a rude affair, coming late one night as he slept. The demon of his reckoning, a foul creature all scale and hair and reeking pomposity, was sitting on his chest when he woke, startled.

‘Wha...?’ he began, before his voice dried like arid desert air. He croaked the question again, fully formed.

In a gesture seen by many and remembered by few, the demon, called Lot, carved shapes from the air with stout fingers and settled these patterns of gossamer nothingness across Carson’s mouth. He fell silent immediately.

‘Better,’ it said in a surprisingly quiet voice.

‘It is time,’ it said, and stroked a gnarled finger across Carson’s chest. Instantly pained bloomed there, like a number of ever tightening steel bands in and around his chest. The demon continued to caress the flesh of Carson’s body, pinching here, pulling there, as if it were working its strange magic in his meat, as it had done with the air around him; knotting his flesh into unnatural configurations. Carson resisted as much as he was able, and even struck the demon with one flailing hand before Lot left off his manipulations long enough to wring shackles from the air, which he laid

almost lovingly across arms and legs, effectively stilling him. Carson's hand buzzed unpleasantly where it had touched the demon, as if poisoned. His head whipped back and forth as if trying to shake off the silencing charms placed there. Still he could not speak.

'Fighting with me will not change anything,' Lot purred. 'It is time.'

For an hour Lot worked on the man, drawing pain and terror, memory and experience from him like heat will draw sweat. At the end, when Carson's body was wracked with nauseating fever, his bed spotted with blood spray from nose and eyes and mouth, his mind empty of all but the sins he had lived, lived in, lived *for*, Lot removed the shackles and the silencing charms that he had wrought from nothingness. Carson gasped.

'What are you?' he managed to say before the last of his strength left him.

'Would you have me tell you, or show you?' asked Lot.

Another twist of atmosphere, a pulling apart of space with the pinched thumb and forefinger of both hands. Had Carson been able to see it, the shape hanging from his delicately pinched digits was a rough rectangle. Lot laid one end on the bed above Carson's head. He seemed to grasp more firmly the other corners and drew it down over Carson's body like a shroud. It settled with the weight of a child's breath and suddenly Carson saw. He saw through it, like wet muslin. He saw what Lot was, and more importantly, he saw *why* Lot was.

He was not a religious man, never had been, but he thought he knew a reckoning when he saw one. This, then, was his, for good or ill.

'Are you death?' he croaked as reality melted away. 'Am I paying now for all that I have done?'

Lot only laughed and gagged him once more. He reached to Carson's face with those

stubby fingers and laid them across his forehead. Instantly that drawing sensation flooded him again, as if Lot was a sponge and his mind was water. He felt himself emptying, imagined a child sucking the colour from a snow cone. He retreated deep into himself, raced backwards down the black corridor of his mind, snatching at memory and feeling as he went, all of it slipping through his grasp.

There was nothing but sin left now, all the acts of cruelty, all the faces of those he had defiled, hurt, destroyed with his words and his fists and his money. He snatched at one, a girl. The memory of her hurt lingered for a moment, and he remembered the feeling of fist against stomach, the gentle snapping of brittle bone, the defilement of soul. He sickened himself suddenly, knew he deserved this demon sent to reckon him, but suddenly the memory was gone, sucked from his grasp and all he had left was her face, her beautiful ruined face, with its startling grey eyes and soft dark lips. He clung to it, folded it like a photograph and hid it deep within, mentally shrouding it with whatever was left of him. The drawing stopped, and he sensed a searching, probing motion, like the wet nose of a bloodhound shifting in and around him. He steeled himself and locked down further. The face of the girl remained hidden. Suddenly there was movement above him as the shroud was lifted from his motionless body. Light and sound faded in, and he woke as if from a coma. He was staring into the at-once-senseless and somehow raging eyes of the demon.

‘WHERE IS IT?!’ Lot roared, stinging spittle flying like rain. He beat Carson on the chest and a rib snapped. Pain flared but soon numbed. ‘GIVE IT TO ME!’

Carson was, by this time, a bereft man. He knew the demon’s face as he knew his own, knew its business, but all else was gone from him. All, except the memory of that face that he kept inside himself, somewhere, somehow. He had no idea how he was keeping it from Lot, or why, but it was all he had left to hold onto. And he held tight. Lot reached to his mouth and scraped a finger across it, tearing at the formless gag made from air. Carson took a huge whooping breath, as if he hadn’t been able to breathe this whole time.

‘No,’ he whispered, feebly. ‘You can’t have it.’

‘I MUST!’

A savage blow to the side of his head, and Carson had the mind to wonder that a demon so adept at torturing with thought and sense and fear, should resort to physical violence at the end of it all. Carson managed a laugh, content to die now, feeling that he had already bested the demon, knowing really that he hadn't. He had a feeling that his body would not recover from all the pulling and wrangling and manipulating. It felt broken in some fundamental way, bones felt pulverised, skin stretched beyond its natural elastic tendencies. He laughed again and Lot screamed his anger and frustration.

‘I need that last face,’ it said more quietly. ‘I must have the face. You know this. Your reckoning is over and I must have that face.’ Its face had calmed but there was still fierce light in its eyes, now turned the colour of burning toffee.

Carson quelled an urge to scream and give up his prize. But he didn't believe his reckoning was over, for the demon was sitting on his chest still. Its gaze was a strong hook in his brain, pulling, snagging, searching for any memory left unplundered, any nugget of his life left intact. It searched, and still Carson had no notion of how he was keeping the girl's face from him. Indeed, as the demon found tidbits of memory and extracted those almost as if he was tossing clothes over his shoulder in the search for a favourite shirt, Carson buried the face deeper still, until even he could hardly reach it. Lot pulled free suddenly and screamed piercingly into the still of the night. Carson's ears fell mercifully deaf at that moment, sound slowly filtering back in as if his ears were filled with tar.

‘You cannot have it,’ Carson replied slowly.

A violent scratching hiss filled the room. Carson smelled burning hair and ozone. The demon whipped its head a full one hundred and eighty degree turn and looked over its shoulder. Carson thought he sensed fear in the movement. There appeared behind the demon a misty drape of air, like a thin sheet of fog at the foot of his bed. He thought

he heard murmurings and icy crackles emanating from it. Lot was listening intently, and bowed his head at the sound. He nodded to himself and turned back to Carson with a look of pleading now playing on his face.

His voice was soft. 'Please,' he said. 'Just give me the face and I can go on my way. As can you. You cannot deny a reckoning. It has to be. One way or the other I will get that face, and you will be reckoned. You know your time here is nearly done. I am here to move you on, but first I need that face that you hide from me. I need to empty you.' His teeth clenched as he said this last, and his voice turned to a hiss. Carson looked behind the demon and motioned with his eyes.

'The boss?' he asked. 'Pressuring you? I can show you some techniques for dealing with the stress.' He had become unnaturally calm, confidence stealing into his words as he realised that the demon would not, *could* not leave him here without that face that he held. He smiled again. He had a notion that Lot could not kill him either, certainly not before he knew he could go back to his boss with a full compliment of Carson's sinful memories. His mouth thick with congealing blood and saliva, he coughed as he spoke again. 'Where am I to be moved onto? Hell?' He did not flinch at the absurdity of that thought.

'Hell. Heaven. These are just words that you have dreamt up to satisfy your need to categorise yourself. All humans are the same. Am I a saint, or am I a sinner?' These last words Lot spoke with more anger, mimicking Carson's tone precisely. 'There is but one stage of reckoning. You all reach it eventually. And you are neither saint nor sinner. You just *are*. What destiny awaits is only a matter of degree. In your eyes, it is good or it is bad. To mine, it just *is*. But I must take you completely. I cannot bring you if you retain a shred of memory, of deed.' He stole another backwards glance, eyes blinking rapidly.

'No,' said Carson softly.

There was a short silence, made unbearable by the feeling that Lot was using all his power not to erupt in anger. He spoke, forcibly soft.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said no,’ Carson whispered. ‘You obviously cannot kill me. You would have done so already. You need that memory and I said no. I am not giving it up. Kill me if you can, but it dies with me.’

Carson was awash with the overwhelming notion that he must defy this creature. It was more important to him now than the memory of the ruined, beautiful face. Clearer, somehow. The desire to see this demon bested, to see it suffer at the hands of the master that inevitably waited for it behind the curtain of shifting fog, in some hellish dominion. Carson had no doubt that he would die here tonight, that indeed Lot would suffer his punishment gladly just to see him die, memory given over or not. But to die with that face secure inside him. That was the game now. That was the reckoning. He laughed, a bubbling splattering laugh, his blood hissing faintly against the rough flesh of Lot’s ever darkening features.

‘You sicken me,’ said the demon, its distaste visible in the set of its mouth, the half lidded eyes. Carson marvelled that this beast could be sickened at all, let alone by his simple act of defiance, but there it was. ‘That you think yourself so important, that you think your memories, your *acts*, so important. You scurry and skulk through life hurting and debasing all around you, killing even, when it is not your right to do so.’

Carson interrupted, emboldened. ‘And is it *your* right?’

‘It has always been so. *I* have always been so. You are not the first to defy me and you will not be the last. But still you sicken me, taking what is mine and hiding it away like some deviant schoolchild. Your time here is done, and yet you cling to hope and to your last surviving memory like they are yours to keep. Your reckoning, your....judgement if you prefer....is my duty and your destiny. You cannot escape it. As I cannot. So end this foolishness, give me the face and we can end all this.’

There was a pause, time in which the soft breathy shifting curtain of fog behind Lot

seemed to darken, congeal as though it were scum at the edges of a pool. Faint smells of fear and pain and death, if such things can be said to have aroma, taunted him. Lot closed his eyes and breathed deeply, his stout fingers clutching the air.

‘Please,’ he said, softer. ‘Please. I cannot bring you with me, judged and reckoned, unless I have you entirely. One memory held back means nothing to you. It cannot save you. And yet to give it over *will* save you. You can enter the realm behind me a cleansed man, fully paid up for the atrocities you committed in this place. Life will be good for you in there, it will be....’

‘No.’ Carson shook his head, despite the searing pain in his temples. Blood, dried to a soft crust across his cheeks and brow, flaked and fell to the pillow beneath him. ‘No.’

Lot reached for him, not physically, but with his searching mind, wrenching shapes from the air as he did so, weaving existence into a web of formlessness that he laid across Carson, its edges tightening around him. Carson took a huge breath, sure that it would be his last, and the hard thrumming of his heart in his ears was slowly drowned out by the scream from the demon. Searing hot spittle flew like acid rain from his lips, drawn back in a paroxysm of fury. Carson screwed his eyes shut against the wetness, and used that last breath to scream back.

‘No, no, no, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!’ and the sound was muted, as though heard through glass.

Within himself, he imagined tearing the face from its hiding place and shredding it, scattering the shreds like so much confetti to the corners of his mind.

‘IT IS MINE!’ he roared, and this sound did break through the demon’s ranting. He felt Lot shift slightly on him, and opened his eyes to see a long fleshy tether wrap itself around Lot’s neck, cutting into the deviant flesh there, tearing through skin like a cheese wire. He could not see through the curtain of mist but could sense a huge shape moving there, a leviathan beneath dark waters; relentless and merciless. Lot screamed and was suddenly gone, pulled back sharply, his screams ended suddenly by

the noose around his neck. As he went, Carson felt a fish hook snag into his mind, Lot's final probing search. He felt it tear, imagined a flood filling his brain, an aneurism of his imagination. He felt his mind drain, the shreds of memory that he had scattered lifting and flowing with the flood like so many dead flower petals on a stream. And then he felt nothing.

*

Carson stood at his bathroom mirror. The face that stared back was unknown to him. The bruising and lacerations across his face were unknown, and indeed the feelings of pain that he felt now were like the first rude, alien sensations filling a newborn baby's thoughts. He reached a slow hand to his face, watched its reflection follow, and touched the damaged flesh that it found there. His eyes roamed the contours of his face, empty and sullen. With each fresh wave of sickening pain, fragments of memory resurfaced.

He felt that he should know the face, broken and bloodied though it was, but he didn't. That part of him was gone, and though he could still remember Lot's hissing vitriol and his burning spittle, the wrought air that he had governed to subdue him, he could not remember *why* he could not remember his own face. It left him empty. Flutterings began in his violated mind, soft breezes, as if torn paper was being blown down a dark corridor.

It seemed that although Lot had sworn to remove every one of Carson's memories, he had truly only been interested in those dark, viscous memories that dealt with the pain and defilement and deviance that filled so much of Carson's mind. In the others, those grey and damp, lifeless things in the deepest whorls of his brain, the ones that allowed him to speak and dress and tie his shoelaces, the demon was wholly uninterested. Carson exercised those memories now and dressed fitfully, cleaned his face as best as he could and as thoroughly as he could manage with the pain, and left the house. As dawn rose, he stood on the front lawn and watched the sun rise, breath pluming from him, cold air biting his skin and soothing it in equal measure. He did the only thing he could think to do, and walked.

Behind him, a twist of air as a shroud, invisible and silent, Lot followed. Occasionally

he would probe Carson's mind, quickly and without much force, but he could not find the memory of the girl with the grey eyes, the broken face and the broken soul. He thought of that face, and it taunted him. He fixed on it until it became *his* memory, and it fluttered about his own mind like a bird caught in a greenhouse. Foul fluid seeped from a wound on his neck, and his eyes were downcast and dark, fuming rage barely contained in the quivering of his lips. He watched Carson walk, bereft, silent himself except for the slight rasp in his breathing. Lot's fingers clicked together with frightening speed, the sound like the first crackle of lightning before the huge crash, all the more terrible for that untapped potential. No-one heard the noise but Lot himself, and he used it to drown out the sound of his own breathing, raw and bloody in his torn throat.

Lot followed until the road Carson trod petered out and became a path across rolling fields. He followed as Carson stepped over gate and stile, walked round tree stump and boulder. In the distance the soft thump of drums, almost physical push of deep bass, swallowed them both, the visible and the invisible. Lot pulled his shroud tighter, occasionally glancing behind him. Had Carson cared to look, he might have seen a shimmering, like the heat haze above a hot road. He might have seen a further shimmering rift within the haze, and had he been able to see Lot's eyes, he would see them dart again and again to this split, fear obvious in their depths.

The source of the music showed itself as they rounded a thick copse of trees. A small group of people were dancing in the field, the music blaring from the rear speakers of a car, the boot open, the tang of alcohol and marijuana smoke pricking Lot's eyes until they watered foul tears. He cleared them with his stubby fingers.

And there she was.

It was *the* girl, undoubtedly. Her face unmarked, her bones unbroken, but it was her. Carson stopped at the perimeter of the party, seemingly lost to himself. Lot howled laughter as the girl walked over to Carson, began to talk. He pulled the air to him suddenly, formed a tight rope that he wound around the couple, pulling it tighter. Neither one felt it, but both felt drawn to each other. The girl was drunk and happy to

flirt. Carson was utterly sober, utterly bereft of emotion, but something about the girl...

Grey eyes fluttered, clumsily seductive, hot breath caressed his ear as she whispered.

‘Take her, you fool,’ hissed Lot. ‘I give her to you again. Take her!’

Carson heard nothing but the thump of music and the soft wind of her voice. But something about her...

He grabbed her wrist tightly, and felt himself stir in the deep pit of his stomach as he felt small bones shift in his hand. She squealed laughter and led him away. Carson followed, allowing his grip to loosen but knowing that he had the power to crush those bones to powder in his fist. He wondered, suddenly, shockingly, what her face would look like bruised and battered, wondered how her beautiful full lips would look puffed and bloodied.

Lot saw all this as he probed Carson. He allowed his own memory of the girl to vanish, and somewhere deep in the folded corners of Carson’s mind, torn scraps of memory began to reform, to reknit themselves.

Carson remembered.

Lot squatted on the grass and entertained himself by making shapes from the air. These he set to dance as the day darkened and the volume of the music grew. Carson had remembered the girl. Her face would be forming somewhere in his mind, and Lot could wait. He would wait forever to complete this reckoning. He lay back, the demon, and clicked his tough fingernails together on his chest. He sensed the rift behind him closing with a tearing gasp.

Soft bubbling laughter welled from his torn throat, and he closed his eyes.

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Super Duper

Chapter Eight

“And to think I thought there would be Monster Munch,” sulked Smith.

“There is Monster Munch.”

Smith carried on washing the clothes. They were using the kitchen sinks of the Little Chef. The sinks were surprisingly spacious.

“This is ridiculous; God knows how radioactive the power plants have become. We’ll end up like Jedburgh in *Edge of Darkness*.”

“A classic,” noted The Don.

“Can’t we just put these in the dishwasher?”

“No, it will shrink them.”

Smith was nearing the end of his pile. He hadn’t done that much cleaning, ever. He realized in dismay that The Don had agreed to cook dinner as soon as they were finished hanging everything up. That would mean even more work, followed by even more cleaning. Smith plunged a cardigan into the tepid water and squeezed it a little. He threw it into The Don’s rinsing pile.

“I’m done.”

Smith sat down on the floor and closed his eyes.

“Wake me when it’s time to hang them up.”

“Smith,” The Don kept his tone as soothing as he could manage. “It’s time to hang them up.”

Smith didn’t open his eyes but he made a half hearted effort to stamp one of his feet.

“Ah, shit.”

They didn’t have any laundry baskets so they were using plastic packing crates. They had filled three of the things. The Don took one under each of his arms and set off, leaving Smith to grab the third by its handle and drag it along the floor. His back began to hurt and reluctantly he picked it up.

Their hostess had hung string up in the large hallway of the service station. The Don started resting the clothes over the string so that they wouldn’t fall off. They didn’t have any pegs.

“I’m exhausted,” said Smith. “I’ve started to feel like butter that’s been spread across too much toast.”

“This won’t take long: we can have a good sleep in the Travel Inn after dinner.”

The prospect of dinner almost made Smith collapse. Instead, he sighed heavily and slumped his shoulders.

“This is the longest day in the history of the world.”

Since abandoning their car, Smith had walked over a mile to the entrance of the service station. They had then launched a mountaineering expedition to scale the wall of cars that seemed to have drifted down from the top of the slip road; there was over a hundred cars blocking the path. They spilled over the sides of the slip road and blocked all points of ascension. The only option was to climb over the tops of the cars and it was slow going. Halfway up the slope Smith wished that he had never started on the adventure and would have gladly let the world explode in exchange for a comfortable place to rest for a few moments.

When they finally got to the top of the slope both Smith and The Don were greeted by a familiar sound that neither of them had heard for some time. It was the

sound of children playing.

“Does that sound like children to you?”

“Yes, my friend, it does.”

“I bet they’ve eaten all of the Monster Munch.”

The Don shook his head ever so slightly, then purposefully strode in the direction of the noise. Smith looked around for something closer. He was astonished to notice that the car park was almost entirely empty. Those few cars that were left in it had been pushed neatly to the side; the flat concrete was open and empty. Smith followed The Don but then noticed a wooden bench. He took the quickest rest he could muster, about five minutes. Then realising that the noise of children had silenced, he assumed that The Don had reached them, and made a reluctant pursuit of his friend.

The Don had walked around the side of the service station and was just out of sight. It was a relatively short walk by the day’s standards but Smith resented it anyway. His legs hurt and he was sleepy. It was OK for The Don, he was used to athleticism.

The side of the service station was just as empty as the rest of the car park, except that it was full of children. There were about twenty of them, all of different ages. Four coats had been carefully placed in a square. The Don was lined up behind nine of the children. As Smith approached, a boy of about eight took exception to his arrival.

“That’s not fair,” said the boy. “Now you’ll have two adults on your team.”

“So, you had Nicola before and we didn’t have anyone,” one of the girls queuing behind The Don protested.

“No worry,” said Smith. “I don’t know how to play.”

All of the children stopped what they were doing and stared blankly at Smith. One of them spoke.

“You don’t know how to play rounders?”

It was then that Smith noticed the woman. He wasn’t amazed that he’d missed her; she wasn’t much taller than the biggest of the children. She was plump faced and full figured. She had bright orange hair and a forgiving smile. She was wearing a W H Smiths uniform.

“Why don’t you sit and watch the action for a bit, you’ll pick it up.”

Smith didn’t feel patronised by her tone but it was obvious from the way that she spoke that she hadn’t talked to an adult in some time. Smith made himself comfortable against the wall and watched the woman and The Don getting children to run around in circles. The laughter and activity was a stark contrast to everything else that Smith had seen in recent days and after about twenty minutes of watching, a strange thing happened to him: he wanted to join in.

The Don was listening intently to Nicola’s story.

“How far down did you go?” he asked.

“I made it, a little over a mile. Obviously, after I’d found the twins my movement was seriously limited. I don’t think there can be many adults left alive out there but the thought that there might be more babies strapped into their chairs all over the country is too horrible to bear.”

“You’ve done more than anyone else,” The Don soothed.

“I don’t know about that, but I think I’ve got everyone I can reach. I just wish I could have saved their parents too.”

“You can’t, trust me. Listen, is there anything we can do to help?”

Smith had always thought it was good manners to turn down any offers of help from strangers but apparently Nicola did not share the belief. She had given them a laundry list of jobs to do and the laundry list was only one item on the itinerary.

Smith knew that if he was going to get The Don to keep helping him save the world, he was going to have to help out at the service station and the thought made him tired.

“Shall we get dinner on now?” Smith asked.

“You’re keen.”

“I’m hungry. I don’t know how Nicola does this on her own.”

“She’s impressive, isn’t she?”

“She’s nice. You like her?”

“I have never been as awestruck.”

“Do you want me to carry on by myself?”

“You wouldn’t get ten metres,” laughed The Don.

“I would, maybe not in the right direction though.”

“Can we stay two days? Just to give her a rest?”

“Sure. Then we move on. We can pick them up on the way back.”

“That’s a good idea. The food here won’t last forever.”

They made sausages and chips. It was the only thing that either of them knew how to cook. It didn’t take long and after they were done, Smith finally got to raid the storeroom of W H Smiths for his favourite savoury snack. He left The Don and Nicola chatting and snuck out to find a bed in the Travel Inn.

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Five

‘I’m not working at the moment, of course,’ the self-professed computer added.

Brian groaned. ‘Sounds typical. So what’s up? Runtime error? Bad syntax? Anyway, what do you mean, you’re a computer?’

‘No wonder the constable thought you were French spies,’ Yates said. ‘I can’t understand half of what you say. I mean exactly that. I’m a computer by trade. I had secured a good position with a well known firm of insurance underwriters at their Liverpool counting house; sadly, I got my sums wrong too many times, and they had to let me go.

‘I went on the parish while looking for another position but the pittance they gave me was calculated on my own parish’s poor rate, a small Cheshire village. I became unable to pay the rent and ended up on the streets. Trying to get back to my own parish I passed through this place, and took a rest in a barn. The farmer found me and called the constable. A rest became arrest and here I am, taking a rest in the local lockup.’

This guy said he had trouble understanding them, Brian thought. What the hell was he on about? Jane Austen was nothing on him.

‘You went on the parish?’ Brian asked, scratching his head. ‘Is that like going on the game?’

‘No, Brian,’ said Ada. ‘It’s like going on the dole, actually. And before Babbage’s invention replaced them, a computer was a person employed to carry out calculations and computations. They used logarithm tables, and were notorious for getting their sums wrong. That’s what inspired Babbage to design a machine that would take their place.’

‘Beg pardon, madam,’ Yates broke in. ‘Are you saying there’s a man’s designed a machine to take the place of computers?’

‘Well, he will do,’ said Ada. ‘Charles Babbage, he’s called. He’s at Cambridge right now. But he will design the difference engine, leading ultimately to the development of the mechanical computer, the end result being the future of stagnation from which we have come.’

Yates fixed on what was most important to him. ‘An engine that will put computers out of work! Why, this is worse than these new-fangled looms that my brother-in-law rails against. After all, mill workers are nothing more than farm labourers come to the cities, and farm labourers are out of work most of the year. But to be a computer requires a knowledge of mathematics, the education of a gentlemen. Such folk should not be put out of work!’

Ada leaned forward, brushing against Brian as she did so. ‘You say your brother-in-law is a Luddite?’

Yates made a shushing noise and leaned closer. ‘I don’t know that for sure,’ he said. ‘But he’s a mill worker, and his talk often borders on the seditious. He has many rough friends. One of them was transported for machine wrecking after the disturbances last year....’

‘What year is this, 1812?’ Ada asked. ‘And the month is April... Of course!’

‘What’s so good about that?’ Brian asked.

Ada leaned over to him. ‘We’re at the beginning of the biggest of the Luddite uprisings. We could use this to our own advantage.’

‘How?’ Brian asked.

‘Well, we’re bound to find a sympathetic ear among the machine wreckers. They destroy the new machines produced by the Industrial Revolution because they’re afraid that they’ll put people out of work. Unemployment is rife right now, almost as bad as in our day, and social security is negligible. I think we’re likely to find more support for our cause than we anticipated.’

‘Why do we need support?’ Brian asked. ‘We just need to get out of here, find Babbage, do him in, and get back to the future.’

‘Exactly. And how do we get out of here, to start with? They think we’re French spies. When they take us to the magistrates, who knows what they’ll do.’

‘Hang you, I reckon,’ Yates broke in. ‘But are you Luddites yourselves? What do you want with this Babbage gentleman?’

Ada breathed in sharply. ‘The simplest solution to the problems he will create is to assassinate him,’ she said.

‘You’re quite a young lady, madam!’ Yates replied. ‘You intend to kill this inventor?’

‘We’ve got to get out of here,’ Ada said, ignoring him. ‘Do you think you could overpower the constable when next he opens the door, Brian?’

‘Why would he open the door?’ Brian asked.

Ada tutted. ‘Well, to bring us food.’

‘He hands the bowl of gruel through the window in the door,’ said Yates apologetically.

Ada sighed angrily. ‘Well, how are we going to get out of here?’

Brian shuffled over to the door and thumped it half heartedly. ‘Solid oak,’ he reported

back. 'No chance of breaking that down.' He tested the walls, and they proved unyielding enough. Desultorily, he picked at the packed earth floor with his fingernails.

'We've got to get out of here!' Ada said. 'We can't let them take us out and hang us, we're the only hope humanity has!'

Brian thought that this was by no means his only reason to want to avoid execution. Yates obviously believed some reassuring words were needed. 'Perhaps they won't hang you,' he said. 'Maybe they'll transport you instead. They can't have much evidence against you if you are innocent.'

'Transport us?' Ada exclaimed. 'What, to Australia? We've got to deal with Babbage and get back here within twelve months or else we're stuck in this century for good!'

'How long are you in here?' Brian asked Yates idly.

'Only until tomorrow morning,' he said. 'I must say, sir, it's a relief to have the monotony broken by your charming company, and that of the lady. But I will be evicted from this fair lodgings house at dawn.'

Brian sighed. 'Suppose we could try and jump the constable then,' he suggested to Ada.

Ada returned his sigh. 'We'd better get some sleep,' she told him, and lay herself down on the hard floor. Brian joined her, but found it too uncomfortable to get any sleep for many hours.

'Wake up! Wake up, you useless idiot! Why did I agree to bring you along? Come on, get up! It's morning!'

Brian's gummy eyes cracked open, letting in a cold grey light that filtered down from the barred window in the door above him. Ada was kneeling at his side, looking down at him in a fury. From outside came the clapping of hoofs and the sound of people's voices.

He tried to move his neck, which sent stabbing pains shooting down his spine. He'd fallen asleep in an odd position, with his head against the wall. Ignoring this manfully, he scanned the whitewashed little room, and saw that it was empty except for him and Ada.

'Hey! Where's that guy?' he mumbled. 'I thought we were supposed to be escaping.'

'We were,' said Ada, glowering. 'When the constable came for him first thing, I tried to wake you but you lay there snoring like the idle dole scrounger you are...'

'I couldn't get to sleep for hours,' Brian told her. 'When that happens, there's no waking me when I do nod off...'

'You don't need to tell me!' Ada snapped. 'I shook you and kicked you but you kept

snoring as the constable dragged Yates out. I tried to slip out when he was distracted but he jabbed at me with that pole he carries and forced me back in here. I would have stood a far better chance if you'd been awake.'

'When was this?' Brian asked, rubbing his neck and getting himself more comfortable against the wall.

'About a quarter of an hour ago,' Ada said. 'Yates will probably be out of the parish now. And we're still stuck in here.'

Brian got to his feet and went to the door. He put his face to the barred window and looked out.

The street outside was fairly busy in the morning sunlight. A cart was passing, drawn by a big horse that trotted along mournfully. On the far side, a lady in a bonnet and a long dress was carrying a parasol while walking arm in arm with a man in soldier's uniform. The scene reminded Brian of Quality Street. Some barefooted kids were playing with a stick and a hoop in the gutter. A few men wearing trousers and grubby shirts, neckerchiefs and caps were lounging on one corner.

Brian recognised some of the buildings from the 21st century, but most must have been knocked down by his day. The road was a rutted cart track. There was a biggish house where the supermarket carpark would be in two hundred years. Where the station would be one day there was nothing but a meadow. Again, Brian noticed that there were no trees.

He mentioned this to Ada.

'The Napoleonic Wars, Brian,' she said heavily. 'You ever heard of Nelson?'

'Of course I have,' he said defensively. 'He couldn't swim; he had one eye and birds crap on him in Trafalgar Square. What about him?'

'England had a pretty sizeable navy in his day,' Ada said, 'and the ships were all made of wood. After a while, trees were hard to come by.'

Brian rapped on the oak door. 'They had enough left over to make this door,' he said. 'Solid oak. What do you think they'll do to us? Hang us?'

Ada shrugged. 'Maybe it'll just be transportation,' she said doubtfully.

'To Australia?' Brian asked. 'God, no. I've never liked the look of the place. Too sunny. And I've always hated *Neighbours*. I think we should make another escape attempt.'

'Well, stay awake for this one, then,' Ada told him sarcastically.

Around noon, a familiar face appeared. Trudging up the street was their old chum Benjamin Pagnell, constable of this parish. He was carrying two bowls which he proceeded to thrust through the window at Brian. They contained a nauseating looking glop, but Brian was starving and he took them enthusiastically, handing one

to Ada. He stirred his own with the horn spoon that was sticking out of it.

‘When are you letting us go?’ he demanded. ‘I’m bored out of my tiny mind. There’s only so many times you can play I-Spy, mate. Particularly with yourself.’

‘Letting you go?’ Pagnell crowed. ‘Why, I’ll let you go just as soon as the magistrate sends for you! The militia will be taking you straight to Chester Gaol, to rot amongst the rest of the filth. Then you’ll hang, I’ll be bound. French spies! What you deserve, foreign scum!’

‘Okay,’ Brian said, tucking into his gruel. It was a bit like extremely watery porridge. ‘So when’s that going to be?’ Maybe they could make a break for it when the militia took them to Chester...

‘Be another se’en-night,’ Pagnell replied brusquely, ‘things being as they are. Soldiers got enough on their hands with all these uprisings going on. If I got my hands on any of these Luddites...’ he grumbled, striding away.

Brian turned to Ada. ‘What’s a se’en-night?’ he asked.

‘A week,’ she said. ‘Seven nights.’

Brian pulled a face and poked at his gruel. It had lost its savour. ‘We’ve got to live on this stuff for a week?’

‘Unless we can see some way to escape,’ she replied.

Brian sat in the corner and thought deep thoughts to take his mind off the taste of the gruel. He was going to eat it, if it was all that was available; he would have to keep up his strength if they were going to get away. But he didn’t have to enjoy it. Lucky chance, that.

It was easier in the films, he thought. Escaping, that is. He looked round the inside of the lockup. What would James Bond do in this situation? Well, he’d find a conveniently located ventilation shaft and escape up it. No chance; no vents here. Alright, he’d knock out the guard and escape while dressed in his uniform. Well, Pagnell didn’t really have a uniform as such, and anyway, everyone would see it wasn’t the parish constable.

He kicked the whitewashed stone wall in frustration. Ada looked up from equally gloomy thoughts.

‘What’s up?’ she said. ‘Are you going to kick your way out?’

Brian sighed heavily and put down the bowl of gruel.

‘Do you really think they’ll hang us?’ he asked in a small voice.

Ada looked at her nails. ‘If we’re lucky,’ she said. ‘That’s if we don’t die from gaol-fever while we’re waiting. And even if our sentence is commuted to transportation,

there's a hundred nasty ways we could die on the way. Or even when we're over there. It's not all lager and surfing and barbecues in Australia in 1812.'

'So we've got to get out!' Brian said. 'What are we going to do?'

'Magistrates were pretty corrupt in this period,' Ada said. She produced the purse containing repro nineteenth century money. 'Maybe we could buy our way out.'

'Yeah, that or get done for forgery,' Brian said. 'That money's not genuine, is it?' But Ada wasn't listening. She had her head cocked. Brian added, 'What is it?'

'Sssh!' she said. 'Listen!'

Brian did as he was told, and he heard a rumbling noise of many voices from outside. It sounded like some kind of disturbance, a multitude of people, shouting and calling outside. He leapt up and put his face to the window in the door.

A mob was careering down the street. The quiet, idyllic scene he had seen before had been transformed. What seemed like hundreds of men, all dressed like the roughs Brian had seen hanging around on the street corner earlier, were charging along the thoroughfare. Brian glimpsed Pagnell gaping at the mob from a side road. A group in the middle was carrying what looked like half a tree.

Ada joined him at the window.

'What's going on?' she demanded. Suddenly, the raging mob was charging at the lockup. Red faces were wide open as they bellowed. The group in the middle levelled the tree trunk and ran straight towards the lockup door.

Brian fell back in horror.

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The Dark Place

Chapter 2

Monday morning dawned grey and dismal with rain falling in sheets. Martin looked out of the bedroom window and saw Spook walking round the edge of the garden trying to stay under the shelter of the plants and out of the rain. Martin dressed in a dark suit and white shirt with a blood red tie and went downstairs. As he walked into the kitchen, Spook came in through the cat flap meowing loudly.

‘I can’t make it stop raining,’ said Martin as he rubbed Spook’s damp head. Spook licked Martin’s palm and the cat’s coarse tongue reminded him of sandpaper. ‘I’m going to be late getting home tonight, so you’d better make the most of this,’ said Martin as he filled Spook’s dish with food. Martin washed his hands before making himself some tea and toast. Martin finished his toast and then took his tea into the study, where he turned on his computer so he could check his emails before he left for work.

His work email was the usual mix of cancelled or re-arranged meetings, research seminar notifications and emails from medical companies trying to interest him in the latest advances in drugs their company had for sale. Martin dealt with the most important emails then logged off from the hospital network and logged on to his personal email. His inbox contained emails offering him cheap Viagra, Cialis and pain management drugs as well as a couple of jokes from Steve.

Martin wondered how the US and Canadian authorities appeared to allow the sale of unlicensed drugs over the internet. Martin marked the emails as spam, deleted them, and was just about to close the connection when the mail alert icon blinked to let him know a new email had arrived. He didn’t recognise the sender but the subject line read, ‘For you, Martin,’ and he wondered how whoever had sent the email knew his name was Martin. His Yahoo email address did not contain his real name and was just a mixture of letters and numbers; feeling slightly puzzled Martin opened the email. The page was blank until slowly words began to appear on the screen.

‘This is a warning. Take heed Martin, for you cannot save her.’

The words then slowly faded from the screen and the inbox was displayed again. Martin blinked and tried to go back to the message but it had vanished. He looked in the deleted items and the spam but it was nowhere to be found and he began to wonder if it had been real at all.

Fifteen minutes later Martin left the house and began the short drive to work, still troubled by what had happened with his email. He tried to rationalise what he had seen but he couldn’t. He felt sure he’d seen and read the email but equally without being able to see it again he couldn’t be absolutely sure.

Martin always took the same route to work, even though some people regarded it as the long way round. Instead of taking the direct route along Eaton Road Martin drove up to Queens Drive then along Queens Drive before turning left into Alder Road so

he could approach the hospital from the rear. Eaton Road was always congested at this time in the morning and the restricted car park he used was easier to get to from the Alder Road entrance.

As he proceeded along Queens Drive Martin was struck by the amount of traffic on the road and the speed that some people drove at. In his rear view mirror, Martin noticed a car weaving in and out of the lanes as the driver tried to get through the traffic quickly.

'I wonder what his hurry is,' Martin thought as the car passed him and accelerated away before cutting sharply into the lane he was travelling in, forcing the car in front of Martin to brake sharply.

The driver of the car in front was sounding his horn and making hand gestures towards the driver of the other car when suddenly he came to an abrupt stop. Martin also had to brake sharply and he hoped the car behind him managed to stop before it collided with the rear of his car. Martin looked ahead, the car that had been weaving through the traffic was now on the pavement, and the driver was standing in the road using his mobile phone. People were running along the pavement towards something Martin couldn't see but from the expression on their faces, he thought it must be serious.

Martin eased his car onto the pavement and got out. A crowd had gathered at the side of the weaving car and some people were on their knees. Martin hurried forward and could see what looked like a bundle of clothes on the floor at the people's feet. Martin eased his way through the crowd telling them he was a doctor. The people parted for him and he was faced with a young girl in a pink coat lying in a contorted position on the pavement. One of her legs was at an impossible angle underneath her and blood was pooling on the wet pavement underneath her head. Martin checked her pulse. It was still there but it was faint.

'Has anyone called for an ambulance?' he asked the crowd.

'There's one on the way,' someone replied. Martin moved the girl's blonde hair to one side to inspect the damage to her head. He couldn't see much for the blood but it looked as though the whole left side of her skull had been crushed by the impact with the pavement. Martin thought to himself that this didn't look good as he once again checked the girl's pulse. It fluttered faintly and he wondered where the ambulance was.

A few seconds later Martin could hear sirens approaching. An ambulance and a police car arrived on the scene. The paramedics gently but quickly moved the girl to a stretcher. Martin helped where he could but he knew the ambulance crew would do all that was required. He quickly told the paramedics his view of the girl's head wound and the fact that her pulse was weak. The paramedics stabilised the girl and put her in the ambulance before roaring off with their lights flashing and siren wailing in the direction of Alder Hey children's hospital. One of the police officers strode purposefully towards Martin took his name and address and asked him what had happened but Martin couldn't tell him much.

‘One of the other drivers said the car was speeding and weaving in and out of the traffic,’ said the officer. ‘Did you see that?’

Martin thought for a second before replying that he hadn’t really seen much, just the cars all having to brake suddenly. The officer made a few notes in his notebook then moved off to speak to another of the onlookers.

‘Bloody lunatic was probably late for work or something,’ said a voice at Martin’s side. ‘And that poor little girl’s been hurt because of it. They drive too fast on this bloody road.’

Martin looked down at the lined face of the old lady standing next to him. ‘Did you see what happened?’ asked Martin.

‘He cut into the inside lane and tried to beat the lights,’ said the old woman. ‘That poor little girl was only on her way to school. Now she’s been taken to hospital.’ One of the police officers went over to where the girl had been lying and began throwing sand over the blood on the pavement. Martin walked back to his car and continued his journey to work.

An hour after he arrived at the hospital Martin made his way down to the A&E department. He asked the triage nurse if a young girl involved in a road accident had been brought into the hospital by ambulance that morning.

‘Let’s see,’ she said consulting her computer screen. ‘There were a couple of RTAs this morning.’

‘It was around 9.00am. She was a young girl about eight or nine years old; blonde hair, wearing a pink coat,’ said Martin.

‘Oh,’ said the nurse, her face looking suddenly sad.

‘That one, we lost her around 0930. I’m sorry. Did you know her?’

‘No,’ said Martin, ‘but I was at the scene when the paramedics arrived.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said the nurse. ‘We did all we could for her but it was as though she just gave up. We thought we’d managed to save her but it was 50/50. She had a severe skull fracture and possibly some intraparenchymal bleeding as well.’

Martin knew with such an injury the girl would have needed an immediate CT scan and probably surgery. He thanked the triage nurse and decided to go over to the staff dining room to get a drink. As Martin walked up the quarter mile long corridor that ran down the middle of the hospital, he was lost in thought and almost collided with a couple that came out of one of the wards that lined each side of the corridor. A large heavysset man had his arm round the shoulders of a slim blonde haired woman who was sobbing loudly. The woman was clutching something in her hands and as they walked away from Martin down the corridor, he noticed that it was a pink coat.

Opposite the dining room was the hospital chapel. Martin stopped outside and then

motivated by something he didn't understand, he went into the chapel. Inside, the small chapel was empty and Martin sat down on one of the front pews. He'd never been religious and he had no idea why he was here now but as he sat, he found himself hoping the little girl had not suffered too much. As he looked at the large wooden cross above the altar Martin thought about the email he had received that morning.

'How could someone have known that accident was going to happen?' he thought, 'and why would they email me a warning?'

As Martin sat in the chapel, he felt a cold draft on the back of his neck. He looked round expecting to see someone coming through the doors and entering the chapel. To his surprise, there was no one there and the door to the chapel was closed. Feeling slightly puzzled Martin turned back towards the front of the chapel and the cross. As he looked at the cross, Martin wondered how some people found the courage and fortitude to deal with the things life threw at them. Martin sat for another few minutes then left the chapel.

That afternoon Martin was in his office on the first floor when his phone rang. He knew his next appointment wasn't for another hour and he hoped it wasn't an emergency call.

'Hello, Martin Davies,' he said.

'Hello Martin. It's Paul Mason here. When you've got a couple of minutes, would you mind coming over to my office?'

'Of course, Paul,' Martin answered. 'When would you like me to come over?'

'Well, if you're free now, that would be great.'

'OK,' said Martin. 'I'll come over now.'

Martin left his office and made the short walk between the two offices, wondering what Paul wanted. Paul Mason was the senior paediatrician at Alder Hey and was in effect Martin's boss. Martin knocked on the door and went into Paul's office.

'Hi, Martin. Sit down,' said Paul, motioning towards the seat in front of his desk as Martin came into the office.

Martin sat down and asked, 'How can I help you, Paul?'

The two men had a good working relationship and both respected the others abilities. Paul had spotted Martin in medical school when he was doing some teaching and had suggested that Martin specialise in paediatrics. Paul had become something of a mentor to Martin. He had played a big part in persuading him to stay in Liverpool after graduating and join the staff at Alder Hey in the face of strong competition from the likes of Great Ormond Street in London. Paul steepled his fingers and looked at Martin.

‘I heard what happened this morning,’ he said.

‘That was quick,’ replied Martin.

‘Somebody from the Liverpool Echo phoned the hospital about the accident and your name was mentioned,’ said Paul. ‘I made a few phone calls and got the details. There was nothing you could have done for the girl, Martin; I’ve seen the reports from the staff in A&E. We couldn’t help her, even with the equipment we have here, so there was nothing you could have done at the scene.’

‘I sort of realised that when I saw the amount of trauma she’d suffered,’ said Martin.

‘It was touch and go from the start and I don’t want you blaming yourself,’ continued Paul. ‘You’re a doctor, not a miracle worker. I felt I needed to speak to you about this because you’re a valuable member of staff and we all need support at one time or another.’

‘Thanks, Paul,’ said Martin. ‘I really appreciate that.’

The two men chatted for a little while until the phone on Paul’s desk began ringing and Martin excused himself as Paul answered the phone. Back in his office, Martin thought about the day’s events and wondered why his name had been mentioned by whoever had contacted the hospital.

That evening Martin was sitting in the staff canteen enjoying a coffee when one of the other doctors came over to his table and asked if she could join him.

‘Of course,’ said Martin. ‘Sit down.’

Karen Williams had worked at the hospital for just over a year and she and Martin had worked together on a few occasions.

‘You’ve had an eventful day haven’t you?’ said Karen as she took a sip from her cup of coffee.

‘It’s been busy,’ replied Martin cautiously. ‘What makes you say that anyway?’

Karen opened a copy of the evening edition of the Liverpool Echo and placed it on the table in front of Martin. There was a photograph of Martin taken at the scene of this morning’s accident. The photograph had been cut so all that could clearly be seen was Martin’s head and shoulders as he bent over the little girl. The headline over the photograph said Local Doctor Fights For Girl’s Life At Horror Smash. Martin scanned over the story; it gave his name as well as brief details of the accident. It also included a short sentence at the end to say that despite the best efforts of the hospital staff the unnamed girl had died later that morning.

‘There was nothing I could do,’ said Martin. ‘She’d suffered a massive head trauma.’

‘I know,’ replied Karen. ‘I was in A&E when they brought her in. I had to break the news to her parents and they were devastated.’ Martin and Karen sat in silence

drinking their coffee. 'She opened her eyes just before she died,' said Karen. 'She seemed to be looking at something over my shoulder and she was smiling. This was just before we lost her. She was smiling and then she looked really scared then she was gone. We did our best to bring her back but there was nothing we could do.'

'We're doctors, not miracle workers,' said Martin, repeating Paul Mason's words from this afternoon. 'Thanks for showing me this, Karen,' said Martin, standing up. 'I need to go and check on some patients. Maybe I'll see you later or tomorrow,' he added as he left the dining room.

Martin left work just after 10pm. It had been a long day and he was very tired.

'At least my first appointment at the clinic tomorrow isn't till 11.30 am,' he thought. 'So I can have a bit of a sleep in.'

As he drove the few miles to his house Martin thought about the couple he had seen coming out of the ward after he had been to A&E that morning.

'I wonder if I should try and contact them,' he thought. 'Probably wouldn't be a good idea,' his conscience argued back. 'They might blame you for not saving her.'

Martin realised arguing with himself and anything he could say to the young girl's parents would ultimately be pointless. He couldn't change the past. He tried to stop thinking about this morning and tried to think about Isobel instead. Martin went over the day they had spent together and the thrill of their first real kiss. He knew he'd only known Isobel for three days but he knew how much he liked her and he found it strange that she occupied so many of his thoughts.

Martin parked his car in the garage and as he walked towards the house, Spook came towards him meowing loudly.

'I know, I know,' Martin said, bending down so he could stroke Spook, who began to purr loudly. 'Come on, let's get you some food,' said Martin as he opened the front door.

Spook ran into the house and began pacing backwards and forwards outside the kitchen door as Martin picked up the post from the floor inside the porch. As he walked into the kitchen, Martin placed the post on the table before filling the kettle and switching it on to boil. He retrieved a packet of cat food from the cupboard and began emptying it into Spook's dish. Spook had his head in the dish and was eating the food before Martin had even finished emptying the packet.

'I did warn you I'd be late,' said Martin as he rubbed Spook's head.

Martin made himself a cup of tea and retrieved his post from the kitchen table before making his way to the lounge. He switched on the wall lights and lit the gas fire before relaxing with a sigh into the comfortable armchair. Martin looked at the small pile of post he'd placed on the coffee table and wondered if he could be bothered with it tonight.

‘I suppose I’d better make the effort,’ he thought. ‘There’ll only be more tomorrow.’

Martin picked up the post and the remote control for the hi-fi he toyed with the idea of listening to the radio but opted for the CD player instead. He pressed play and the achingly beautiful ‘If I am a stranger,’ by Ryan Adams started playing on the CD player.

Martin lost himself in the music until Spook wandered in from the kitchen and brought him out of his dreaming and back to reality. Spook lay in front of the fire and began washing himself.

‘What’s with the big clean Spook?’ asked Martin. ‘You got a hot date tonight?’

Spook looked at Martin and his amber eyes seemed to absorb and reflect the light from the fire so that they looked like mini pools of flame. He blinked once and went back to his cleaning. Martin opened his post and started working through it as he listened to the music. After an hour he’d finished and decided it was time to call it a day.

Martin picked Spook up and carried him into the kitchen. Spook decided he didn’t want to be put down on his chair and gripped Martin’s shirt sleeves with his claws. Martin pulled Spook’s paws off his shirt and put him down on the chair. Spook looked disgustedly at him before turning his back and curling up on the chair. Martin laughed and scratched Spook between the shoulders.

‘Not talking to me now then?’ he said Spook just curled up tighter and ignored him. As Martin was walking back towards the lounge, he noticed the red light on the answer phone machine in the hall was blinking. Martin picked up the phone and went through to the lounge where he sat down and keyed in the number for his messages. The electronic voice told him he had one new message so he pressed one to access it. It was Isobel.

‘Hi Martin,’ she said. ‘I saw your picture in the paper this evening. That must have been an awful thing for you to have to go through this morning. Anyway I hope you’re OK, and everything’s all right.’ Isobel paused for a couple of seconds and then said, ‘Missing you Martin and I’m really looking forward to seeing you later this week. Bye.’

Martin smiled as he deleted the message. ‘I’m missing you too,’ he thought to himself. Martin looked at his watch it was 11.30 so he decided it was too late to phone Isobel. He was just about to hang up the phone when he thought he heard something. He put the phone back to his ear and he thought it sounded as though it was still connected to someone.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’ said Martin. Silence answered him and then he heard a faint sobbing. ‘Hello, who’s there?’ said Martin, the sobbing got louder and then he heard a child’s voice full of fear say, ‘I’m scared, I want my Mum.’

The sobbing continued, deep heart wrenching sobs with gasps for air in between. It was as though whoever was crying couldn’t get enough air in between each sob. Then

the line went dead; not the silence of a connection that has been terminated but a deep black silence that seemed to reach out from the telephone and into Martin's mind.

Martin quickly pressed the end call button and put the phone on the coffee table as though it had suddenly become too hot to hold on to. Martin looked down at his hands and they were shaking. He sat looking at the phone for a while, waiting for something to happen, but it remained inanimate. Martin suddenly snatched the phone from the table, pressed the call button and held the phone to his ear before he could change his mind. All he could hear was the dial tone.

Martin turned off the CD player and the wall lights before walking back into the hall and carefully replacing the phone in its stand. 'That accident must have affected me more than I thought. Maybe Paul was right about the whole support thing,' he mused as he went upstairs. Martin showered quickly, brushed his teeth and got into bed. He rarely bothered with an alarm, preferring to rely on his own 'body clock' to wake him up.

Martin switched off the light and the red glow of the digital clock informed him that it was 11.55. A brisk wind was blowing and the full moon turned the shadows of the trees into grotesque shapes against the blinds on Martin's bedroom window. As he lay there watching the shadows of the branches twist and writhe, Martin thought about the day's events, especially the message on his computer and the disturbing incident with the phone. He didn't believe in God but equally he didn't believe in an equal and opposing force of Evil. Martin knew people could do unspeakable things to each other but he preferred to believe in the innate goodness of man rather than man being born into original sin.

Martin was in total darkness, not the darkness of a country lane without any streetlights or a room with a blackout blind, but total disorientating blackness as though he had been buried alive. There were no sounds or smells. Martin was unsure whether his eyes were open or closed, which way was up or down or if his feet were even standing on anything solid. The lack of a reference point left Martin's head spinning with vertigo and he thought he was going to vomit. Martin's world slipped away from him and he fell to his knees. The jarring contact of his knees against something solid while painful at least restored some of Martin's equilibrium and the urge to vomit passed. He felt around his knees with his hands and whatever he was kneeling on felt solid enough. As Martin struggled to find something to cling onto in order to bring some sense of order to his confusion, his eyes registered a slight change in the darkness.

'It's getting lighter,' he thought hopefully. Slowly the pale light increased until Martin could see he was kneeling in the middle of a road. There were trees on either side and as he looked each way along the road it stretched away into the distance with no end in sight. There was something wrong with the light. It was as though Martin was in a negative photograph, and all was black or white or a shade of grey. Martin got shakily to his feet and looked around. Beyond the trees was total blackness and the only illumination seemed to come from the road itself.

'Which way do I go?' Martin thought. 'I can't see anything either way except a road that doesn't seem to lead anywhere.'

Martin turned to his right and began to jog slowly along the centre of the road. As he moved steadily forward, Martin wondered where the road led. All he could see on either side were the monochrome trees and in front the road which seemed to vanish in the distance. As he jogged, Martin began to feel a growing sense of unease. He looked repeatedly over his shoulder but nothing was behind him. As the feeling grew stronger Martin found his pace was increasing. He wasn't jogging anymore, he was almost running.

Martin looked over his shoulder again and he realised that the road no longer vanished into the distance behind him. Where the road used to be there was an approaching wall of blackness and it was gaining fast. Martin started to run faster, trying to outpace the approaching darkness and as he ran, he noticed something in the distance. There was an object in the middle of the road in front of him but he couldn't make out what it was. Martin was sprinting now his lungs were starting to burn and the sense of dread and horror he felt was draining his energy. He risked a look over his shoulder and the darkness was almost on him. He made a final almost herculean effort to outrun the darkness but it caught him. Martin screamed as the ground fell away from him and he was falling.

Martin fought his way out of the duvet with a strangled sob and sat bolt upright in bed; he was bathed in sweat, which was rapidly cooling on his exposed body. Martin almost fell out of bed as he made his way into the en suite. His head was spinning and once again he had the urge to vomit. Martin braced himself against the sink, his arms were rigid and his hands gripped the porcelain of the sink until his knuckles were white. Slowly his breathing returned to normal. His stomach settled and he splashed some cold water on his face. Martin looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were wide and his face and chest were flushed a deep pink as though he had just finished a strenuous exercise session. Martin turned on the shower and before it had a chance to warm up he stepped under the falling water. It was cold at first and the coldness of the water helped him come back to himself. The water quickly warmed up and soon Martin was standing under a steaming shower. Feeling more like himself, Martin turned off the shower and reached for a towel to dry himself. As he dried his head and then threw the towel over his shoulder, Martin wondered why he had just experienced a nightmare.

'I haven't had nightmares since I was a kid,' he thought. Stepping out of the shower onto the mat, Martin reached down to dry his legs. As he rubbed the towel over his thighs and across his knees, he felt a sharp pain. Looking down he saw that both his knees were skinned as though he had fallen against something hard and abrasive.

Martin went back into the bedroom and looked at the clock which read 2.45. He knew his adrenalin levels were too high and he would never be able to sleep so decided to go downstairs and make himself a drink and try to relax. Spook sat up and stretched and looked at Martin as he walked into the kitchen.

'I know,' said Martin. 'It's nearly three o'clock in the morning and we should both be asleep.'

Spook yawned, jumped down from his chair and went over to his bowl. He sniffed

around the empty bowl before sitting down and looking at Martin expectantly.

‘You never give up, do you, Spook?’ said Martin as he switched the kettle on to boil. He spooned coffee and sugar into a mug then added hot water and milk. As he stirred the coffee, he tried to rationalise his nightmare. He wondered why he had accepted the reality of his situation in his dream. He hadn’t questioned the logic of his presence in the strange black and white landscape or the existence of the road, the trees or the feeling of dread he had experienced. Then he thought about his scraped knees.

‘I can’t explain that,’ he thought. Martin could still feel the hard abrasive road beneath his knees as he had pitched forward in the darkness. ‘But you can’t hurt yourself in dreams,’ he argued desperately. The only rational explanation was he had done it that morning when he knelt on the floor at the scene of the accident and had only noticed when he showered following the nightmare.

Feeling slightly better, Martin went into the lounge and lit the fire. Spook had followed Martin and he curled up in front of the fire and promptly went to sleep. Martin sat in the armchair and sipped his coffee lost in thought. At 7.00 am he was still sitting in the lounge. He had tried to listen to the radio but couldn’t find a programme that held his attention. The 24 hour news stations on the TV also offered little in the way of relaxation. The same headlines seemed to be repeated every hour or so and the stories of death and mayhem from around the globe did not make Martin feel any better, if anything they made him feel worse. Martin decided he might as well be in work doing something productive as sitting in the lounge.

The journey to work was uneventful although Martin did feel a little strange as he drove past the scene of yesterday’s accident. There was a blue police accident notice on the pavement asking for witnesses and an array of flowers had been laid on the pavement. As Martin passed, he noticed a large bouquet of lilies in the middle of the flowers.

Martin parked his car and made his way into the hospital. As he went through the staff entrance, he nearly collided with Paul Mason.

‘Good morning, Martin,’ said Paul.

‘Hello, Paul,’ said Martin. ‘Sorry about that. I was miles away.’

‘Yes,’ said Paul drily. ‘I can see. Are you alright, Martin? You look tired.’

‘I didn’t sleep very well,’ answered Martin.

‘If what happened yesterday is bothering you, Martin, take a day or two off and relax. It might help?’

‘Thanks, Paul. I’ll bear that in mind,’ said Martin as he made his way to his office.

Paul watched Martin walk away and hoped things were OK; he liked Martin immensely and knew he was an excellent doctor.

‘Maybe he just needs a couple of days off,’ thought Paul as he made his way to his early morning appointment, knowing it was only the first in what promised to be a long day.

On his way to the office, Martin stopped off at the canteen and bought a coffee as well as a bottle of water. The young blonde woman serving behind the counter smiled at Martin and asked how he was today to which Martin replied that he was fine thank you. As he left the canteen the blonde woman sadly watched him leave.

‘Still got the hots for him then, Mary,’ said the other woman behind the counter. Mary smiled at her older colleague.

‘Some of us are still young enough to dream, you know, Maureen,’ she said as she turned to serve another customer. The older woman laughed as she took two slices of toast from the toaster.

‘Two toasts,’ she called out to the dining room and was rewarded by the sight of a nurse raising her hand and making her way towards the counter.

Mary Johnson pushed the lock of blonde hair she had so carefully allowed to escape back underneath her cap.

‘He never even noticed me,’ she thought disappointedly.

Mary had worked at the hospital for six months and had liked Martin the first time she saw him. She thought Martin had looked tired today. His eyes were red and she thought it must surely be the long hours all doctors had to work. Even though they had only ever exchanged the normal everyday pleasantries most people take for granted, Mary felt she had some connection with Martin. He occupied so many of her thoughts and dreams as well as what she wished for her future. She hoped with all her heart that one day he would notice her.

Once he had reached his office Martin threw himself into his work, hoping to shake off some of his lethargy. It seemed to work. He quickly dealt with his email inbox and prepared himself for his 11.30 appointment. He knew it was a relatively straightforward case. Young Robert was autistic. He’s on the autistic spectrum, Martin corrected himself. Robert had been something of a handful to his parents ever since his autism had manifested itself. Both his mother and father blamed themselves for his condition but truthfully it was no one’s fault.

Robert had started to show signs of autism at two years old, although prior to that he had seemed a normal baby. Now at aged seven Robert had developed into a normal looking child but there the similarity ended. Robert had none of the childlike qualities of other seven year olds. He wouldn’t make eye contact when he spoke, which was seldom, preferring to communicate by pulling on the hand of whoever he was interacting with. He also had the repetitive behaviour and impulsivity common to children diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. Robert was fiercely attached to his parents though and would seldom allow them to be out of his sight for extended periods of time.

Robert was in Martin's office now, repeatedly stacking the wooden building blocks Martin had given him to play with.

'There's nothing wrong with his spatial awareness and his co-ordination,' he was telling Robert's parents. 'He's also learnt to talk, although as we know he doesn't use that method of communication much.'

'Learnt to talk,' repeated Robert as he restacked the blocks in a precise geometric formation. Martin and Robert's parents looked over towards the boy but he continued with his constant stacking and moving of the blocks. Martin crossed the room to Robert and moved into his field of vision in an effort to make eye contact with him but Robert looked away. Robert's parents watched as Martin repeatedly tried to engage with Robert but it was no use.

Martin was about to give up when Robert suddenly looked straight at him and smiled beautifully before his face contorted and he started to hurl the blocks at Martin.

Martin dodged the first block but Robert's action had taken him completely by surprise and the second block caught him on the cheekbone under his left eye drawing blood. Robert's mother quickly crossed the room and caught Robert's arms stopping him throwing any more blocks. She held him in her arms as he kicked and screamed until Robert's father picked him up and held him close, soothing him.

'We'll take him home and he'll calm down,' Robert's mother was saying as Martin held a handkerchief to his cheek. 'I'm so sorry,' she said as she opened the door to let her and her husband out of the office.

'Don't worry about it,' Martin reassured her. 'It's only a scratch.' She went out the door followed by her husband who was carrying Robert who had now stopped struggling. As they left the office, Robert raised his head from his father's shoulder and looked straight at Martin. His eyes were as black as coal and his stare chilled Martin to the bone then the door closed and they were gone.

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Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PEEP THROUGH AN IRON GRATING.—THE LONELY PRISONER IN HIS DUNGEON.—THE MYSTERY.

Without forestalling the interest of our story, or recording a fact in its wrong place, we now call our readers' attention to a circumstance which may, at all events, afford some food for conjecture.

Some distance from the Hall, which, from time immemorial, had been the home and the property of the Bannerworth family, was an ancient ruin known by the name of the Monks' Hall.

It was conjectured that this ruin was the remains of some one of those half monastic, half military buildings which, during the middle ages, were so common in almost every commanding situation in every county of England.

At a period of history when the church arrogated to itself an amount of political power which the intelligence of the spirit of the age now denies to it, and when its members were quite ready to assert at any time the truth of their doctrines by the strong arm of power, such buildings as the one, the old grey ruins of which were situated near to Bannerworth Hall, were erected.

Ostensibly for religious purposes, but really as a stronghold for defence, as well as for aggression, this Monks' Hall, as it was called, partook quite as much of the character of a fortress, as of an ecclesiastical building.

The ruins covered a considerable extent, of ground, but the only part which seemed successfully to have resisted the encroaches of time, at least to a considerable extent, was a long, hall in which the jolly monks no doubt feasted and caroused.

Adjoining to this hall, were the walls of other parts of the building, and at several places there were small, low, mysterious-looking doors that led, heaven knows where, into some intricacies and labyrinths beneath the building, which no one had, within the memory of man, been content to run the risk of losing himself in.

It was related that among these subterranean passages and arches there were pitfalls and pools of water; and whether such a statement was true or not, it certainly acted as a considerable damper upon the vigour of curiosity.

This ruin was so well known in the neighbourhood, and had become from earliest childhood so familiar to the inhabitants of Bannerworth Hall, that one would as soon expect an old inhabitant of Ludgate-hill to make some remark about St. Paul's, as any of them to allude to the ruins of Monks' Hall.

They never now thought of going near to it, for in infancy they had spoiled among its

ruins, and it had become one of those familiar objects which, almost, from that very familiarity, cease to hold a place in the memories of those who know it so well.

It is, however, to this ruin we would now conduct our readers, premising that what we have to say concerning it now, is not precisely in the form of a connected portion of our narrative.

It is evening—the evening of that first day of heart loneliness to poor Flora Bannerworth. The lingering rays of the setting sun are gilding the old ruins with a wondrous beauty. The edges of the decayed stones seem now to be tipped with gold, and as the rich golden refulgence of light gleams upon the painted glass which still adorned a large window of the hall, a flood of many-coloured beautiful light was cast within, making the old flag-stones, with which the interior was paved, look more like some rich tapestry, laid down to do honour to a monarch.

So picturesque and so beautiful an aspect did the ancient ruin wear, that to one with a soul to appreciate the romantic and the beautiful, it would have amply repaid the fatigue of a long journey now to see it.

And as the sun sank to rest, the gorgeous colours that it cast upon the mouldering wall, deepened from an appearance of burnished gold to a crimson hue, and from that again the colour changed to a shifting purple, mingling with the shadows of the evening, and so gradually fading away into absolute darkness.

The place is as silent as the tomb—a silence far more solemn than could have existed, had there been no remains of a human habitation; because even these time-worn walls were suggestive of what once had been; and the wrapt stillness which now pervaded them brought with them a melancholy feeling for the past.

There was not even the low hum of insect life to break the stillness of these ancient ruins.

And now the last rays of the sun are gradually fading away. In a short time all will be darkness. A low gentle wind is getting up, and beginning slightly to stir the tall blades of grass that have shot up between some of the old stones. The silence is broken, awfully broken, by a sudden cry of despair; such a cry as might come from some imprisoned spirit, doomed to waste an age of horror in a tomb.

And yet it was scarcely to be called a scream, and not all a groan. It might have come from some one on the moment of some dreadful sacrifice, when the judgment had not sufficient time to call courage to its aid, but involuntarily had induced that sound which might not be repeated.

A few startled birds flew from odd holes and corners about the ruins, to seek some other place of rest. The owl hooted from a corner of what had once been a belfry, and a dreamy-looking bat flew out from a cranny and struck itself headlong against a

projection.

Then all was still again. Silence resumed its reign, and if there had been a mortal ear to drink in that sudden sound, the mind might well have doubted if fancy had not more to do with the matter than reality.

From out a portion of the ruins that was enveloped in the deepest gloom, there now glides a figure. It is of gigantic height, and it moves along with a slow and measured tread. An ample mantle envelopes the form, which might well have been taken for the spirit of one of the monks who, centuries since, had made that place their home.

It walked the whole length of the ample hall we have alluded to, and then, at the window from which had streamed the long flood of many coloured light, it paused.

For more than ten minutes this mysterious looking figure there stood.

At length there passed something on the outside of the window, that looked like the shadow of a human form.

Then the tall, mysterious, apparition-looking man turned, and sought a side entrance to the hall.

Then he paused, and, in about a minute, he was joined by another who must have been he who had so recently passed the stained glass window on the outer side.

There was a friendly salutation between these two beings, and they walked to the centre of the hall, where they remained for some time in animated conversation.

From the gestures they used, it was evident that the subject of their discourse was one of deep and absorbing interest to both. It was one, too, upon which, after a time, they seemed a little to differ, and more than once they each assumed attitudes of mutual defiance.

This continued until the sun had so completely sunk, that twilight was beginning sensibly to wane, and then gradually the two men appeared to have come to a better understanding, and whatever might be the subject of their discourse, there was some positive result evidently arrived at now.

They spoke in lower tones. They used less animated gestures than before; and, after a time, they both walked slowly down the hull towards the dark spot from whence the first tall figure had so mysteriously emerged.

There it a dungeon—damp and full of the most unwholesome exhalations—deep under ground it seems, and, in its excavations, it would appear as if some small land springs had been liberated, for the earthen floor was one continued extent of moisture.

From the roof, too, came perpetually the dripping of water, which fell with sullen,

startling splashes in the pool below.

At one end, and near to the roof,—so near that to reach it, without the most efficient means from the inside, was a matter of positive impossibility—is a small iron grating, and not much larger than might be entirely obscured by any human face that might be close to it from the outside of the dungeon.

That dreadful abode is tenanted. In one corner, on a heap of straw, which appears freshly to have been cast into the place, lies a hopeless prisoner.

It is no great stretch of fancy to suppose, that it is from his lips came the sound of terror and of woe that had disturbed the repose of that lonely spot.

The prisoner is lying on his back; a rude bandage round his head, on which were numerous spots of blood, would seem to indicate that he had suffered personal injury in some recent struggle. His eyes were open. They were fixed despairingly, perhaps unconsciously, upon that small grating which looked into the upper world.

That grating slants upwards, and looks to the west, so that any one confined in that dreary dungeon might be tantalized, on a sweet summer's day, by seeing the sweet blue sky, and occasionally the white clouds flitting by in that freedom which he cannot hope for.

The carol of a bird, too, might reach him there. Alas! sad remembrance of life, and joy, and liberty.

But now all is deepening gloom. The prisoner sees nothing—hears nothing; and the sky is not quite dark. That small grating looks like a strange light-patch in the dungeon wall.

Hark! some footstep sounds upon his ear. The creaking of a door follows—a gleam of light shines into the dungeon, and the tall mysterious-looking figure in the cloak stands before the occupant of that wretched place.

Then comes in the other man, and he carries in his hand writing materials. He stoops to the stone couch on which the prisoner lies, and offers him a pen, as he raises him partially from the miserable damp pallet.

But there is no speculation in the eyes of that oppressed man. In vain the pen is repeatedly placed in his grasp, and a document of some length, written on parchment, spread out before him to sign. In vain is he held up now by both the men, who have thus mysteriously sought him in his dungeon; he has not power to do as they would wish him. The pen falls from his nerveless grasp, and, with a deep sigh, when they cease to hold him up, he falls heavily back upon the stone couch.

Then the two men looked at each other for about a minute silently; after which he who was the shorter of the two raised one hand, and, in a voice of such concentrated hatred and passion as was horrible to hear, he said,—

"D—n!"

The reply of the other was a laugh; and then he took the light from the floor, and motioned the one who seemed so little able to control his feelings of bitterness and disappointment to leave the place with him.

With a haste and vehemence, then, which showed how much angered he was, the shorter man of the two now rolled up the parchment, and placed it in a breast-pocket of his coat.

He cast a withering look of intense hatred on the form of the nearly-unconscious prisoner, and then prepared to follow the other.

But when they reached the door of the dungeon, the taller man of the two paused, and appeared for a moment or two to be in deep thought; after which he handed the lamp he carried to his companion, and approached the pallet of the prisoner.

He took from his pocket a small bottle, and, raising the head of the feeble and wounded man, he poured some portion of the contents into his mouth, and watched him swallow it.

The other looked on in silence, and then they both slowly left the dreary dungeon.

The wind rose, and the night had deepened into the utmost darkness. The blackness of a night, unilluminated by the moon, which would not now rise for some hours, was upon the ancient ruins. All was calm and still, and no one would have supposed that aught human was within those ancient, dreary looking walls.

Time will show who it was who lay in that unwholesome dungeon, as well as who were they who visited him so mysteriously, and retired again with feelings of such evident disappointment with the document it seemed of such importance, at least to one of them, to get that unconscious man to sign.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Four: Lot and Morgaine

Lot smiled with satisfaction as he saw the crumpled figure of the boy-pretender lying in the shadows of the Abbey doors. A tap on his shoulder made him turn. One of his men was pointing away across the rooftops towards a helicopter squadron that was approaching rapidly.

‘Too many for us,’ Lot muttered. ‘Time to go!’

They broke free from the pursuing choppers somewhere over Watford, and flew on across the English countryside, keeping vigilant for sky-pirates. Lot’s family seat lay over the Border near Jedburgh. They had some way to go.

The king was dead. Shortly after his coronation, this pretender lay riddled with bullets. Lot grunted in satisfaction. They had no need for a king; they’d managed without one since Uther’s assassination. Britain had seen weak, incompetent government since the Vortigern government opened the floodgates to the heathen; it was better off without any. As Lord Protector, Lot himself had prospered without law or taxes to interfere with his prerogatives, able to defend his own from the heathen without a government that would only protect them. Many of the other lords agreed with him; only a few fools like Leodegrance wanted a return to the government that had favoured the heathen.

Not long after, they were descending. Below, the forbidding baronial hall of Orguenie Castle stood amid several acres of parkland. His wife and children would not be expecting him to return so soon, although Morgaine would be pleased that matters had reached a close so quickly.

The chopper landed on the grass. Nearby, the other was landing. Lot waited until his security men had leapt down before following them. The second chopper emptied as more security men disembarked. They flanked Lot as he strode up to the house.

Morgaine greeted him balefully as he swept into the hall after dismissing his men. His three sons stood at her side.

‘You’re back,’ Morgaine greeted him curtly. Soft faced, wide eyed, her pale English beauty hid a will as steely as her late father, the Duke of Cornwall. ‘What went wrong?’

‘Wrong?’ Lot demanded. He glanced at Gawain, his eldest son, and Gawain’s two brothers Gaheris and Agravaine, all of them smaller editions of himself. Gawain was frowning thoughtfully.

‘What do you mean, wrong?’ Lot added. ‘This pretender is as dead as the last king! I saw to it myself. We were too late to halt the coronation – they put it forward at the last moment, security must have got wind of my plan...’

Morgaine flicked on the wide screen TV on the opposite wall. It was half way through a news program. Lot watched in stunned amazement as he saw footage of the pretender, Arthur, being helped into an ambulance. He was alive!

‘I shot him down!’ he protested to Morgaine. ‘Just as you suggested!’

Morgaine folded her arms. She glared at the boys. ‘Children, go to your rooms,’ she snapped, and waited for Gawain to lead them from the hall.

‘You idiot!’ she was saying as the boys hurried upstairs. ‘This Arthur’s not so easy to kill...’

‘Don’t do that!’ Gawain snapped at his brother Agravaine, who was straining his ears to listen to the muffled argument. ‘Mother told us to go to our rooms.’

Agravaine laughed, and Gaheris joined in. ‘Are you going to do what Mother says all your life?’

Gawain faced them down, knowing full well that he was the oldest, and could subdue them both in a fight. He grabbed Agravaine by an ear and dragged him to his room.

‘Alright, alright,’ the boy protested. ‘I’m going!’

They all ended up in Gawain’s bedroom, as usual. The argument from downstairs was still dimly audible. It could probably be heard as far as the staff quarters.

‘What do you think they’re rowing about now?’ Gaheris asked, lounging on Gawain’s bed.

‘Father tried to get rid of this new king,’ Agravaine said casually. ‘Like he got rid of the last one.’

‘You know it was the heathens who assassinated the old king,’ Gawain said. ‘Everyone knows that.’

‘Unless they listen at the right keyholes,’ Agravaine said with a sneer. Gawain sighed. Months ago, Agravaine had claimed he had heard their parents discussing King Uther’s murder; that their mother had spoken about it as if their father had been behind it. And Gawain knew full well that his father did nothing without Mother’s approval.

‘You’ve got to admit, if he did order King Uther’s death,’ Gaheris added, ‘he’s been true to form in trying to kill Arthur.’

Gawain sighed, and looked out of the window at the grass below where the choppers sat. His father’s ambitions troubled him. The man made little attempt to conceal them from his family, and it seemed that Mother always approved, if she wasn’t his inspiration. They had both brought Gawain up to believe that Britain was better off without a government that had favoured the heathen, but he knew from history lessons that the country had known no sky-pirates or road warriors before the Vortigern regime.

Gawain knew his father had taken over after King Uther was killed, but since then he had made no attempt to return the country to order; rather he seemed to have perpetuated the chaos. One thing troubled him more than the rest.

‘I can’t believe Father paid heathens to assassinate King Uther,’ he said firmly. ‘He hates the heathen.’

Agravaine shrugged. ‘We could easily find out what’s going on,’ he said. ‘If you’d stop being stupid.’

Gawain glowered at him. Agravaine gave him an insolent stare. Gaheris looked from one to the other.

‘Very well,’ said Gawain at last. He let Agravaine lead them both back to the top of the stairs where they crouched, listening to the argument in the hall below. Gawain just hoped that none of the staff would find them.

‘But Arthur still has to die?’ Lot asked wearily.

Morgaine faced him, her face cold and hard. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘You know

he'll be like Vortigern; like Uther proved to be, for all his wars against the heathen.'

Lot nodded mechanically. 'He secretly favoured them,' he said. 'He let them stay in Britain, found them work; instead of sending them back to their own country.'

'That's why we agreed to have him removed,' Morgaine said. 'And it was the heathen themselves who did it for us.'

'So you say,' Lot said. 'It was you who dealt with them.'

He remembered her; a young woman in her twenties, newly married. She had opened his eyes to Uther's iniquities; how he had betrayed his own people to the heathen they had fought for so long. She had even arranged his murder, employing heathen militants: how she had recruited them he couldn't guess, but he had been glad to leave it to her.

Since then, he had been Lord Protector. He had accepted the position with promises to get the country back on its feet, but that had never quite seemed to be expedient, not in Morgaine's opinion. He listened to her opinion frequently. Too much, perhaps.

'Never mind the past,' Morgaine said. 'It's now that matters. This Arthur threatens your position; he will let more and more heathens swamp the country, let them murder us and our children in our own beds. Unless you strike!'

Lot shrugged helplessly. 'What can I do?' he said. 'I tried to kill him.' The news said that Arthur had been wearing a bullet-proof vest. 'Security will be tighter now,' he added. 'We've no chance of assassinating him, not even if you can find willing militants again.'

Morgaine threw her hands up. 'Why did I marry such a fool?' she asked of the air. 'When the country fell apart, you know full well that every man who could surrounded himself with a private army. All the Lords who support you have their own troops; so do you. Unite them against this boy who threatens you. What support will he have?'

'Leodegrance...' Lot said pensively. 'Leodegrance supports him openly. Other Lords too. The Archbishop...'

'Leodegrance we can deal with,' Morgaine said confidently. 'I think I know who we can find to keep Lord Cameliard occupied. In the meantime, go to your supporters. Lord Urien will back you; he always does. And between you both, you can raise enough support to gather a large enough army to wipe Arthur and his paltry supporters from the face of the earth.'

At the head of the stairs, Gawain sat with his brothers, sick to the stomach with horror. So it was all true...

Arthur looked round the table at his assembled supporters. His arm was in a sling, and his ribs still ached, but otherwise he had recovered well from the assassination attempt. He was grateful Merlin had persuaded him to wear a bullet-proof vest under his robes.

'Lot escaped us,' he said. 'Lord Urien has also left us, as have a number of other Lords. We can only assume they are plotting something.'

Merlin leaned forward and listed the lords implicated. 'Clarivance, Duke of Northumberland; Nentres, Lord of Garlot; Margon, Lord Malehaut; Carados, Lord Galencie... Each of these men has a large militia, almost an army.'

'Lot won't be happy with his failure,' said Leodegrance. 'He'll attack.'

'With the aid of his supporters,' the Archbishop added.

‘And how many supporters do we have?’ Arthur asked, dreading the answer.

‘You have my support,’ said Ector quietly.

‘I can provide men also,’ the Archbishop added.

‘As can I,’ said Leodegrance.

A few others present promised their support. ‘But Lot and his supporters will still outnumber us,’ Merlin said.

Arthur shook his head. ‘We must strike fast, before he can gather them,’ he said grimly. ‘How soon can we assemble our troops?’

Leodegrance said, ‘I will need time to return to Cameliard and gather my men. In the meantime I will leave you the troops who came with me.’

‘It will delay us,’ said Ulfín.

Merlin stroked his long nose thoughtfully. ‘I think I know where we can find more troops,’ he said.

‘Where, Merlin?’ Arthur demanded. ‘Who else in Britain will support me?’

‘In Great Britain, no one I know of,’ Merlin replied. ‘But in Vannes, in Brittany, Ban and his brother Bors have been defending their land from General Claudas, the French dictator. Their war is over for the moment. We could ask them to provide us with assistance in return for future help against their enemy.’

Arthur nodded. ‘Good idea,’ he said. ‘Bedivere, Kay, I want you to set out for Brittany at once. Go to Vannes and speak with Bors. Explain our situation and offer help in future in return for help now.’

‘Leodegrance, go back to Cameliard and gather your troops. You have more men than anyone else. Your help will be invaluable. Everyone else, gather what forces you have and assemble them here at London. We’ll head north as soon as we can. With luck, we’ll end this insurgency before it’s begun.’

He looked at the grim-faced men who surrounded him. Everyone there apart from Kay was twice his age if not older. He was little more than a boy. Was it right that he should make such decisions at his age?

Yet fierce excitement burned in his veins at the thought of going to war against the man who had oppressed Britain for so many years, the man who had tried to kill him, the man who doubted Arthur’s right to rule.

Merlin studied him thoughtfully, as if seeing something new in Arthur’s face.

Bedivere piloted the small plane that took the two men south. As they flew high above the fields and woods of Southern England, seeming to chase their shadow across the land, he remembered the first flight he had made, when King Uther was still alive. In those days, it had seemed that peace was within their grasp, that the heathen would be driven back across the sea. His majesty’s lust for a woman had been the beginning of the end; fewer men would support him when the heathen rose up a second time, and after his assassination there had been no hope for peace.

They flew over the city of Camelot and towards the Isle of Wight. The land below was green and peaceful, giving no indication of the horrors of civil war that awaited. ‘Why should these Bretons help us against the Lord Protector?’ Kay asked.

Bedivere glanced over at his companion. ‘Their grandfather was Budic, who sheltered King Uther when he was a boy. If anyone will be willing to help us, it will be those two. I knew them, years ago.’

He had accompanied Uther and Ambrosius to Brittany when they had to escape the Vortigern regime. Ban and Bors had been young lads, younger than Uther,

but the four boys had been inseparable. Affairs of state – or war – had stopped Uther from seeing them again.

‘Besides, it seems they’re in a spot of bother with the French dictator, Claudas,’ Bedivere added. ‘Brittany seceded from his tyranny but he’s determined to reconquer it.’

They were flying over the grey waters of the Channel now, and the clouds were gone. Brittany was still a long way away.

The Channel Islands began to appear, small green gems in the wide grey waters, and to the east, the Normandy coast. The plane seemed to creep over the archipelago with impossible slowness, although a glance at the instrument panel told Bedivere that they were flying over them at high speed.

They passed Jersey, and then the coast of Brittany crept over the curvature of the earth. Soon they were over fields, forests, and hills once again.

Vannes lay on the south coast of Brittany. The plane crossed a small mountain range as they flew inland towards Lorient, the closest airport to their destination, and the land below seemed quiet and peaceful, but as they approached the tower and asked to land, they received a distraught response demanding they identify their unscheduled flight.

Bedivere leaned towards the microphone: ‘We are here on British diplomatic business. Our coming was radioed ahead.’

After a pause, another voice came over the radio, giving them permission to land. Bedivere guided the plane towards the runway and soon they were touching down on the long strip of tarmac. It was about lunchtime, and Bedivere was feeling hungry. They disembarked as a jeep sped up the runway towards them. Soldiers crewed it. Bedivere and Kay exchanged glances.

‘This doesn’t look good,’ Kay remarked. The jeep pulled up beside them and Bedivere found an automatic rifle being aimed directly at him. A man in officer’s uniform leapt down.

‘You’re coming with us,’ he told them.

‘We’re here on diplomatic business,’ Bedivere protested. ‘Contact Ban and Bors in Vannes. They’ll fill you in.’

‘This is the wrong place to mention those insurgents,’ the officer said. ‘General Claudas is our leader.’

Lorient had fallen into the hands of the French, Bedivere realised in horror. Soldiers surrounded them while one searched the two Britons for concealed weapons, producing the guns they had worn in shoulder holsters. There were too many for them to fight, and nowhere to run except back to the plane, and that would need refuelling before they could be sure of escaping.

They were marched across the tarmac towards the terminal, which was deserted except for groups of armed guards.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Kay demanded.

The French officer replied: ‘You’ll be taken for questioning to Nantes, where the General is based. We’ll soon find out why you’re dealing with the insurgents.’

They were marched through the terminal and out into the sunlight on the far side where a French army truck was waiting in the extensive car park. More soldiers bundled the two men into the back, handcuffing them to struts and leaving two men to watch over them. Bedivere sat back as they drove away from the airport and waited for the journey to end.

What had happened? The tranquillity of Brittany they had seen from the plane had been an illusion. General Claudas was in control, at least of Lorient. And Nantes,

apparently. This must have happened very recently; when Bedivere and Kay had set out, Claudas' troops were nowhere near and Bors' people had welcomed the visit.

Kay looked at one of the guards. 'So when did Claudas take over here?' Clearly, the same questions were on his mind.

The French soldier shouted in his own language. Bedivere caught a few words, none of which seemed complimentary, and then the soldier threatened Kay with the butt of his rifle. Claudas' men were not noted for their sweet tempers. Bedivere caught Kay's eye and shook his head.

'We've got to escape,' Kay muttered. 'Our mission is too important to jeopardise.'

He was right. Bedivere knew that with only Leodegrance and a few others to provide Arthur with troops they would be seriously outnumbered against Lot and his supporters. It was vital that they secure the aid of Ban and Bors, but maybe the Bretons were in no position to help them.

With shocking suddenness, there was an explosion tore up ahead, and the truck swerved to one side. Bedivere was flung forward, and his arms were almost dragged out of their sockets as he hung from his shackles. The two soldiers were flung against the opposite canvas wall, and one dropped his gun. Kay struggled against his handcuffs.

The truck righted itself. As it seemed to continue down the road, Bedivere looked around in frustration. They could have no idea of what was happening while they were stuck in the back of the truck. Were they under attack? A blast of gunfire from very close seemed to confirm his assumption. Was it the Bretons? It would be ironic if they were killed by the people they had come to find. The truck screeched to a halt and silence came as suddenly and shockingly as the noise.

Bedivere heard a moaning from the cab. Doors banged open. Another burst of gunfire ripped through the hush. The two soldiers in the back of the truck pushed open the canvas flap. One leapt down. More gunfire; even more. Then the other soldier staggered back, falling to the floor of the truck, his chest a mass of gunshot wounds.

Bedivere looked at Kay, who was struggling with his bonds again. The truck floor bounced up and down as a figure leapt onto it, and stood silhouetted in the sunlight. It was training a rifle on them.

'Qui vous etes?' the man asked.

'Lot's forces are advancing!'

Merlin looked up from the report and approached Arthur. 'The war's beginning, Arthur,' he added. 'You're commander-in-chief. What now?'

Arthur looked uncertainly around the busy operations room. The confidence he'd felt speaking to his aides had been diminished by several days of planning where he had been confronted by the reality of military strategy. He couldn't have coped without Merlin's advice. But now the old man was expecting him to make the decisions again.

Trying to look decisive, Arthur crossed to the electronic map that took up one entire wall.

'What's their position?' he asked. Merlin came to stand by him. He pressed a control and the map zoomed in on the Scottish Borders.

'Their main force is concentrated here' – Merlin indicated a position along the A68 – 'south of the Border, outside Carduel. According to our sources, they are

beginning to move south.'

Arthur stroked his chin. 'Well, our forces here in the South East are mobilised,' he said. 'What about Leodegrance? Any word from Cameliard?'

'Last report stated that he was mobilising his troops,' Merlin replied. 'He suggested he should join up with us as we advanced.'

Arthur tapped the map at a position in the East Midlands. 'We should meet the advancing insurgents about here,' he said. 'That would give Leodegrance about seventy miles to come, across the hills from Cameliard.' He indicated Leodegrance's position, just north of Norgales. He peered at the spot he had indicated, a little to the east of the M1. 'Where is this, Merlin?'

The old man zoomed in. 'The town of Castle Bedegraine,' he replied. 'Just south of the Bedegraine Forest National Park. I think I see your plan...'

'Can we raise Leodegrance?' Arthur said. He turned to the communications section. 'Get me Lord Cameliard.'

'Encrypt the message, I think,' Merlin added. Arthur flushed. He'd just been about to blurt their plans on an open channel.

'Already doing that, sir,' said the communications technician calmly. Shortly after, Leodegrance's voice boomed from the speaker.

'Your majesty. How can I help you?'

Arthur leaned over. 'My lord,' he said formally. 'How are the preparations?'

'All looking good at this end, your majesty,' Leodegrance replied. 'We're ready to set out at your word of command.'

Arthur smiled excitedly. 'Lord Lothian's forces are on the move,' he said. 'But remain in your current position for the moment. We hope to meet the enemy in the vicinity of Castle Bedegraine. Do you know the place?'

'I know it, your majesty,' Leodegrance replied crisply.

'We'll take them in a pincer manoeuvre,' Arthur replied. 'They'll see my forces are small, and that'll make them overconfident. Then you can come in on their flank. With luck, we'll have our Breton support by then.'

'Have we had word from Bedivere and Kay?' Leodegrance inquired.

'Not yet,' Arthur replied, frowning. He had been fretting since the two envoys had failed to report. 'Something may have happened. There's been word that General Claudas is active in the Nantes area again. We may have to plan without them.'

'I hear you,' Leodegrance said. 'Out.'

Arthur stepped away from the microphone. He gazed up at the map, in his mind far away from the noise and bustle of the operations room. Kay hadn't been in touch for days now. Arthur was worried about his brother, and Bedivere. He shouldn't have sent them.

But he couldn't afford to worry about them. The situation in the North was far more pressing. Still, with Leodegrance's support it might be possible to give Lot something to think about.

Leodegrance surveyed his troops from the town hall steps as they paraded across Cameliard town square. At his side stood his teenage daughter Guinevere, who watched each passing tank and truck and militia with wide eyes. Town dignitaries and security men had joined them.

Leodegrance saluted smartly as another militia marched past, some in uniform, others in civilian clothes. It was a ragtag army that he commanded, but he was proud

of it. It had kept Cameliard and the surrounding area safe from attack for a decade, since he had retreated to his home town after the assassination of Uther. Back then, the country had been in hopeless disarray and he could see nothing for it but to protect his own; now Britain was plunging into civil war and all he could do was pitch in on what he hoped was the right side, and pray that the war would be brief and victorious for his own side.

‘I didn’t know you had so many toy soldiers, dad,’ Guinevere said with a giggle. ‘You don’t play with them very often.’

Leodegrance laughed at her impudence. ‘There was a period when I had to play war all the time,’ he said. ‘It seems that time has come round again.’

Guinevere looked pensive. As the square rang with the jubilation of the crowd, however, her spirits rose again; soon she was waving to passing soldiers.

She had been a baby when war last troubled Cameliard, and her father’s protecting hand had maintained the town as a refuge from the anarchy of recent years. Guinevere was happiest gossiping with her girlfriends or out dancing in the town’s night clubs and bars.

She paid little attention to the news and the horrors that assailed the rest of the country were something she liked to close her mind to. But she knew her father wanted peace for Britain, and it was an ambition she shared, in her own way. She was going to train to become a doctor, and she couldn’t see that happening in the middle of civil war

Leodegrance’s head snapped round as he heard the roaring of jets. Black dots were hurtling through the skies above the Georgian houses that lined the south side of the square. His face set grimly. They were heading this way.

Guinevere clapped her hands.

‘Dad!’ she cried as the roar of jets grew and people in the crowd turned to look at their approach. ‘You didn’t tell me you had planes, too!’

‘I don’t,’ Leodegrance replied urgently. ‘Unless the king’s sent me air support, I’d hazard guess that those planes mean us no good.’ No time for a round table meeting; they needed action! ‘Air raid!’ he boomed, turning to his second-in-command, Cleodalis. ‘Air raid! Prepare to resist! Get the civilians to safety...’

He was still giving orders when the first bombs fell.

Arthur’s army advanced out of the London suburbs at dawn.

The main convoy of troops was being carried in trucks down the deserted M1. After he declared war on the advancing insurgents, Arthur had given a series of directives at Merlin’s prompting. No armed men other than his forces were permitted in the area of their advance, and the roads and motorways heading north were forbidden to all but the army. Tanks and armoured cars formed the spearhead of the advance, while helicopters buzzed through the skies, some on reconnaissance, others carrying more troops. Otherwise Arthur’s air support was minor.

Arthur himself was aboard a helicopter gunship that hovered above the vanguard. From it he could see his forces spread out across the Midlands countryside. Fields and towns below him resembled models, and through this miniature landscape his tiny forces advanced.

‘Reconnaissance reports the outriders of Lot’s force in the Trent Valley,’ Brastias said, coming forward from the cockpit.

‘No doubt the main force is still north of the Humber,’ Merlin said. ‘About

time Leodegrance began his advance.'

Arthur nodded. 'Contact Cameliard and ask them to advance on Castle Bedegraine.'

Brastias returned to the cockpit. Arthur turned to Merlin. 'Be honest with me,' he said. 'What do you think are our chances?'

Merlin looked at him enigmatically. 'Who can say?' he said. 'Do you expect me to see the future?'

Arthur shifted uncomfortably. 'Everyone seems to think you can,' he replied. 'I've heard stories about you in Vortigern's day...'

'That's all in the past,' Merlin replied. 'The future? Well, hasn't Providence chosen you as king? Surely that wouldn't have happened unless you were to rule Britain. Think on that, Arthur.'

Arthur digested this. They were outnumbered, by all reports. Would Leodegrance's strike tip the balance in their favour? What about Kay's mission to Brittany? Where did Providence come into that?

'Providence!' he muttered. 'How did that happen, Merlin? How – why – did Providence choose me? What's so special about me?' Merlin was about to speak when Brastias reappeared from the cockpit. His face was grim.

'What is it?' Arthur demanded.

'Urgent report from Cameliard!' Brastias said. 'They're under mass attack from sky pirates! They think it's Rience of Norgales. They can't commit.'

Arthur glanced at Merlin in horror. Fear struck him to the heart. Now they had no chance!

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Brigands of the Moon

V

Shortly after that midday meal I encountered Venza sitting on the starlit deck. I had been in the bow observatory; taken my routine castings of our position and worked them out. I was, I think, of the Planetara's officers the most expert handler of the mathematical calculators. The locating of our position and charting the trajectory of our course was, under ordinary circumstances, about all I had to do. And it took only a few minutes every twelve hours.

I had a moment with Carter in the isolation of his chart room.

"This voyage! Gregg, I'm getting like you—too fanciful. We've a normal group of passengers apparently, but I don't like the look of any of them. That Ob Hahn, at your table—"

"Snaky looking fellow," I commented. "He and the Englishman are great on arguments. Did you have Princes' cabin searched?"

My breath hung on his answer.

"Yes. Nothing unusual among his things. We searched both his room and his sister's."

I did not follow that up. Instead I told him about the burn on Miko's thick arm.

He stared. "I wish we were at Ferrok-Shahn. Gregg, tonight when the passengers are asleep, come here to me. Snap will be here, and Dr. Frank. We can trust him."

"He knows about—about the Grantline treasure?"

"Yes. And so do Balch and Blackstone." Balch and Blackstone were our first and second officers.

"We'll all meet here, Gregg—say about the zero hour. We must take some precautions."

Then he dismissed me.

I found Venza seated alone in a starlit corner of the secluded deck. A porthole, with the black heavens and the blazing stars was before her. There was an empty seat nearby.

She greeted me with the Venus form of jocular, intimate greeting:

"Hola-lo, Gregg! Sit here with me. I have been wondering when you would come

after me."

I sat down beside her. "Why are you going to Mars, Venza? I'm glad to see you."

"Many thanks. But I am glad to see you, Gregg. So handsome a man. Do you know, from Venus to Earth, and I have no doubt on all of Mars, no man will please me more."

"Glib tongue," I laughed. "Born to flatter the male—every girl of your world." And I added seriously, "You don't answer my question. What takes you to Mars?"

"Contract. By the stars, what else? Of course, a chance to make a voyage with you—"

"Don't be silly, Venza."

I enjoyed her. I gazed at her small, slim figure reclining in the deck chair. Her long, gray robe parted by design, I have no doubt, to display her shapely, satin-sheathed legs. Her black hair was coiled in a heavy knot at the back of her neck; her carmine lips were parted with a mocking, alluring smile. The exotic perfume of her enveloped me.

She glanced at me sidewise from beneath her sweeping black lashes.

"Be serious," I added.

"I am serious. Sober. Intoxicated by you, but sober."

I said, "What sort of a contract?"

"A theater in Ferrok-Shahn. Good money, Gregg. I'll be there a year." She sat up to face me. "There's a fellow here on the Planetara, Rance Rankin, he calls himself. At our table—a big, good-looking blond American. He says he is a magician. Ever hear of him?"

"That's what he told me. No, I never heard of him."

"Nor did I. And I thought I had heard of everyone of importance. He is listed for the same theater I am. Nice sort of fellow." She paused, then added, "If he's a professional entertainer, I'm a motor oiler."

It startled me. "Why do you say that?"

Instinctively my gaze swept the deck. An Earth woman and child and a small Venus man were in sight, but not within earshot.

"Why do you look so furtive?" she retorted. "Gregg, there's something strange about this voyage. I'm no fool, nor you, so you must know it as well as I do."

"Rance Rankin—" I prompted.

She leaned closer toward me. "He could fool you. But not me—I've known too many magicians." She grinned. "I challenged him to trick me. You should have seen him evading!"

"Do you know Ob Hahn?" I interrupted.

She shook her head. "Never heard of him. But he told me plenty at breakfast. By Satan, what a flow of words that devil driver can muster! He and the Englishman don't mesh very well, do they?"

She stared at me. I had not answered her grin; my mind was too busy with queer fancies. Halsey's words: "Things are not always what they seem—" Were these passengers masqueraders? Were they put here by George Prince? And then I thought of Miko the Martian, and the burn upon his arm.

"Come back, Gregg! Don't go wandering off like that!" She dropped her voice to a whisper. "I'll be serious. I want to know what in hell is going on aboard this ship. I'm a woman and I'm curious. You tell me."

"What do you mean?" I parried.

"I mean a lot of things. What we've just been talking about. And what was the excitement you were in just before breakfast this morning?"

"Excitement?"

"Gregg, you may trust me." For the first time she was wholly serious. Her gaze made sure no one was within hearing. She put her hand on my arm. I could barely hear her whisper: "I know they might have a ray upon us. I'll be careful."

"They?"

"Anyone. Something's going on. You know it. You are in it. I saw you this morning, Gregg. Wild-eyed, chasing a phantom—"

"You?"

"And I heard the phantom! A man's footsteps. A magnetic, deflecting, invisible cloak. You couldn't fool an audience with that, it's too commonplace. If Rance Rankin tried—"

I gripped her. "Don't ramble, Venza! You saw me?"

"Yes. My stateroom door was open. I was sitting with a cigarette. I saw the purser in the smoking room. He was visible from—"

"Wait! Venza, that prowler went through the smoking room!"

"I know he did. I could hear him."

"Did the purser hear him?"

"Of course. The purser looked up, followed the sound with his gaze. I thought that was queer. He never made a move. And then you came along and he acted innocent. Why? What's going on, that's what I want to know?"

I held my breath. "Venza, where did the prowler run to? Can you—"

She whispered calmly, "Into A20. I saw the door open and close. I even thought I could see his blurred outline." She added, "Why should George Prince be sneaking around with you after him? And the purser acting innocent? And who is this George Prince, anyway?"

The huge Martian, Miko, with his sister Moa came strolling along the deck. They nodded as they passed us.

I whispered, "I can't explain anything now. But you're right, Venza: there is something going on. Listen! Whatever you learn—whatever you encounter which looks unusual—will you tell me? I ... well, I do trust you. Really I do, but the whole thing isn't mine to tell."

The somber pools of her eyes were shining. "You are very lovable, Gregg. I won't question you." She was trembling with excitement. "Whatever it is, I want to be in on it. Here's something I can tell you now. We've two high class gold leaf gamblers aboard. Do you know that?"

"Who are they?"

"Shac and Dud Ardley. Every detective in Greater New York knows them. They had a wonderful game with that Englishman, Sir Arthur, this morning. Stripped him of half a pound of eight-inch leaves—a neat little stack. A crooked game, of course. Those fellows are more nimble-fingered than Rance Rankin ever dared to be!"

I sat staring at her. She was a mine of information, this girl.

"And Gregg, I tried my charms on Shac and Dud. Nice men, but dumb. Whatever's going on, they're not in it. They wanted to know what kind of a ship this was. Why? Because Shac has a cute little eavesdropping microphone of his own. He had it working last night. He overheard George Prince and that giant Miko arguing about the Moon!"

I gasped, "Venza! Softer—"

Against all propriety of this public deck she pretended to drape herself upon me. Her hair smothered my face as her lips almost touched my ear.

"Something about treasure on the Moon. Shac couldn't understand what. And they mentioned you. Then the purser joined them." Her whispered words tumbled over one another. "A hundred pounds of gold leaf—that's the purser's price. He's with them—"

whatever it is. He promised to do something or other for them."

She stopped. "Well?" I prompted.

"That's all. Shac's current was interrupted."

"Tell him to try it again, Venza! I'll talk with him. No! I'd better let him alone. Can you get him to keep his mouth shut?"

"I think he might do anything I told him. He's a man!"

"Find out what you can."

She drew away from me abruptly. "There's Anita and George Prince."

They came to the corner of the deck, but turned back. Venza caught my look. And understood it.

"You do love Anita Prince, Gregg?" Venza was smiling. "I wish you.... I wish some man handsome as you would gaze after me like that." She turned solemn. "You may be interested to know, she loves you. I could see it. I knew it when I mentioned you to her this morning."

"Me? Why we've hardly spoken!"

"Is it necessary? I never heard that it was."

I could not see Venza's face; she stood up suddenly. And when I rose beside her, she whispered, "We should not be seen talking so long. I'll find out what I can."

I stared after her slight robed figure as she turned into the lounge archway and vanished.

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Witches and Barbarians

Part Two

Nick woke up in the bender they'd built in the woods near Westchester Public School. He looked around. The early morning sun streamed in through the entrance to the primitive shelter, and he screwed up his eyes. The snoring lump nearby was Hamish, hugging the spear he'd brought back from the mystic isle of Abalos. There was no sign of Eloise. She still hadn't come back.

They'd sat up half the night waiting for her to return after giving the Pigs the slip near the edge of town; they had hurried back to their bender, expecting to find Eloise there already, able to tell them the results of the ritual. But she hadn't been there and she hadn't turned up later. And she still wasn't back yet. Nick felt worried. They knew something grim was going on beneath the smug surface of this Middle English cathedral city, but as far as they were aware, it was centred on the sauna parlour, where the brother of Eloise's friend Mary had last been seen.

Quite a while had passed since they'd returned to Britain after their inadvertent trip across the North Sea, and their new friend Professor Higgins had offered to put them up for the duration of their stay in his own rooms at the university. But Eloise had insisted that they did not take up his time, and they had been camping in the trees near Mary's school since then, resting, preparing themselves for the last leg of their journey to Caer Pedryfan in North Wales. They had seen a fair bit of Mary, who sneaked out of the school grounds quite frequently to see her old friend Eloise; although they hadn't been there when her brother and his chums turned up. It had been his birthday, and he had come to spend some time with his sister. One of his friends had decided to take him to the brothel, as a kind of public schoolboy joke. But the joke had got out of hand after they left him there. He hadn't been seen since, and Mary wanted to know what had happened to him.

She had been intending to tell the police, but Eloise had warned her off that; her recent experiences had taught her to distrust the Pigs as much as Nick did. Instead she had offered to use her witchcraft to find out the truth. Mary had laughed nervously at the idea, but Nick and Hamish had convinced her that Eloise did have some uncanny abilities.

Nick had been less than happy that he and Hamish had to do the dangerous work, though, taking the focus crystal to the brothel, through which Eloise would be able to see the events of the past. And look what that had led to!

Still, he was worried for Eloise.

There was a rustle and a rumble from beside him, and Hamish sat up suddenly. He looked around him, and caught sight of his crustie companion.

'Och, fuck!' he growled. 'I thought it had all been a bad dream.'

'Eloise still isn't back,' said Nick softly.

'Where is she?' demanded the skinhead rhetorically. 'Silly little bitch.' But beneath the callous tone was a note of worry.

Nick turned quickly at a sound from outside. He wriggled forward to the entrance, and peered out.

Making her way up the slope below them was a girl in the purple and maroon uniform of Westchester Public School. She cast anxious glances over her shoulder as she forced her way through the bracken and nettles.

'It's Mary!' muttered Nick. He liked Mary. She was always nice to him, and brought back bittersweet memories of Siara, the Celtic girl he'd met on the Isle of

Abalos, who had died saving them from their enemies. Hamish liked her as well, though he tried not to show it.

‘Och, that dizzy bint,’ he muttered from the gloom of the bender.

Mary crested the rise. Nick grinned up at her. ‘Alright, Mary!’ he said. ‘Have you seen Eloise?’

Mary shook her head. ‘God, no, I haven’t,’ she replied. ‘I haven’t. What, isn’t she with you? Did you do this black magic thing, anyway? I didn’t think it would work...’

‘We did our bit of it,’ said Hamish, coming forward to the entrance. ‘But we haven’t seen Eloise since.’

‘Oh no!’ Mary replied, sitting herself down beside them. ‘What do you think has happened to her?’ She giggled nervously. ‘Was she taken off by the Devil?’ Then she shook her head. ‘Oh, but this might be serious, though.’

Nick scrambled out of the bender to sit by her. She wriggled a little to give him some room, and he moved up.

‘It’s probably nothing,’ he said reassuringly, placing a tentative hand on her knee. ‘She’ll turn up.’ Mary politely removed Nick’s hand.

Hamish came out, and sat on Mary’s other side.

‘Yeah, but you never know what might happen,’ he said. ‘There’s some weird things going on round here.’

Mary went quiet. Her usually jolly face fell.

‘Did... did you go to the sauna place?’ she asked tentatively.

‘Och, aye we did, and we got attacked by loadsa fuckers there, too,’ Hamish replied. ‘Fought them off, though,’ he boasted. ‘Then we got chased by the Pigs, but we got away.’

‘You got in a fight?’ asked Mary, wonderingly. ‘How awful! Did you get in a fight as well?’ she asked, turning to Nick.

‘Yeah!’ replied the Scouser, swelling with pride. ‘I can handle myself, you know!’

Mary looked disappointedly at him.

‘That’s horrible! Who attacked you?’

‘Bouncers, I suppose,’ replied Hamish. ‘But there were a fuck of a lot of them. They must get a lot of trouble from their customers.’

‘There wasn’t any sign of Mark, was there?’ Mary asked. They shook their heads.

‘Just this mad biker feller,’ replied Nick. ‘He was...’

‘Quiet!’ hissed Hamish. ‘Listen.’

They did as he said. From the general direction of the road, they could hear a motorbike. It stopped somewhere not far from them. Nick poked his head over the roof of the bender.

From here he could just make out the road. A motorbike was pulled up on the verge, and a couple of bikers stood by it. One had just got off the bike and was reaching up to remove her helmet. Nick frowned, recognising her as she handed it to her friend. It was Eloise! And the biker bore a striking resemblance to their acquaintance of the previous night.

‘Talking of bikers and Eloise...’ Nick said.

The other two rose up to join him. Eloise was heading for the trees, waving over her shoulder as the biker sped off. She tripped happily through the nettles, a broad grin on her face. Catching sight of the others, she stopped dead.

Mary hurried up to her, and Nick and Hamish followed.

‘Where did you get to last night?’ Mary demanded.

‘And what were you doing with that biker?’ Hamish scowled.

Eloise looked at each of them, one after the other, and laughed humourlessly.

‘What is this?’ she demanded. ‘You’re not my parents!’

‘Eloise, we were worried about you,’ Nick said reprovingly.

Eloise raised an eyebrow.

‘Gods, I ran away from home to get away from this,’ she said with irritation.

Mary took her arm.

‘Look, I’m sorry I snapped at you,’ she said gently. ‘But I’m worried about Mark. You said you’d find out what happened to him...’

Eloise shook her head.

‘Oh - oh, I’m sorry too,’ she replied apologetically. ‘It’s just you were all badgering me. Come on, let’s sit down and talk about it.’

Mary took a look at her watch.

‘Oh no - look, I’m late for class again,’ she replied. ‘I’ll be back for lunch-break, okay?’ Her eyes were wide with concern. ‘Tell me then, alright?’ She turned, and headed off through the undergrowth.

Eloise shouted after her.

‘I’m sorry, Mary - but I don’t think my news is going to be good...’

‘Tell me later!’ came Mary’s voice as she disappeared towards the school.

Nick looked at Eloise.

‘That wasn’t nice,’ he said. ‘She’ll be worrying about it till she comes back.’

‘She had to be prepared,’ Eloise replied sombrely. She sat in the lea of the bender. ‘What happened to you last night, anyway?’

Nick squatted down beside her.

‘Well, we went to the “massage parlour”, hung around until they got suspicious, then there was a fight, and we ran away with the Pigs after us. There was a biker there as well. In fact, he looked rather like the bloke who gave you a lift here.’

Nick ended on a questioning note. Eloise looked away, and caught sight of Hamish’s disapproving glare.

‘Oh, the pair of you!’ said Eloise. ‘Osborne and I didn’t get up to anything. I just spent the night on his sofa, after the police went.’

‘What happened?’ demanded Hamish. ‘Where did he spring from, what happened in the ritual? Just tell us!’

Eloise sighed. ‘I performed the ritual, I saw what happened to Mark - more or less - then I woke from my trance when this biker came bursting through the trees. He had the police after him, and I was still skylad...’

‘He saw you naked?’ demanded Hamish. Eloise nodded. Hamish muttered something under his breath. Nick caught the words ‘Lucky bugger...’

‘But he understood,’ Eloise added. ‘He’s a pagan as well, a Norse pagan, an Odinst. He comes from York, where they’re all mad on the Vikings and stuff... Anyway, we got chatting after the police had gone past, after I’d got dressed. And I realised that he was also interested in the Castle Sauna Massage Parlour.’ She frowned. ‘He didn’t mention you two, though,’ she added.

‘Well we were fucking there!’ blazed Hamish. ‘I’ve still got the bruises!’

Eloise smiled wickedly. ‘I didn’t know you were into that kind of thing,’ she murmured. She returned to her story before Hamish worked this one out.

‘It turns out that one of his mates went missing at the brothel on the same night as Mark - I saw him, actually, in the scrying waters. Osborne and his friends had come down here to Westchester after they read something in an old saga about an evil

demon-goddess buried beneath Castle Hill. They were wanting to do a ritual there in honour of one of their ancient heroes, who imprisoned the monster there, according to the saga. But the authorities wouldn't let them, so they rented a house near the City centre and decided to stay here until they could get a chance to sneak in when no one was looking. There's this ancient Roman temple under the castle, you see...'

'But what about the biker in the brothel?' asked Nick. 'Not your friend, the other one.'

'Oh yes,' replied Eloise. 'Well, he was "always a bit of deviant", Osborne says. He couldn't get anywhere with any of the local girls in the pub a couple of nights ago - they all said he was a greasy biker and they wouldn't shag him if he paid them. Which gave him the idea of going to the brothel. He staggered out of the pub, and hasn't been seen since...'

'Just like Mark..' muttered Nick. 'But what did you see in your vision?'

'Mark and Osborne's friend, Karl, were taken off into the booths, then after a while... everyone else in the room followed them. You've been there. I didn't see what was behind the booths, but I can't see how that could have happened. But both the prostitutes and all the other clients disappeared after Mark and Karl and never came back. That was when Osborne appeared, and my trance was broken.'

Nick frowned.

'The prostitutes and the customers?' he demanded.

'I'd understand it if mebbe they were murdering their customers and robbing them, or something...' Hamish murmured. 'But the customers were involved as well?'

'And all the other customers apart from Karl and Mark were dead respectable Westchester citizens,' Eloise said. 'I recognised the mayor at one point. And you know the madame, the woman in charge of the whorehouse?'

Nick nodded.

'Well,' said Eloise slowly. 'I came to visit Mary here, before I ran away. And while I was waiting for her in the school entrance hall, I saw the headmistress going past...'

'Yeah?'

'And she looked exactly the same.'

Mary was in trouble again.

'This is the third time this week!' shouted Miss Heath, the headmistress. 'In the last two weeks you have been late for lessons almost every day! While in the past you have been so conscientious a pupil! What is the matter? We can't help if you won't tell us.'

Mary shrugged, wishing she'd get it over with. 'Don't know,' she mumbled.

Miss Heath shook her head. 'As if I didn't have enough on my mind with Candlemas coming up,' she muttered to herself. She looked back at her pupil. 'Oh, get back to your lesson, girl,' she said quietly. 'And don't do it again!' she added, as Mary fled.

Miss Heath sat back, and looked around her spacious office. Really, her double life was beginning to get to her. Her other duties had always seemed so simple, but now it seemed that they had stirred up a whole host of problems; those three layabouts the night before hadn't been the usual unsuspecting victims... She needed to discuss her problems with someone.

She leaned forward and flicked the switch on the intercom.

'Send Judith here, please,' she said. Judith was the head girl, and one of Miss Heath's closest allies in the school.

She glanced around the room again, and flicked through a file. People just didn't realise the pressure she was under; fulfilling three roles in the close-knit society of Westchester created terrible stress, and no one appreciated her work. And all this because she had been born into one particular old-established Westchester family.

She looked up at the knock. 'Come in!' she called.

A dark-haired girl with penetrating eyes slipped into the room.

'Judith!' Miss Heath greeted her. 'I want to discuss the preparations for Candlemas with you...'

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Carmilla

III

We Compare Notes

We followed the cortege with our eyes until it was swiftly lost to sight in the misty wood; and the very sound of the hoofs and the wheels died away in the silent night air.

Nothing remained to assure us that the adventure had not been an illusion of a moment but the young lady, who just at that moment opened her eyes. I could not see, for her face was turned from me, but she raised her head, evidently looking about her, and I heard a very sweet voice ask complainingly, "Where is mamma?"

Our good Madame Perrodon answered tenderly, and added some comfortable assurances.

I then heard her ask:

"Where am I? What is this place?" and after that she said, "I don't see the carriage; and Matska, where is she?"

Madame answered all her questions in so far as she understood them; and gradually the young lady remembered how the misadventure came about, and was glad to hear that no one in, or in attendance on, the carriage was hurt; and on learning that her mamma had left her here, till her return in about three months, she wept.

I was going to add my consolations to those of Madame Perrodon when Mademoiselle De Lafontaine placed her hand upon my arm, saying:

"Don't approach, one at a time is as much as she can at present converse with; a very little excitement would possibly overpower her now."

As soon as she is comfortably in bed, I thought, I will run up to her room and see her.

My father in the meantime had sent a servant on horseback for the physician, who lived about two leagues away; and a bedroom was being prepared for the young lady's reception.

The stranger now rose, and leaning on Madame's arm, walked slowly over the drawbridge and into the castle gate.

In the hall, servants waited to receive her, and she was conducted forthwith to her room. The room we usually sat in as our drawing room is long, having four windows, that looked over the moat and drawbridge, upon the forest scene I have just described.

It is furnished in old carved oak, with large carved cabinets, and the chairs are cushioned with crimson Utrecht velvet. The walls are covered with tapestry, and surrounded with great gold frames, the figures being as large as life, in ancient and very curious costume, and the subjects represented are hunting, hawking, and generally festive. It is not too stately to be extremely comfortable; and here we had our tea, for with his usual patriotic leanings he insisted that the national beverage should make its appearance regularly with our coffee and chocolate.

We sat here this night, and with candles lighted, were talking over the adventure of the evening.

Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine were both of our party. The young stranger had hardly lain down in her bed when she sank into a deep sleep; and those ladies had left her in the care of a servant.

"How do you like our guest?" I asked, as soon as Madame entered. "Tell me all about her?"

"I like her extremely," answered Madame, "she is, I almost think, the prettiest creature I ever saw; about your age, and so gentle and nice."

"She is absolutely beautiful," threw in Mademoiselle, who had peeped for a moment into the stranger's room.

"And such a sweet voice!" added Madame Perrodon.

"Did you remark a woman in the carriage, after it was set up again, who did not get out," inquired Mademoiselle, "but only looked from the window?"

"No, we had not seen her."

Then she described a hideous black woman, with a sort of colored turban on her head, and who was gazing all the time from the carriage window, nodding and grinning derisively towards the ladies, with gleaming eyes and large white eyeballs, and her teeth set as if in fury.

"Did you remark what an ill-looking pack of men the servants were?" asked Madame.

"Yes," said my father, who had just come in, "ugly, hang-dog looking fellows as ever I beheld in my life. I hope they mayn't rob the poor lady in the forest. They are clever rogues, however; they got everything to rights in a minute."

"I dare say they are worn out with too long traveling," said Madame.

"Besides looking wicked, their faces were so strangely lean, and dark, and sullen. I am very curious, I own; but I dare say the young lady will tell you all about it tomorrow, if she is sufficiently recovered."

"I don't think she will," said my father, with a mysterious smile, and a little nod of his

head, as if he knew more about it than he cared to tell us.

This made us all the more inquisitive as to what had passed between him and the lady in the black velvet, in the brief but earnest interview that had immediately preceded her departure.

We were scarcely alone, when I entreated him to tell me. He did not need much pressing.

"There is no particular reason why I should not tell you. She expressed a reluctance to trouble us with the care of her daughter, saying she was in delicate health, and nervous, but not subject to any kind of seizure--she volunteered that--nor to any illusion; being, in fact, perfectly sane."

"How very odd to say all that!" I interpolated. "It was so unnecessary."

"At all events it was said," he laughed, "and as you wish to know all that passed, which was indeed very little, I tell you. She then said, 'I am making a long journey of vital importance--she emphasized the word--rapid and secret; I shall return for my child in three months; in the meantime, she will be silent as to who we are, whence we come, and whither we are traveling.' That is all she said. She spoke very pure French. When she said the word 'secret,' she paused for a few seconds, looking sternly, her eyes fixed on mine. I fancy she makes a great point of that. You saw how quickly she was gone. I hope I have not done a very foolish thing, in taking charge of the young lady."

For my part, I was delighted. I was longing to see and talk to her; and only waiting till the doctor should give me leave. You, who live in towns, can have no idea how great an event the introduction of a new friend is, in such a solitude as surrounded us.

The doctor did not arrive till nearly one o'clock; but I could no more have gone to my bed and slept, than I could have overtaken, on foot, the carriage in which the princess in black velvet had driven away.

When the physician came down to the drawing room, it was to report very favorably upon his patient. She was now sitting up, her pulse quite regular, apparently perfectly well. She had sustained no injury, and the little shock to her nerves had passed away quite harmlessly. There could be no harm certainly in my seeing her, if we both wished it; and, with this permission I sent, forthwith, to know whether she would allow me to visit her for a few minutes in her room.

The servant returned immediately to say that she desired nothing more.

You may be sure I was not long in availing myself of this permission.

Our visitor lay in one of the handsomest rooms in the schloss. It was, perhaps, a little stately. There was a somber piece of tapestry opposite the foot of the bed, representing Cleopatra with the asps to her bosom; and other solemn classic scenes were displayed, a little faded, upon the other walls. But there was gold carving, and rich and varied color enough in the other decorations of the room, to more than

redeem the gloom of the old tapestry.

There were candles at the bedside. She was sitting up; her slender pretty figure enveloped in the soft silk dressing gown, embroidered with flowers, and lined with thick quilted silk, which her mother had thrown over her feet as she lay upon the ground.

What was it that, as I reached the bedside and had just begun my little greeting, struck me dumb in a moment, and made me recoil a step or two from before her? I will tell you.

I saw the very face which had visited me in my childhood at night, which remained so fixed in my memory, and on which I had for so many years so often ruminated with horror, when no one suspected of what I was thinking.

It was pretty, even beautiful; and when I first beheld it, wore the same melancholy expression.

But this almost instantly lighted into a strange fixed smile of recognition.

There was a silence of fully a minute, and then at length she spoke; I could not.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Twelve years ago, I saw your face in a dream, and it has haunted me ever since."

"Wonderful indeed!" I repeated, overcoming with an effort the horror that had for a time suspended my utterances. "Twelve years ago, in vision or reality, I certainly saw you. I could not forget your face. It has remained before my eyes ever since."

Her smile had softened. Whatever I had fancied strange in it, was gone, and it and her dimpling cheeks were now delightfully pretty and intelligent.

I felt reassured, and continued more in the vein which hospitality indicated, to bid her welcome, and to tell her how much pleasure her accidental arrival had given us all, and especially what a happiness it was to me.

I took her hand as I spoke. I was a little shy, as lonely people are, but the situation made me eloquent, and even bold. She pressed my hand, she laid hers upon it, and her eyes glowed, as, looking hastily into mine, she smiled again, and blushed.

She answered my welcome very prettily. I sat down beside her, still wondering; and she said:

"I must tell you my vision about you; it is so very strange that you and I should have had, each of the other so vivid a dream, that each should have seen, I you and you me, looking as we do now, when of course we both were mere children. I was a child, about six years old, and I awoke from a confused and troubled dream, and found myself in a room, unlike my nursery, wainscoted clumsily in some dark wood, and with cupboards and bedsteads, and chairs, and benches placed about it. The beds were, I thought, all empty, and the room itself without anyone but myself in it; and I,

after looking about me for some time, and admiring especially an iron candlestick with two branches, which I should certainly know again, crept under one of the beds to reach the window; but as I got from under the bed, I heard someone crying; and looking up, while I was still upon my knees, I saw you--most assuredly you--as I see you now; a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes, and lips--your lips--you as you are here.

"Your looks won me; I climbed on the bed and put my arms about you, and I think we both fell asleep. I was aroused by a scream; you were sitting up screaming. I was frightened, and slipped down upon the ground, and, it seemed to me, lost consciousness for a moment; and when I came to myself, I was again in my nursery at home. Your face I have never forgotten since. I could not be misled by mere resemblance. You are the lady whom I saw then."

It was now my turn to relate my corresponding vision, which I did, to the undisguised wonder of my new acquaintance.

"I don't know which should be most afraid of the other," she said, again smiling--"If you were less pretty I think I should be very much afraid of you, but being as you are, and you and I both so young, I feel only that I have made your acquaintance twelve years ago, and have already a right to your intimacy; at all events it does seem as if we were destined, from our earliest childhood, to be friends. I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you; I have never had a friend--shall I find one now?" She sighed, and her fine dark eyes gazed passionately on me.

Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, "drawn towards her," but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging.

I perceived now something of languor and exhaustion stealing over her, and hastened to bid her good night.

"The doctor thinks," I added, "that you ought to have a maid to sit up with you tonight; one of ours is waiting, and you will find her a very useful and quiet creature."

"How kind of you, but I could not sleep, I never could with an attendant in the room. I shan't require any assistance--and, shall I confess my weakness, I am haunted with a terror of robbers. Our house was robbed once, and two servants murdered, so I always lock my door. It has become a habit--and you look so kind I know you will forgive me. I see there is a key in the lock."

She held me close in her pretty arms for a moment and whispered in my ear, "Good night, darling, it is very hard to part with you, but good night; tomorrow, but not early, I shall see you again."

She sank back on the pillow with a sigh, and her fine eyes followed me with a fond and melancholy gaze, and she murmured again "Good night, dear friend."

Young people like, and even love, on impulse. I was flattered by the evident, though

as yet undeserved, fondness she showed me. I liked the confidence with which she at once received me. She was determined that we should be very near friends.

Next day came and we met again. I was delighted with my companion; that is to say, in many respects.

Her looks lost nothing in daylight--she was certainly the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, and the unpleasant remembrance of the face presented in my early dream, had lost the effect of the first unexpected recognition.

She confessed that she had experienced a similar shock on seeing me, and precisely the same faint antipathy that had mingled with my admiration of her. We now laughed together over our momentary horrors.

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