



This Edition

This week's cover illustration is "Shibuya_crossing_2" by Angaurits. Cover design by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week we introduce C. Priest Brumley's *Slicer Chronicles*, a shared universe set in a world where the NeuralNetwork, "a hive-processor-like network in which all human minds on the planet are interconnected via implants given at birth" has replaced the internet. For further details, including how YOU can contribute to the shared universe, go to The Slicer Chronicles Manifesto. For a slice of Slicer life, read C. Priest Brumley's *The Road Everyone Travels*.

We also see the last in the present series of the Hettford Witch Hunt, which will return later in the year, first for an Easter Special (*The Power of the Eggs*), and later for a second series of the popular occult sitcom.

We have another seasonal article from Chris Friend; meanwhile, *Days of High Adventure* continues with *Kings of the Night*, a story concerning the Pictish king Bran Mak Morn's struggles against the voracious Roman Empire; we also have more poetry from Nathan Rowark; *Texas Rising*, a story of storm and flood from the prolific pen of John L Campbell; and also we see the welcome return of Todd Nelsen, too long absent from these pages, with his fantasy tale *Kirrane and the Second Sorrow*. Plus my retelling of the saga of *Fridthjof the Bold*, and the continuation of all your usual serials.

- Gavin Chappell

THE SLICER CHRONICLES:

The Road Everyone Travels by C. Priest Brumley.

I have the worst headache in the history of horrendous fucking headaches. A migraine would be a damn cakewalk compared to it, you know? The aspirin help, as does the whiskey, but I have work in a few. So I throw the bottle of aspirin underhand at the counter and take a long draft from the bottle of Maker's Mark on top the fridge. Relief.

The bathroom lights are set to auto, and when I enter the room, all 3 kick on at once. My apartment's not a grand one, but this is my one concession to the money I make: a huge bathroom. The foyer has the sink and the mirror, and beyond are the separate toilet and shower chambers. I stop at the mirror as always, checking the face inside of it for any signs of the hormones failing.

Not an inch out of place. Sometimes, you just got to love modern medicine. My reflection stares back at me: masculine nose, effeminate brow and jaw, neutral chin with a hint of stubble. Jet black hair, jawline length, normally combed straight back but still disheveled from my recent attempt at sleep. The face of Angelica was still there; no amount of hair dye or hormones could stop that. She was in my mother's browline and jawline, and the luscious eyelashes that stayed framing the fuchsia iris. Just enough femininity left to remember.

I wanted it all gone. I wanted Angelica dead and buried. David is all I am, not that bitch in my eyes. Let 'er die. I'll welcome it.

"David, your preparation time is up. Next on Schedule: plug in to work." The house's automated voice reminder system, which I've affectionately dubbed "Dumbass," chimed in from overhead. Not everyone had 'em, but they were an inescapable part of this particular apartment. And besides, at times it came in handy, like now. I looked at Angelica for one more fleeting glimpse, then dashed out of the room.

"David, your preparation time is up. Next on Schedule: plug in to work."

"I heard ya, Dumbass. On my way now."

I walked two rooms over, to my sitting room, grabbing the half-pizza from the fridge in the kitchen on the way. It was Spartan; just a bookcase with my training manuals and the one or two real books I owned, a coffee table, and my couch. Blank walls, no television or media player, not even a plant or anything. Cloud, my Pomeranian, was already on the couch and waiting.

I sat down and plugged in.

Now, the phrase "plugged in" is a bit of a misnomer. Back in the early days of the net, the people would literally have to plug in, with connector jacks installed alongside the neural net implants; Connector stations built at the time offered NeuNet jacks and WiFi to those who needed it. Inevitably, much like that crude internet structure that came before, people wanted

freedom from chords. Enter Jack Rivance, neuro-technologist. Dr. Rivance devised the device that everyone gets from birth now: the NeuNet implant. Always on, powered by your own bioelectricity. Just press the button on your temple and a virtual interface would appear, allowing you to browse the information of the collective.

And that's where I came in. I'm a NetCop, to use the old phrase. We prefer to think of ourselves as Slicers, government trained, funded, and sanctioned NeuralNet hackers that investigate disturbances, information blockages, et cetera. Most of the time, it's stupid stuff, like a child's implant coming undone from rough play and thusforth creating a blank space where his information should be, or an old man with Alzheimers attacking the portion of the brain used by the interface. But I've heard-tell of other situations from my peers. Never experienced 'em myself, but there you go.

There are dangers to the job. Real ones, in fact. The first is exhaustion. The implants use bioelectricity to function, and quite a bit of it in VI mode. Use it too much, and you use up yourself. You become a shell, struggling to live for a few days, never more than one off-kilter heartbeat away from total annihilation. I had that happen once after training, trying to trace down an old man who had fallen and loosed his implant. No one at records could confirm the last time his presence was online, and I stayed plugged for hours tracking him down. By the time it was done, I had used up all but the most basic of my functions: primal brain activity and heart beat regulation. Kyra, one of the other Slicers in our region, had to come over and physically nurse me back to health again. She was a pip.

Another danger is malnourishment. It was discovered relatively soon after the release of the implant that when your body's bioelectricity is used in such a fashion, your body's metabolism kicks in to overdrive trying to refill its facilities. Which is good, on one hand, having erased the general population's obesity problem in one generation. Unfortunately, it means you have to eat more than you used to. For Slicers like me, who spend more time browsing than most, I have to eat six or seven times a day just to prevent mortal starvation. It sucks, let me tell ya, but does afford me one good opportunity: I can eat all the damn Take-N-Bake Pizza I want and never get fat. Say it with me, folks: Godsend. Take-N-Bake is, simply put, everything great about humanity together in one box of awesome. I love it.

So yeah, back to work. It's a boring job most days, browsing the NeuNet all day, paying the utmost attention for blocked access or places you cannot go for whatever reason. Investigate on Net, solve offline, lather, rinse, repeat. Fun, huh? Yup. I'm the next generation Dick Tracey. Without the fun. Or the villains. Or the dames, for that matter.

I pulled my legs up on my couch, chosen for comfort in the long term, grabbed a slice of Mushroom and Sausage goodness, and pressed the small red button on my right temple. I felt Cloud curl up by my stomach, the scent of dog drifting up to my nostrils as he did so. My eyes closed by themselves, the progress bar seen in the middle of my field of vision. Subsequent revisions to Doctor Rivance's original design cut the loading time by half, which was like taking a cross country trip in half the time; it still took forever and a damn day. And while I waited, I feasted.

Fifteen seconds later, I was online. I tell ya, someone needs to do something about those load times.

The experience is a bit jarring at first, every single time. Your senses open up and shut down at once. Your sense of vision is taken over by the net, rendering you physically blind. Smell, taste, and touch were left alone, for the most part, allowing one to continue doing minor tasks, like eating. Which I did. First piece gone, second piece, here I come.

The opening interface is customizable for everyone. Some people like movie theaters, memories stored as movie reels to be played on a screen. Some people, like myself, prefer the library setting, where memories are stored as books on an ever-growing series of bookshelves. I've even seen one set up as an aquarium, memories stored as fish, swimming around free in a tank. To start, I selected a book marked, quite simply, "Yesterday," and retreated to a couch nearby.

Opening the book filled my awareness with a slideshow of everything from the day before, organized chronologically. Woke up, ate, took Cloud for a walk, ate, plugged in, ate, browsed the pathways in my sector for three hours and forty-eight minutes (eating in the process), ate, nap, ate, plugged in, browsed for a further three hours exactly, ate dinner, crashed hard.

"Now that we've read the minutes," I blurted out loud to no one in particular. Most people wouldn't get the joke, but hey, you have to entertain yourself first, right? Damn job's awful boring if you don't. I put the memory back on its shelf and went to work.

* * * * *

The child was in a playground, children running free around him, playing in the sandbox and on the swingset. I felt his elation at having the opportunity to come here, that mommy finally said 'yes' to bringing him after he'd bugged her for a week about it and gotten nothing but noncommittal grunts in response. She said she would bring him if he got an A on his history paper, and he studied hard and did just that, shoving the paper at her face with a triumphant grin, insisting they went "today, maw-meeeeeeee, today!" She gave in with a well-worn sigh, urging him to dress in his broken-in playclothes and tie his shoes properly. He complied to the best of his ability, although double knots still gave him fits. His happiness at being at the playground, where he knew his friends were, where he could run and play and be free, made me happy.

I pulled myself from the memory, replaced its avatar to the toybox in the middle of the room, and moved on.

* * * * *

The doorway was huge to her, impossible in its scope. She'd wanted the job for so long, grew up dreaming of working in a real, professional kitchen like her mother, and when Chef Jeanne called her up and offered her the position of saucier and second sous chef, she'd almost fainted.

Today was her first day on the job, and her nerves and anticipation flavored the air around her with the unmistakable metallic tang of adrenaline. My heart beats twice as fast as normal. Any faster and we're in trouble. I decided to pull out before any lasting damage could be done.

* * * * *

Walking down the hallway of a family's building in VI mode, checking doors to individual people's memory chambers. None locked. No disturbances. One was kind of tough to open, but the older generation's doors oftentimes are when dementia sets in. Nothing new there, nothing to report.

* * * * *

No secrets, no hiding.

Everyone knowing everything.

Want to see what a woman looks like naked? Look up her memories, find one of her looking in the mirror or taking a shower. Want to watch a sports game? Find a fan of your favorite team, and watch his memories. Or you could go watch them live if you lived close enough. Old television programs and movies exist in records archives, if that's your thing. If you're lucky on timing you can livefeed a man's death or a child's birth. You could even watch me, if you want to see a man playing with a Pomeranian or polishing off a pizza.

No secrets. No hiding. This is my job, making sure it stays that way. Walking the road everyone travels. My name is David Hadley, and I am a Slicer.

KINGS OF THE NIGHT by Robert E Howard

Bran Mak Morn is more solidly based in real history, although Howard had a very Howardesque take on the Picts and the Romans in whose days Bran flourished. However, this is not pure historical fiction: as you will see, there are very close links with the previous tale, which of course, also featured Picts, but Picts contemporary with Atlantis.

Bran is a king, ruler of the Picts, a declining race, doomed to vanish mysteriously from the pages of history. Dwelling in the heather north of Hadrian's Wall, they need Bran to bring them together against their civilized enemies. This means Bran must take some hard choices...

Chapter 1

The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne--

His iron legions came

To break a king in a land unknown,

And a race without a name.

--The Song of Bran

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Victory for us, says the priest,” answered Cormac.

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

“And Gonar?”

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

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

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

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

“Aye,” the king nodded gloomily. “Cormac--you know as well as I. Tomorrow’s battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western

horsemen, our success would be certain, but--surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! You know how I trapped that band--how they swore to fight for me against Rome! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And so these Cymric Britons face Rome," said Bran. "These will aid us on the morrow. Further I can not say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my

own people? Thousands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhere the Dissension-breeder, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates--the breaking of the sworn word.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We have sworn.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Kull, king of Valusia,” said the wizard imperturbably, “was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule,

your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour ago."

"You talked with his ghost--"

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

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

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

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

"Who--or what is it?" exclaimed Bran.

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

IMBOLC by Chris Friend

In the old Celtic Festival of Events, the date of February 2nd is known as Imbolc (Em-bowl) which translates to "first milk." It is assumed that the date was a time to mark the birth of the spring lambs. It was also a time to honor the ancient Celtic Goddess Brighid, also known as Brigit, and Bride. Her name means "fiery arrow." She was a patroness of fire, smiths, and poets. In folklore, she ousts Cailleach, the Winter Crone, and ushers in spring. So popular a deity, that she was later Christianized as Saint Brighid. Imbolc has no connection to the Catholic festival of Candlemas at all.

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by J Rhodes

Episode Six: Bring Out Your Dead – Part Two

1.

The house's double glazed windows made cracking noises in time to each heavy gust of wind that pressed against them. Behind the wind was an odd scraping sound. Alison rolled over in the bed and shook Gary.

“Are you OK?” he asked her.

“I'm surprised that you're awake.”

“I'm listening to the wind. I can't get my mind off what happened to Saul.”

“You're being stupid. What's that other sound?”

“I don't know. I looked but there's nothing out there.”

“I think something's blown onto the car, can you go and look?”

Gary looked at Alison's wide eyes.

“Sure,” he said.

Gary put on his dressing gown and slippers and plodded down the stairs. As he opened the door, the scraping noise that Alison had been talking about was immediately amplified. He looked out at his driveway. In front of him stood a massive human-shaped darkness. Gary squinted but he couldn't make out what the thing was. Whatever it was, it was blocking his driveway.

Alison's voice drifted down the stairs.

“Can you tell what it is?”

Gary took a step closer but the shape became no clearer. It couldn't be a person, so what was it?

“This is ridiculous,” Gary said to himself, “you're a grown man.”

Gary took a deep breath and began to stride towards the shape. As he did so, the scraping noise increased. He noticed a movement at his feet. Looking down he saw the shape of a fox stood directly in front of him. Its gums pulled back to reveal canine teeth as slender and sharp as syringes. The fox barked at him. Gary had never heard a fox bark before; it made an unnatural and coarse rasp, like the sound of metal scraping against metal. The black shape took a step forward and as it did so, Gary got a sense of its features. It was the colour of an unlit cave – a faceless caricature of the human body made of only weight and the darkness. It cracked the flagstones at the entrance to his driveway with the step. However, despite its immense weight, the movement was not slow. The pace and determination of the step reminded him of tsunamis and avalanches. The shadow would engulf anything it came into contact with.

The fox spun around and growled at the shadow. The fox's tail pointed rigidly backwards and it lifted one of its front legs ready to lurch forward.

The darkness lifted an arm and reached inside itself, its hand passing through into its chest. When the hand re-emerged, it was holding a slip of paper. Gary recognised it as the death curse he had passed on to Saul. The darkness did not speak aloud but Gary could feel the pressure of air building in his inner ears as the words formed inside him.

“The last owner is dead; you called me. I will take you.”

“Fantastic,” thought Gary, “I didn't kill Saul; at least I can die with a clear conscience.”

The creature rushed at Gary. He stepped backwards unable to comprehend everything he was seeing. There was a flicker of light as the fur of the fox ignited into flame. The flame fox leapt up and took the creature by its throat. As it bit into the darkness, the thing dissipated into nothing and all that was left was an ordinary fox.

The fox walked up to Gary and raised its nose like a domestic dog. Still utterly bewildered, he reached down and stroked its head. The fox rubbed against him then rolled over and showed him its belly. He could feel the animal's ribs as he ran his fingers through its fur. The fur was softer than he expected and very, very warm.

“Thanks,” he told it, “I owe you one.”

With that, the fox rolled back over and ran off down the road. Gary went back into the house and back upstairs. Alison was wrapped in the blanket, her face covered.

“Did you see what it was?” asked Alison.

“It was a fox barking.”

“It couldn’t have been.”

“I saw it,” Gary said. “Foxes have a weird bark; I’ve never heard one before.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t come back.”

“I thought you said you were leaving in two days.”

“I’ll come back and visit.”

“Good.”

“And when I do, I don’t want to be kept awake by a fox barking.”

Gary got into bed but found himself still unable to sleep.

2.

Milton was woken by the sound of his downstairs window smashing. He left Carrie in bed and ran to see what was going on. By the time he was on the landing, he could already hear Dan’s heavy footsteps crashing down the stairs.

The wind was blowing through the window. On the window sill sat two crows. The crows mewled at the two friends as they stood to observe them.

“It’s the Witches,” Dan yelled.

“I know, let’s bag them.”

“That would be like inviting them in.”

“Well, then what?”

“Try and keep them there.”

Dan ran off to the kitchen. Meanwhile, Milton decided to taunt the two crows.

“Can’t get in, can you?”

The frame of the window shook as one of them took a step forward.

“There’s horse shoes above every door and window in the house. So you two are just going to have to find another way.”

Milton felt himself shoved out of the way. Dan barged past him and pointed an aerosol can of WD40 at the two birds. There was a click as he turned the flint on a cigarette lighter. A stream of liquid fire burst out of the can. The two birds flew away just in time for Dan to set the curtains on fire.

Milton ran over to the curtains and pulled the rail out of the wall, burning his hands as he did so. The flaming curtains fell to the ground and Milton stamped on it in his bare feet. Dan ran back to the kitchen and sprayed a fire extinguisher on to the curtains. The flames died out.

“I’m the king of aerosols,” Dan declared.

“You’re a fucking knob,” retorted Milton.

Milton looked at the flame damage on his wallpaper and carpet and sighed. The two crows had returned to the broken window and they let out a horrid, chattering laugh.

Carrie walked past Milton. He wasn't surprised that the commotion had shaken her out of bed. However, he was quite surprised at what she did next. She grabbed one of the crows by its neck and pulled out one of its feathers. The other crow drove its beak into the top of her hand and she snatched it back, allowing the feather to drop on top of the spoiled curtains.

The birds flapped their wings as if they were trying to fly directly at her. However, they were unable to break through the liminal space of the window frame.

Dan thrust his pelvis towards the two crows, time and time again screaming.

"Suck it, you two, suck it," which didn't really help the situation.

Milton pulled Carrie to her feet and took her to the kitchen to dress the wound. There was another window directly in front of the kitchen sink. As he ran Carrie's hand under the cold water, one of the crows descended, wings spread wide, and shattered through both panes of the double glazing.

"PVC doesn't shatter," screamed Milton. "I'm sorry, but it just doesn't."

"It has," said Carrie.

"Shit, I only had those put in three months ago."

Carrie winced as Milton wrapped a bandage around her cut hand.

"They'll still be under warranty," Carrie gritted her teeth as she spoke. "You can claim it as wind damage."

Another window smashed as they were speaking. One by one, the birds broke through every window in the house. Dan burst into the kitchen. There wasn't a door for him to burst through but he managed to give the impression of bursting nonetheless. The effect was highlighted by the sound of yet another window being broken.

“That is just petty,” said Dan. “Witches are so bloody petty.”

“I’m just glad that we thought to bring Roaster into the house.”

Milton’s pet chicken was sat in a small indoor run Milton had built under the table.

“Well, at least with the windows broken, the thing won’t smell so badly,” Dan told him.

3.

The phone rang. Gary looked at the clock. It was only half past eight. He had been asleep for roughly three minutes. He looked at Alison, who he knew as a fact had been asleep for most of the night, but she wasn’t stirring. He reached over and grabbed the receiver.

“Hello,” he said, feigning a sunny and awake disposition.

“Oh, hi Gary,” said the voice at the other end of the phone, “it’s Joan.”

“Hi boss,” Gary replied.

“Erm, about that...” Mrs. Fuller paused awkwardly. “I’m afraid Mr. Broughton who used to teach English has asked for his old job back and well, the head has said it’s OK.”

“Does that mean I’m out of a job?”

“Will that be OK? I’m sorry it’s late notice.”

“Not really,” said Gary, “but what the hell can I do about it? I mean, I’ve handed in my notice at the garage and my girlfriend who pays half the rent is moving to Leeds, but I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Well, as long as you’re sure,” said Mrs. Fuller.

“I’ll speak to you soon,” said Gary.

Gary put the phone down. Alison was still snoring. He went downstairs to make her a cup of tea. Gary flicked on the kettle and opened the fridge to get the milk. He was greeted by the stink of decay. Literally, every last item of natural food had spoiled.

4.

“How is Alison doing?”

Gary stared at Paul in amazement. It was hard to imagine that he was the same person that had caused such torment to him. Paul’s eyes were childlike and hurt-looking.

“She’s fine, looking forward to Leeds. How are you doing?”

“I’m not great.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be, would you?”

“I guess not.”

Gary waved his hand at the groceries he had placed on the shop counter.

“Is Tajel around? I’d like to pay for these.”

“She’ll be back in a minute; she’s just gone to the loo.”

“You seem to be getting on well with her.”

“Yeah, she’s been great.” Paul pursed his lips: “Really, really great.”

Gary nodded in what he hoped looked like sympathy.

“Listen, I want you to know – all that stuff that happened with you and Alison; just forget about it, OK?”

“Thanks man,” said Paul. “I want you to know that I don’t believe that rumour that you caused Saul’s death with some spell.”

“What?”

“You know, how people are saying you cast some kind of spell on Saul and then he died. Apparently he told our cousin Angela you’d given him a piece of paper or something.”

“I’ve not heard that,” said Gary.

“Well, I saw him die and I know what happened and I’ll tell anyone it wasn’t you. Even if you did ask for some of his blood.”

“Thanks for that.”

“I know you gave him the paper, I just don’t think it’s what killed him.”

Gary felt his stomach sink into his guts. Tajel appeared in the door behind the counter.

“Can I pay for this, please?”

5.

Carrie was woken up by the sound of a rooster crowing the dawn. She hadn’t really been asleep because it was very cold with every window in the house smashed.

“What the hell?” Carrie asked Milton who was already half dressed.

“It’s just Roaster,” Milton told her, “my pet chicken, who needs an alarm clock. I’m off to call the insurance company and then see if I can shift a few books. Do you want some breakfast?”

“I thought Roaster laid eggs.”

“She does. Would you like some?”

“That would make her a hen.”

“That’s what the farmer told me.”

“Hens don’t say cock-a-doodle-do.”

“Don’t be silly, of course they do. All chickens do, right?”

Carrie shook her head.

“But then all chickens must lay eggs.”

“Only the ones with vaginas.”

Milton put his hands on his knees and a wave of panic hit him. He tried to breathe deeply.

“So where have all the eggs been coming from?” he asked her.

6.

Gary put the groceries in the fridge, making sure to bag and bin all of the old food first. Then he checked the temperature and made sure that the thing was working. He moved the dial from “cold” to “extra cold” just to be on the safe side.

He was fairly sure that the smell of breakfast would awaken Alison, so before he began cooking he wanted to see if he couldn’t fix his life a little bit. He was not going to procrastinate anymore. Time to get things done. Plus, it seemed like the easiest way to avoid Alison yelling at him. He picked up the phone and called his old job.

“Hello Ron,” said Gary.

“Who’s that?” Ron asked.

“It’s Gary.”

“OK, what do you want? Let me guess, you can’t make it in tonight?”

“No that’s fine, I can.”

Ron grunted in acceptance.

“What it is,” Gary continued, “is that, you know how I handed in my notice?”

“Yes I do. Been a right pain in the arse finding somebody else to work nights but I’ve got someone. Girl named Julie. Very keen she is.”

“What?”

“Yup, starts the day you leave.”

“Right, I was wondering if I could have my old job back. The new one has kind of fallen through.”

“Sorry, I’m a man of my word. A promise is a promise.”

“Oh, OK.”

“So, I’ll see you tonight then.”

Ron put the phone down. Gary stared at the bacon and thought about how Alison might react when she found out that he was jobless. “Fuck it,” he thought, “I just won’t tell her.”

He turned the gas on and put the bacon in the frying pan. Then he went to the recycling bin and pulled out the free local newspaper.

7.

Milton, Dan and Carrie sat around the kitchen table, each of them with a good mug of tea at hands reach. Roaster had been sent back outside to his run. In the centre of the table was a small side plate. In the centre of the side plate was a black feather and an egg.

“Here are the possibilities,” said Dan: “Firstly, someone has been sneaking the eggs into the run. Secondly, Roaster is a magical hermaphroditic hen who says cock-a-doodle-do. Or thirdly, Carrie is wrong and all chickens say cock-a-doodle-do. Occam’s razor suggests the latter hypothesis.”

“You’re wrong, Dan,” said Carrie, “all chickens say bawk-bok-bokark, but only roosters say cock-a-doodle-do.”

“Is the problem that onomatopoeia such as cock-a-doodle-do and bawk-bok-bokark are not reliable phonetic reproduction of the sounds they represent?” Milton asked. “I mean, what’s to say that some people don’t hear the bawk-bok sound as cock-a-doodle?”

“There’s a clear difference,” said Carrie, “anyone can hear that cock-a-doodle is different to bawk-bokark. Look it up on Google if you won’t take my word for it.”

“OK,” Milton said, “then I think the most rational hypothesis is that the farmer gave me the wrong kind of chicken because he didn’t like me. And that the eggs got here by witchcraft.”

“That makes sense,” Dan agreed.

“So what purpose do they serve?” Carrie asked.

“I shudder to think,” said Milton. “I’ve eaten hundreds of the bloody things.”

“And I had to eat cornflakes near the thing!” Dan chipped in.

“There’s a chicken on the damn box, Dan!”

Carrie intervened:

“Can you two calm down?”

Milton stared at Dan. Dan was already flushed red, but he began to turn purple like a fingertip with string wrapped around it.

“Fine,” he said.

Dan and Milton took swigs from their tea and eyed each other sideways.

“We do need to find out what’s going on,” said Carrie.

“Sorry,” said Milton, “yes, we do.”

“What do you suggest, Carrie?” Dan asked.

“Well, we have the feather from the witch. We can summon and bind her. See if we can find out what’s she’s doing?”

“We could kill her too,” said Dan, “that would save a lot of trouble.”

“We can’t,” Carrie told him, “the circle that will protect us from her will also protect her from us.”

“Nonetheless,” Dan said, “it beats faffing around with our thumbs shoved up our arses.”

“I don’t think we should do it.” Milton’s voice was wary, reflecting both the caution he felt towards the plan and his eagerness not to offend or annoy his new girlfriend any further than he already had: “Sometimes you have to use a little witchcraft to protect yourself from witchcraft but we should try to avoid it as much as possible.”

“Why?” Carrie asked.

“Have you ever read the Lord of the Rings?”

“No.”

“What? You’ve seen the film though, right?”

“It’s not my sort of thing.”

Milton stared at her in astonishment.

“OK, there’s this ring in it and no matter what you do with it that deed turns to evil because that’s how the ring was made.”

“So what?” Carrie asked.

“So that’s how I view magic, anything you do with it will always get turned to evil.”

“But this is not a ring, it’s a feather and this is not a story – it’s real life, right?”

Carrie turned and looked directly into the camera. The studio audience gave a brief and precise laugh. Milton shook his head.

“The principle is the same. How can we claim to be witch-hunters if we’re using witchcraft ourselves?”

“Dan will do it.”

“Dan’s psychotic.”

“But he’s effective, sometimes.”

“And Gary killed Saul,” Dan said. “What do you mean, sometimes?”

“No, he didn’t,” Milton told him.

“He tried to; can we be sure he didn’t?”

Neither Milton nor Carrie felt ready to answer the question. Milton shrugged and changed the subject.

“Do you really think you can bind one of the witches with this?”

Carrie nodded.

“Then go for it.”

8.

Alison was wasting no time about packing her bags. The bedroom wardrobe looked sad and depleted.

“How do I only own five t-shirts, two jumpers, a pair of jeans and some sweatpants?”

“The other stuff is in the laundry. In the case of your jumpers, most of it has been there since it got warm.”

“Well, they’re probably clean again by now, then.”

“You will be OK, won’t you?”

“Contrary to popular cliché, men are capable of looking after their own needs.”

“Just not ours, hey?”

“Oh, fuck off,” said Gary.

“Ooh, someone’s testy.”

“Well, you’re leaving tomorrow. I get to watch you spend your last day putting stuff in bags. What do you want from me? Should I shit myself and rub it all over the house so you can be sure that you were the one who did everything?”

“Gary.”

“Just pack your stuff. I’m going for a walk.”

Gary slammed the door to the bedroom, then slammed the door to the house. As the cool air of late summer hit him, he wondered what it was that he was so angry about. Then he remembered. He started to run, not anywhere in particular – just away.

9.

An array of mysterious symbols circled around a chalk circle in the middle of Milton’s living room. Dan had helped move the TV out of the way so that there was space for it. Carrie drew a second circle around the symbols and then placed the feather in the middle of the inner circle.

“Will this be long?” Milton asked. “I’ve got the bloke from the insurance coming around in an hour.”

“When is the double-glazing company coming?”

“Not till tomorrow, but it’s going to be embarrassing enough having boarded up windows for a few days without them seeing this.”

“Let’s get started, then.”

Carrie sat cross-legged in front of the circle. She was holding a cup of salt in her left hand and a glass of water in her right hand.

“What are they for?” Dan asked.

“Is that water or tequila?” Milton asked.

“Hush up; I’m getting into the mood.”

Dan nudged Milton twice. Carrie began to chant in ancient Greek:

“Αυτό μάλλον δεν έχει νόημα,” she said.

The room began to fill with a dark smoke.

“Δεν είναι από υπολογιστή μεταφραστική υπηρεσία.”

The lines of the circle filled with a green moss, so that they looked like the unattended patio in Milton’s garden.

“Είναι πιθανόν να μην αρχαία είτε.”

The centre of the circle began to fill with soil, the earth emerging from the wood panelling as if it were being burrowed up by a mole. Finally from the centre the Witch appeared.

“It’s a crow,” Dan observed.

The crow stood in the centre of the circle and glanced at the three friends in curiosity.

“Ask it about the eggs,” Milton told Carrie.

“Are the eggs Milton has been eating enchanted?” Carrie asked the crow.

“Caw, caw.”

“Does that mean yes or no?” said Dan.

“It’s once for yes and twice for no,” Milton told him.

“Yes, I know that - but does the crow?”

“Ask it, Carrie.”

“Was that twice for no?” Carrie asked the crow.

“Caw, caw, caw, caw,” said the crow.

“I command you to take human form,” Carrie told the crow. The crow paced around the circle a little and then pecked the ground as if it were looking for worms.

Carrie turned to Milton and Dan. She shrugged.

“It was worth a go right?”

“Well hang on,” said Dan, “we might not be able to question it but we’ve got it trapped. Can’t we kill it?”

“Not without breaking the circle.” Carrie sighed.

“We’ll keep it as prisoner of war, then.”

“Oh no, we fucking won’t - look what you did to my curtains, look at the windows. I don’t want to live like this.”

Milton waved at the ruin of his house.

“The insurance bloke won’t mind if there’s a crow here.”

“No, not at all Dan – I’m sure he’ll find no suspicion whatsoever in the unnatural patch of raised earth – the dank mystic smoke or the spirit witch crow.”

“Well, he won’t know it’s a spirit witch, will he?”

“He’ll know it’s weird.”

“Shall I dismiss it?” Carrie asked.

“Can we call it again?” Dan asked.

“We should be able to.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, Carrie.” Milton’s voice brimmed with appreciation.

Carrie lifted her arms and flicked the salt and water into the circle. The crow vanished, leaving behind it a pile of soil and an unpleasant smell.

“Have you farted?” Dan asked Milton.

10.

The road jolted Gary’s legs as his heavy paces drove him onwards and away from the village of Hettford. As he had passed the garage where he had no intention of returning, a plump girl with yellow lipstick and indigo hair waved her hands at him. He caught the movement in his periphery, but his focus did not shift from the horizon.

The leather shoes he was wearing knocked hard against the tarmac, sounding the rhythm of his running like a metronome. He reached the outskirts of the village, by the farmer’s fields, and descended a dip in the road.

As he arrived at the top of the dip, he reached another dip in the road. As he arrived at the top of the dip, he reached yet another dip in the road. The pattern did not become suspicious to him until it had repeated four times. At the top of the dip, he looked back on his path. He stopped and turned around and scrutinised it. There was nothing except flat tarmac running all the way back to the village.

11.

“You see, there was a candle on the window sill, one of those scented ones,” Milton was explaining, “romantic night in.”

The claims inspector, who by a miracle had actually come on time, nodded her head.

“So the candle, without blowing out, flew into the open curtain and set it alight?”

“I didn’t actually see it, because I was in the kitchen marvelling that the first window had blown out.”

“That’s understandable, I would have expected there to be some wax spilled though.”

“Oh, there was, but it’s been cleaned up.”

Milton gestured towards the kitchen where Carrie and Dan were sat talking.

“You know women,” he told the woman, “they like to clean up before the maid.”

“Hmmm,” said the woman.

Given how badly Milton was handling the claims adjuster, he was greatly relieved that he no longer had a supernatural crow in his living room. The soil had brushed right up, though there was no sign of the feather to call the creature back again. Milton was not as upset about the loss of it as the other two hunt members were because he had mostly been worrying about what his floor would look like under the soil. Thankfully, it had only been a little dirty and not damaged, as he had envisaged.

“Well,” said the claims adjuster, “I’m not satisfied that I know what happened here. I am however, happy to acknowledge it as an act of God which you are covered for; perhaps she was trying to smite you.”

Milton gave an awkward grin.

“I believe the windows are still under warranty, so we won’t cover them, but we’ll send someone this afternoon to board them up and someone tomorrow to discuss redecorating the living room.”

“Thanks,” said Milton.

The woman left the house. Milton waved her car off from his doorstep. He went to join his friends in the kitchen.

12.

Gary’s legs hurt. He had tried to walk out of the village by sneaking over the fields. He was not sure how he had managed it but by walking in a straight line forwards he had managed to tread the entire circumference of the village and wind up back where he had started. He tried walking through the dip three more times before he gave up and walked back towards the house.

Alison was not there when he got back, so he picked up the car keys and turned them in the ignition. The starter motor whirred but failed to spark the engine. After three or four tries, Gary walked to the bus stop and sat down to wait for the bus.

He hadn’t been there long when he felt someone sit down next to him. He felt denim and soft skin pressing against his thigh and he looked across to see Julie smiling at him.

“Going anywhere exciting?”

“Everywhere is exciting when you live in Hettford.”

“Aren’t you excited about your new job?”

“No,” said Gary abruptly – then in response to the hurt in the girl’s face he added, “not really.”

“Well, you know where I am if you ever need to talk.”

Gary took a deep breath.

“Listen, things still aren’t great between Alison and me. It wouldn’t look good if we were seen together.”

Julie smiled at him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone I saw you.”

A car drove past with its window down. The passenger leant across the driver’s seat and yelled.

“Murderer!”

Julie took a step backwards.

“What was that about?”

“I was going to ask you.”

“Weird. Great minds think alike, hey?”

Gary forced as pleasant a smile as his face would form.

“I suppose so, but hang on - are you getting the bus?”

Julie shook her head.

“I guess they don’t then, do you mind?”

Gary waved his thumb in what he considered his friendliest non-verbal “hop it.”

Julie frowned at him. It was pretty harsh, he realised, but he didn’t want to have to worry about sleeping with her whilst Alison was away. He waited for another hour before he accepted that the half hourly bus to Bridgeford wasn’t going to show.

When he finally got back to his house, Gary found Alison packing her bags into the car.

“I could have helped you with these,” he offered

“Thanks, I’m fine.”

“What time are you planning to leave tomorrow?”

“I’m leaving now, Gary.”

“What?”

“I can’t stand to spend another night in that house with you.”

“I know I’ve been out a while but...”

“Five hours Gary, five hours – are you out buying me a farewell corsage? No, you’re swanking about town with that fat Julie.”

“I saw Julie but I certainly wasn’t swanking around with her.”

“Oh, you just couldn’t wait for me to be gone could you? Couldn’t wait five minutes until you started sniffing around that pussy.”

Alison got into the car.

“Well, you can have it. Enjoy your miserable life.”

Alison slammed the door and put the key in the ignition. With a certain amount of glee, Gary waited for the starter motor to fail. The engine sparked on its first attempt and Alison drove off with Gary running next to the car calling:

“Wait, there’s been a misunderstanding.”

As she disappeared around the corner, a second car drove past – someone in the back seat threw an empty drink can at him. It caught him on the side of the head.

14.

“Here it is.” Milton held up a thick old book in triumph. “Eggs of deceit, in the sequel to *Der Hexenhammer*.”

“Malleus Two: What does it say?” Dan asked.

“Apparently it has something to do with cuckoos leaving their eggs in other bird’s nests. Basically it means someone is trying to warn us that there is a traitor in our midst.”

“I would be the obvious choice right?” Carrie inquired, “I mean, this didn’t start happening until after I joined the group.”

“No,” said Dan, “this started before you came.”

“I know I’m not a traitor to me,” said Milton. “I’m pretty sure about you two.”

“Well, then that leaves Gary,” Dan looked very stern.

“I really don’t think so, Dan.”

“Think about it, the break in, using witchcraft to kill someone...”

“We don’t know that he did.”

“We know he bloody tried.”

“Gary’s lovely,” said Carrie.

“You two are soft. It’s a war out there now. They’re bringing it to us – and when did that start? After Gary’s little break-in.”

Milton took a long draught of tea:

“I don’t want to agree but you have a point.”

Carrie frowned in disapproval.

“What are you going to do? You can’t be too harsh on him after all the stuff he’s done for you.”

“We’ll just suspend him,” said Milton. “Give him a holiday. I’m sure he’ll be fine with that – he’s a very relaxed kid.”

“No point putting it off,” said Dan. “Let’s get him over here.”

“No, it’s his last night with Alison.”

“She won’t mind, you can do it over the phone.”

Milton sighed and braced himself.

“Let’s get it out the way, then.”

15.

Gary had drawn the curtains to his living room. Somewhere in the house, his phone was ringing. Gary lay on his couch, covering his head with a pillow until eventually, the noise stopped.

END OF SERIES ONE

The Hettford Witch Hunt will return in Easter for the holiday special: The Power of the Eggs.

EXIT REVEALED by Nathan J.D.L Rowark

Running about in a circle forever; stuck to the sides by this appalling tether.

Try slipping leash, they won't have it, dollar entangled for an eighties styled habit.

Couldn't forget in the light of recession, social teachings of their out of school lesson.

Eating our greens, limits to ponder, couldn't keep our cash, just inevitably squander.

Bottom to fall, an ontological balance that squashes all with any undisclosed talents.

Rising up is a bitch, I don't want her, know where she's been, can't trust her for sure.

Galloping wheel chases carrot in line, which now is rotten for this rotten game's rhyme.

Hatch unseen, for rabbits out on the field, our cadaver's stench, the only exit revealed.

FRIDTHJOF THE BOLD by Gavin Chappell

When Fridthjof was growing up, he was so revered that everyone prayed for his welfare. His foster father was a man named Hilding, who also fostered Ingiborg the Fair, daughter of King Beli, and two strong lads named Bjorn and Asmund. By now, Beli was getting old, and he was losing much of his property. Thorstein ruled over a third of the kingdom, and every three years he invited Beli to a banquet. Beli, however, feasted Fridthjof's father Thorstein every two years. Beli had a son named Helgi, and another named Halfdan, who were both devout worshippers of the gods. They were not very popular, however, but Fridthjof was thought without equal, and he was so strong that he could row the longship *Ellidi* with two oars, while other men were two to an oar. Beli's sons were jealous of his popularity.

Beli grew ill and died. On his deathbed, he called his sons to him and told them; "Maintain the friendship that has existed between my kindred and Thorstein's family, and raise a burial mound for me."

Not long after, Thorstein also took sick and died, but before his death, he told Fridthjof: "Yield to the sons of Beli, and bury me in a mound on the fjord shore opposite where Beli was laid to rest."

Thorstein died and Fridthjof buried him accordingly, and took over his property and wealth, including the farm at Framness, the longship *Ellidi* and the most precious golden ring in Norway.

Now Fridthjof became a famous man, and he valued Bjorn, his foster brother, over all others, while Asmund served both of them. He was so generous that it was said that he was no less honourable than the kings were, except that he was not of royal blood. This angered the kings, this, and the fact that Fridthjof and Ingiborg had fallen in love. When they came to a banquet at Framness, where Fridthjof entertained them splendidly, they saw that he spoke often with their sister, who admired the gold ring he had inherited from his father. The king's sons went home, their envy of Fridthjof undiminished.

Soon after, Fridthjof was seen to look sad. His foster-brother Bjorn asked him, "What is wrong?" Fridthjof said, "I intend to woo Ingiborg, since although I am lower in rank than the brothers I am no lower in personal worth." They went to the kings and found them sitting on their father's burial mound. Fridthjof greeted them courteously and asked for Ingiborg's hand in marriage. The kings refused, saying that Fridthjof lacked dignity. Fridthjof accepted this, but told them, "You need not expect my assistance in future." Then he went home.

A king named Hring ruled over Ringeriki. By now, he was growing old. When he heard that Fridthjof and Beli's sons had quarrelled, he saw this as an opportunity to show that even in his old age he was not a weak man. He sent messengers to Beli's sons demanding they pay him tribute, or else prepare to face his army. When Helgi and Halfdan heard King Hring's words, they said, "We would rather fight than pay tribute, though we deem it shameful to fight a man so old and decrepit." They gathered an army, but since they saw that their numbers would be small, they sent Hilding's foster-father to Fridthjof to ask him for aid.

When Hilding reached Fridthjof, he found him in the hall, playing chess with Bjorn. Hilding gave his message and Fridthjof made no reply, but told Bjorn, "I see an opening that cannot be mended. I will attack the red piece, to see if it could be saved."

Hilding said, "If you do not join the kings, you can expect rough treatment in future."

Bjorn said, "Fridthjof, you have two choices, and two moves by which you can escape."

Fridthjof replied, "I think I will attack the king first, but a double game is hard to play."

Hilding returned to the kings and told them what had happened. The kings asked him the meaning of Fridthjof's words.

Hilding said, "I think the red piece meant Ingiborg, and that they should protect her; that when Bjorn said Fridthjof had two choices, and Fridthjof said he would attack the king, he meant he would march against King Hring."

Now the kings made ready for battle, but before they did so, they took Princess Ingiborg, accompanied by eight maidens, and placed her in the protection of the Temple of Balder, a place of peace where no man or beast could be harmed, and where no men and women should sleep together. They thought that even Fridthjof would not be so rash as to meet her there. Then they went south to Jadar, and encountered King Hring at Sogn-sound.

Now the kings were gone, Fridthjof put on his robes of state, put on his good gold ring, and went with Bjorn to the shore where they launched *Ellidi*. Bjorn asked where they were going, and Fridthjof said, "We will go to the Temple of Balder to amuse ourselves with Ingiborg."

Bjorn said, "It is unwise to anger the gods."

Fridthjof said, "I rate Ingiborg higher than Balder."

They came to the Temple and found Ingiborg with her maidens.

Ingiborg asked, "Why do you defy my brothers, and risk the wrath of the gods?"

Fridthjof said, "I would risk even that for your love."

Then Ingiborg welcomed them. They sat together and drank, making merry. Ingiborg saw the ring on Fridthjof's finger, and greatly admired it. Fridthjof gave her the ring on the condition that she never part with it, except to return it to him should she no longer desire it. With that, they plighted their troth. They spent many nights together, and each day Fridthjof came to the Temple to see her.

Meanwhile, the brothers came to terms with King Hring, whose forces greatly outnumbered them, agreeing to give him a third of their lands and their sister's hand in marriage. But they were unhappy with these terms, and returned home in anger.

When Fridthjof thought Helgi and Halfdan likely to return, he said to Ingiborg, "You have treated me well, nor has Balder been angry with us. But when the kings return, hang out the sheets on the hall of the goddesses, so I can see it from his home."

The next day he saw the sheets on the hall of the goddesses, and he knew that the kings had returned. Bjorn advised him to gather his forces, and Fridthjof did so.

When word of this came to the kings, they sent Hilding to Fridthjof to ask if he was willing to make atonement, by going to collect the tribute from the Orkneys, or else face exile. Hilding did so, and explained to Fridthjof that the kings needed money now, since they had offered Ingiborg in marriage to King Hring. Fridthjof agreed to the expedition, on the assurance that all his possession be left alone in his absence. Before he went, his men asked him if he would not beg for peace with King Helgi, and Fridthjof vowed that this he would never do. He boarded *Ellidi* and they sailed from Sogn Fjord. As soon as he was gone, the kings descended on Framness and ransacked and burned Fridthjof's farm. Then they paid two witches, Heid and Hamglom, to bring down a storm and wreck Fridthjof's ship.

The moment Fridthjof sailed from Sogn Fjord, a storm hit them, but *Ellidi* sailed smoothly across the waters. They were driven to the Solunds, where the storm reached its height. They intended to land there, but then the wind dropped and they sailed on. Almost at once, the storm broke out again, snow showered down on them, and the waves washed over their bows. Fridthjof knew that Helgi had sent the wind. Fridthjof and Bjorn remembered their days in the Temple of Balder, and said they would rather be there than bailing out *Ellidi*, but they faced the growing storm with courage. When he thought that some of them would be going to Ran, the giantess who welcomes the drowned into her submarine hall, Fridthjof cut up Ingiborg's ring and distributed it among his men.

Then they came out into an unknown sea, and Fridthjof climbed the mast to search the waters around them. It seemed to him they were nearing land, but then he saw a whale swimming towards them, and upon its back were two witches. Then Fridthjof ran to the prow, and struck at one witch, urging the ship, which understood his speech, to attack the other. It struck the second witch with its prow, and both witches had their backs broken, while the whale swam away. The weather grew clam, and the men began to bail out the boat. Then Fridthjof rowed them towards land, and they discovered they had reached the Orkneys. Here they landed, and Fridthjof bore his own men ashore.

Angantyr was earl of the Orkneys. One of his men, Hallvard, was keeping watch and he saw Fridthjof come ashore. He spoke of this and Angantyr heard, and asked for news.

Hallvard said, "Men have landed and they are very tired but one of them carried the rest ashore."

Angantyr guessed that this must be Fridthjof.

There were some berserks there, led by Atli, and he said, "I have heard that Fridthjof swore never to be the first to beg for peace."

He and his fellows went down to the strand to challenge this visitor but Angantyr sent Hallvard to demand peace between them. When Fridthjof heard the berserk's challenge and Angantyr's command, he said he would accept peace or war. They stayed the winter with Angantyr and he honoured them greatly, taking a keen interest in their voyages. He heard of how King Helgi had treated Fridthjof, and knew that Fridthjof came to levy tribute. He said he would not pay Helgi tribute but he would gladly give Fridthjof anything he asked for.

Back in Norway, the kings had been astounded when the two witches fell from their scaffolds and broke their backs. That autumn, King Hring came to Sogn to marry Ingiborg. When he saw Fridthjof's ring on her finger, he asked where it had come from.

She said, "It belonged to my father."

Hring said, "I know it is Fridthjof's. You shall not take it back to my kingdom – there you will not want for gold."

Ingiborg gave the ring to Helgi's wife, asking her to give it to Fridthjof when he returned. Then they went to King Hring's land.

That spring, Fridthjof left Angantyr and the Orkneys on friendly terms. Hallvard accompanied Fridthjof but when they reached Norway, he learnt that his farm had been torched, and when Fridthjof reached Framness, he consulted with his men as to what should be done. They advised him to look after himself and he resolved to hand over the tribute. They rowed over to Syrstrand where they learnt that the kings were at the Temple of Balder, sacrificing to the goddesses. Fridthjof went there with Bjorn, after he told the other men to destroy any ships or boats they found in the area.

Fridthjof left Bjorn outside the hall of the goddesses and entered alone. He saw few people in there, but the kings were there sacrificing and they sat drinking. The king's wives were warming the gods at a fire in the middle while other women anointed the gods and wiped them down. Fridthjof went to Helgi and flung the purse containing the tribute in his face. Helgi fell in a faint and Halfdan seized him before he fell into the fire. As Fridthjof walked out, he saw the ring on the finger of Helgi's wife. He tried to take it but it was stuck on her finger so he dragged her across the floor towards the door and then Balder fell in the fire. Halfdan's wife caught hold of Helgi's wife and the god she had been warming also fell in the fire. The fire spread and soon the Temple was burning. Fridthjof took the ring from Helgi's wife's hand and left. Bjorn asked him what had happened and he told him, before flinging a blazing brand onto the roof of the Temple and returned to the ships.

When King Helgi returned to his senses, he ordered his men to follow Fridthjof and kill him and everyone with him. The king's men were called and saw the hall in flames. Halfdan and his men worked to extinguish the fire but Helgi and his followers pursued Fridthjof and his men who had already embarked. When Helgi and his men tried to follow, they discovered that all the ships had been staved in and they had to row ashore again. Some men were drowned. Helgi went mad with rage, put an arrow to his bow, and pulled the bow so much that it snapped.

The wind began to blow, Fridthjof's men set sail, and they sailed from the fjord. Fridthjof resolved to take up the life of a Viking. He explored islands and skerries that summer, fighting with other Vikings and gaining plunder and fame. In autumn, they sailed to the Orkneys where Angantyr welcomed them. Meanwhile, the kings had declared Fridthjof and outlaw and confiscated his possessions. Halfdan settled at Framness and rebuilt the farm that had been burnt. They also rebuilt the Temple of Balder at great cost. Helgi remained at Syrstrand.

Fridthjof won many sea battles against Vikings, but he did not plunder merchants. He gathered a large army and became very rich. After three years spent in this way, Fridthjof sailed up Oslo Fjord. He announced his intention to go ashore and leave the rest to continue their warfare.

"I want to go into the uplands and find King Hring and Ingiborg. I will return to this spot on the first day of summer."

Bjorn did not think the plan wise. "I think it would be better to go to Sogn and kill Helgi and Halfdan."

Regardless, Fridthjof went into the uplands disguised as an old man, and came to Hring's kingdom of Ringeriki. He met some herders who lived at Hring's dwelling and asked them if he was a strong king. He went up to the king's hall and sat near the door. Hring noticed this old man and mentioned him to Ingiborg. He sent a servant to ask the old man his name, where he came from and who were his kin. Questioned, Fridthjof answered with riddling puns on his real name.

The king told Fridthjof to speak to him and asked him his name. Ingiborg disapproved of the elderly visitor, but Hring welcomed him and told him to sit at his side. The king told the queen to give Fridthjof a more becoming cloak and the queen did so unwillingly. She blushed when she saw the ring Fridthjof wore. Hring also noticed it and complimented him upon his possession.

Fridthjof said, "It is all that I inherited from my father."

One day Hring, his queen, and many courtiers were going to a feast. Hring asked Fridthjof if he wished to come and Fridthjof agreed. They sledged across a frozen lake on their way and

Fridthjof warned the king that he thought the ice dangerous. Then the ice broke beneath the sled's runners and Fridthjof leapt down to heave the runners out of the hole in the ice.

The king remarked on his strength, saying, "Even Fridthjof the Bold would not have shown greater strength."

They came to the feast and the king went home with many gifts. Spring came and melted the ice.

One day in spring Fridthjof and other men at court accompanied the king into the woods. The king grew sleepy and said, "I shall sleep right here."

Fridthjof advised him to return home. The king did not pay attention and went to sleep in the wood. Fridthjof drew his sword, and flung it far away. The king awoke shortly after and addressed him by his true name. He knew that he had been tempted to kill him but had thought better of it.

He said, "You will remain here in great honour."

Fridthjof said, "I cannot stay. I arranged to meet my troops on the first day of summer."

The king and his people returned home and the king made it known to them that it was Fridthjof the Bold who had been there during the winter.

One morning there was a knock at the door of the king's hall and the king answered it to learn that Fridthjof was there, ready to depart. He gave the ring to Ingiborg and the king laughed that she had received more payment for Fridthjof's winter quarters than he had. He called for food and drink so they could eat before Fridthjof departed. As they ate, the king asked Fridthjof to think again, saying, "You will be welcome to remain since my sons are still children and I am old and feeble and have no one to guard my kingdom for me."

Fridthjof was persuaded, but he refused to take the name of king. Hring took to his sick bed shortly after and died. He was buried with many treasures in a burial mound, and the wedding of Fridthjof and Ingiborg followed shortly after his funeral. Now Fridthjof became king and he had many children with Ingiborg.

Helgi and Halfdan heard of this. They were angry and took a large army of men to Ringeriki with the intention of killing Fridthjof and taking the kingdom for themselves. Fridthjof learnt of their coming and he gathered men together. Bjorn came to them from the east to help Fridthjof and the battle began. Finally, Fridthjof went where the battle was thickest and there he fought against Helgi and slew him. He held up the shield of peace and the battle ended.

Fridthjof offered Halfdan two choices, to surrender or die. Halfdan chose to yield his kingdom to Fridthjof, but Fridthjof kept him on as his lord in Sogn, paying tribute. Later Fridthjof gave Ringeriki to Hring's sons when they grew up, and he was known as King of Sogn and went on to conquer Hordaland. Fridthjof and Ingiborg had two sons, Gunnthjof and Herthjof, who both became mighty men.

Kirrane and the Second Sorrow

by Todd Nelsen

Startled, a raven, black as night, leapt from its branch and took to the open air, its sight beyond the reaches of mortal men, its wings forever beating.

“I am a Spokesman of the Fire! A Harbinger of the New Sun! How dare you accost me --”

His tone was accusing.

In response, Kirrane raised the hilt of his sword, a hilt of bone and antler, and leveled it before him as one would level a stick before an unruly child. The corners of his mouth turned to a disapproving frown. The man standing before him was at his mercy, and they both knew it.

“Your time of prophecy is over,” Kirrane said. “Make your peace with the earth.”

“Peace? How dare you speak of peace, druid?” he shouted back. “Do you need not see the Star in the night sky? A child will be born this night. It has been prophesized. Foretold. Even you cannot change prophecy!”

The Draoi eyed him coldly; sensing his danger, the speaker’s courage faltered.

“*With the earth,*” Kirrane repeated with conviction.

And when he struck, it was as lightning, and his words rang true; his sword cut deep, crumpling him in mid-turn as he struggled to run. He twitched, if only for a moment, then lay still on the open road.

Lowering his weapon, Kirrane bent low to the ground and cocked his head to one side, as if to listen. A strand of his dark hair brushed his face, a sign of both his lineage and pride. He took in breath and half-closed his eyes.

“Go raibh amhlaaidh,” he whispered.

And with his words, the air grew to a gentle calm.

If the woodland creatures dwelling beyond the road were aware of his presence or the change, they made no hint of it. Only the raven had taken flight, and where it flew, was beyond even Kirrane’s sight.

A soft moan escaped the man’s lips.

One swift cut, and another, and the task was finished. Reaching down, Kirrane snatched up the burlap sack he had dropped moments before and opened it.

“I release you of your burden,” he said, filling it with the Magi’s offering, its contents twinkling like jeweled stars in the night. “I release you of your body. As all must pass, so shall you this night.”

And with that, he closed his sack and walked from the road, returning to the forest, the burlap wound tightly about his fingers.

* * *

It was night, and the branches were thick.

A lesser man would have struck fire, but he zigzagged his way through the brambles and prickly leaves with practiced ease. It has been said the Draoi are blessed with the sight of

the owl, the natural cunning of the fox. Kirrane was no exception. For him, it was like passing through smoke. Not a single branch clung to his tunic or scratched at his cheek. When the clouds dissipated, and the moon shown at its zenith in the night sky, he emerged as before, unharmed.

He found himself in an open glade, the outline of a city looming heavy in the distance.

The sight was startling to him, though he had seen it many times in both dream and vision; they *all* had, and it called out to them like a beacon.

He cast his keen eyes to the night sky, then, his heart filled with a terrible sorrow.

There, he saw the passage of time, the turning of the ages. He watched men struggle, and he watched men die, both on the hot, summered ground and the cold, cold snow. He saw cities rise, and he saw civilizations fall. He saw war, plague, pestilence, and devastation. He saw his clan, still living, so long behind him now, and their rune markings carved on soft stone.

And he watched as their rivers and springs turned to blood, and their lakes rolled to a red boil.

The moon rose above him, as well, and Kirrane turned to it and spoke to it, also, his voice filled with the same sorrow and longing.

“When I have no other, you offer me your comfort,” he said. “When I am lost, you light the path when my darkness grows too great. I beseech thee to do so, again, dear Sister. I need you now, more than ever, this night. Stay with me, for the dark path I walk is difficult, and my task is great.”

And with that, he continued, deep into the forest and beyond it, toward the bustling metropolis of New Bethlehem.

TEXAS RISING

Hurricane Sophie, a Category-5 nightmare, swept in off the Gulf on September 16th, devastating the coastal regions. Everyone had seen the giant coming, swift and terrible, but despite widespread evacuations she savaged all she came in contact with, flinging her destructive arms wide. Corpus Christi vanished, and pieces of obliterated oil platforms as well as entire tankers were cast ten miles inland.

She tore north across the Hill Country, into the Big Country, and failed to drop to a Cat-3 as predicted by the time she reached Leesville, population 18,000, located in a county which averaged only seventeen people per square mile. Along with her merciless winds, Sophie brought rain. Lots of rain.

Everyone expected flooding. Central Texas was known as Flash Flood Alley, and every fire department was trained and equipped for swift water rescue. Most flooding deaths were the result of people trying to cross moving water, underestimating the force and weight of the currents, and every year the news ran footage of some fool standing on the roof of his pickup amid white water, waving his arms while people worked to save him. For the most part, this was the type of rescue firemen in rural Texas were trained for. Helicopter crewmen were similarly trained to descend on cables to pluck folks from rooftops and trees.

No one expected Sophie to come this far, with such force.

No one imagined what was approaching, and by the time her full fury was realized, it was too late.

Dell McCall straddled the peak of his roof as if he was riding one of his horses, facing his family. They were straddling too, all in a line like half-drowned crows. Above them the sky was a boiling mix of black and charcoal, clouds tumbling over one another as rain slashed down in dark curtains. Water poured down their faces, and they tried to wipe it from their eyes and hold onto the roof at the same time. The wind was a woman's scream.

Arlene, Dell's wife of twenty-two years, hugged their two-year-old Dylan to her chest as she looked at her other two children. Their seventeen-year-old was closest to her, and Ricky, eleven, rode the roof behind her.

"Bailey, I want you to climb over your brother and sit so you're facing me again."

"I'll fall!"

"You won't fall. I've seen you ride in the rain plenty of times. You just hold on tight, you can do it." Arlene said something else, but it was lost in the wind. When her voice came back it was firm. "Go on, now." Bailey nodded but stayed put.

"Once you're set, you're going to scooch backwards all the way to the chimney, put your back hard against it. You understand me?"

Bailey nodded again, wiping a clump of hair from her eyes. She was trembling. Dell wasn't sure she would move at first, thought she might freeze up, but then she started to her feet. She held onto her brother as she edged past him, her sneakers sliding over the wet shingles. Her legs were shaking and she began to whimper, gripping Ricky's shoulders hard while he in turn clung to the roof.

"Mama..."

Her right foot shot away and she went down with a scream, banging her chin, losing her grip on Ricky, and for one terrible moment Dell saw her sliding, sliding, falling and swept away. But one hand caught the roofline and the other snagged on Ricky's jeans.

"Mama!"

"Pull yourself up!"

"I'm falling!"

"You pull yourself up, Bailey McCall!"

The girl's sobs were torn away by the wind as she obeyed her mother's voice, clawing her way back to the roofline and throwing a leg over, hugging her brother's back and burying her face in his wet shirt.

"Now you get to scooching," Arlene commanded.

Bailey shook her head, hiding her face.

"Do it *right now*, girl!"

She pulled her face out of hiding. "I hate you!" she screamed, but did as she was told, easing her butt backwards six inches at a time, holding the roofline with both hands while Arlene cooed a steady stream of encouragement. "That's it, baby, you can do it, you're doing fine, honey, keep going..." Five endless minutes later she pressed her back against the bricks of the chimney.

"I'm sorry, Mama," she cried, wiping at her eyes.

"It's okay, baby, Mama knows. I'm so proud of you."

Dell gave his daughter a smile, and she managed a weak one in return. His wife's voice cut through the wind again. "Ricky, your turn, just like your sister."

The eleven-year-old needed no encouragement. He scooted backwards with the fearless agility of boys and crossed the distance in seconds, into Bailey's waiting arms. Arlene was murmuring to Dylan, keeping his face shielded from the biting rain as the toddler shivered close against her and cried. Dell looked away, at what had become of the world.

The McCall ranch sat twelve miles outside Leesville proper, the house and a cluster of outbuildings and trees alone on the flats of Gonzales County, not another structure in sight. It was sheep country, wide open and green, dotted in places with clumps of Texas oaks. Now, however, they might as well have been at sea, for eight feet of brown, turning water was moving across the flats like an ocean in every direction, endless, hammering at the gutters of their one story house. The white roof of Arlene's Durango could still be seen a quarter mile off as the SUV was carried away, and the wheels of Dell's Chevy poked just above the surface where the overturned pickup had floated to rest against the tree in what had been their front yard.

The water around them was fast and unforgiving.

Just beyond the house were the rooftops of the sheep shed and the second story of the barn. None of the smaller buildings could be seen. They were already underwater.

Arlene looked back into the wind and rain at her husband. "Together?"

He nodded, and they began to scoot forward across the space separating them from their children, slowly, carefully. Dylan was starting to squirm, and Arlene clamped him tight against her while she used the other hand to stay balanced and pull herself along. Dell kept close, prepared to grab them both if she should tip over one side or the other, not thinking or caring that he would most likely be pulled over with them if they went.

They stopped once, Dylan's squalling competing with the driving wind, and Arlene used both hands to rock and soothe him. Then they were off again, the rough shingles grating

beneath them, knees gripping the wet roof like the withers of a bareback horse. Lightning split the sky, followed close by sharp, rippling cracks as they reached the far end, Arlene's knees touching Ricky's. They rested for a moment, his wife's forehead pressed against the toddler, Dell's against his wife's shoulder. A surge of wind rocked them and the rain fell harder, coming in sideways for a moment, both conspiring to send them off the roof. They hung on.

"Bailey," Arlene was shouting, "I want my hands free to grab anyone who might slip, so I'm going to pass Dylan forward. Ricky, you're going to help. Put him tight in between the two of you."

Both kids nodded that they understood, and whatever fear they might have had for themselves momentarily vanished as they undertook the deadly serious task of protecting their youngest. Within moments, Dylan was safely tucked between his brother and sister, Bailey covering him with her body. In the midst of the horror, Dell McCall felt a burst of pride for his children.

It was short-lived, as the situation and bitterness crashed back in on him. He could have evacuated them days ago, when Sophie was crossing Florida. They could have left when she brushed Louisiana, showing no signs of diminishing, then again as she made landfall on the Texas Gulf Coast. But everyone was so certain she would slow down and blow out in the Hill Country, even the TV weathermen, that it would just be hard rain and high wind by the time it reached them. What Texan picked up his family and ran from that? They had been through heavy weather before. Dell supposed that had been at the heart of it. Pride. Too proud to be chased off his land.

And then there she'd been in all her terrible glory, ripping overland at record speeds, and it had been too late. The wind and thunder had gotten them moving in the early hours,

and the dreaded grumble of water rushing across the main road – cutting off any hope of driving out – had sent them up an aluminum ladder and onto the roof mere seconds before a dark tide bristling with uprooted trees had surged across the flats, surrounding their house.

He looked at the barn, with its safe, dry loft and much higher roof. I should have taken them there, he thought.

New gusts attacked out of the early morning, rain cutting hard through their clothes, making them all tuck and hunch against it, closing their eyes. Dylan cried loudly until a long barrage of thunder drowned him out.

You did this to them, Dell thought. You led them up here to die.

He clenched his teeth so hard he thought they might crack.

The wind lifted for a moment as the storm drew a breath, and he looked around once more. All gone. The horses drowned in their stalls, his fine Dall sheep either swept away on the Texas tide or drowned in their pens. The house. Arlene's photo albums. Troy's flag. All gone.

The thought of Troy McCall's flag – handed to Arlene two years ago by a somber Army colonel and later placed reverently over the mantle, now just another piece of floating debris – caused an ache in his chest. Nineteen-years-old and killed by a roadside bomb on some obscure, numbered highway outside Baghdad, dead in a war that began when he was still Ricky's age. It was Dell who had given his approval to the enlistment, caught up in his eldest son's excitement over adventure and patriotism and career possibilities, the chance to be more than a sheep rancher.

He looked at his family shivering in the storm. Troy wouldn't be the last McCall child to be led to destruction by their father.

Dell looked to the barn again, remembering a night shortly after they'd gotten the news, him alone in the dark, surrounded by the warm sweetness of hay and horses, alone with his shotgun resting across his knees. He had been beyond crying, his body exhausted and drained, eyes distant and raw, a single shell in the chamber. It was this fine woman in front of him who came along in the dark, taking the shotgun and holding him, and he'd discovered he did have more tears, the two of them crying together. She had saved his life.

And as repayment for that gift, he had now sentenced her to death.

"Daddy?"

Dell squeezed his eyes shut, his fists tight and shaking.

"Daddy, look."

He opened his eyes to see Ricky pointing to the sheep shed, and Dell wiped away tears and rain as he saw what had caught his son's attention. An animal was scrambling out of the floodwaters, nails scratching and slipping as it clawed furiously up the corrugated tin slope, finally gaining purchase and moving on unsteady legs to the peak. It was a coyote, a female he had seen before, recognized by her drooping left ear. She gave herself a shake from tail to head, then stood there shivering, looking down at the brown sea churning all about the shed.

"She's alone," said Ricky, who remembered her too, and now they were all looking. "Where's her pups?"

Dell and Ricky had been out riding a few weeks ago, and saw her fifty yards off, loping across the grasslands, three little pups trotting behind her in a line. As a rule, sheep ranchers will shoot a coyote on sight, and Dell was no exception, in fact he'd had his rifle with him that day. He could have easily made the shot, but allowed her to go on her way, not

sure why. Not because of Ricky, who was old enough to know what a plague coyotes were to a sheep herd, and not because of her pups. Every rancher Dell knew would have dropped each one in turn without hesitation, getting them before they got bigger and could do real damage. But he didn't, hadn't even wanted to. He had no explanation for his son or himself, other than a private suspicion it probably had something to do with Troy, but it was confused and they were thoughts he had no desire to explore.

Now, as he looked at her, scrawny and shaking and alone on a rooftop with no understanding of what was happening to her, he was glad he hadn't done it. "Her pups are gone," he told his son. "She couldn't save them."

Arlene reached back and squeezed her husband's knee. It was small comfort.

For a while no one said anything, just watched the animal pace from one end of the roof to the other, turning her head from side to side, tail tucked. Finally it was Ricky who asked the question.

"Are we going to get rescued, Daddy?" Behind him, Bailey looked up to see the answer.

"Of course we are." He had to raise his voice so they could hear him over the wind, and doing that allowed him to hide the way it cracked.

"Is a helicopter going to pick us up, like we saw them do on TV during Katrina?"

"They can't fly in this," Bailey said. "The wind's too strong." It was snapping her hair around her head and face as if she was being electrocuted.

Arlene shot her daughter a look. "They'll just have to use a boat, won't they, honey?" She gave her husband's leg another squeeze.

Dell said that yes, a boat would come for them. He couldn't see his wife's eyes, and that was just as well. They wouldn't have to watch each other lie.

Another rising surge of wind ended further conversation, and the McCalls tucked down as lightning flashed within the violent clouds, rain pelting them without relent while thunder rolled across the Texas sea. They were all shivering, the wind and rain turning cold. Only Dell kept his head up, looking at the coyote which had ceased pacing for the moment and stood midway along the rooftop, her pelt hanging in wet straggles. She winced at every crash of thunder, and though he couldn't hear her, Dell imagined she was whining as well. Wet and whining and hopeless.

He saw that the water was halfway up the shed's metal slope, and a glance down to the right showed him that the gutters of his house were gone, a good foot under now. The brown sea rolled against his roof, and a huge oak tumbled past, branches turning slowly as it floated quickly by. Some debris was tangled with it; a red cooler, a lawn chair, the bloated shape of an armadillo corpse, a telephone pole with a snarl of wire trailing behind, thumping briefly against the house before it was gone. Something swollen and gray with stiff legs sticking out of the water chased the debris, and Dell realized it was a dead mule.

Minutes later the white box of a delivery truck cruised past on the far side of the front yard tree, leaning at a sharp angle, and Dell recognized the logo of bright flowers on the side as Dawson's Orchids. Gonzales County was one of the biggest orchid suppliers in the U.S., and Dell knew the owner. The truck's cab was submerged, and with a chill he wondered if Lyle Dawson might not still be in the driver's seat, buckled in tight with his dead hands on the wheel.

While Dell watched Texas float by, the water climbed another foot up his roof.

Arlene was tugging at his pants leg to get his attention, and she half turned and moved her head close so the kids wouldn't hear her. "What are we going to do?"

Dell looked at her for a long moment. "We have to hang on as long as we can, and hope someone comes."

Her green eyes never left his. "No one's coming." It wasn't a question.

"Not in time to make a difference."

She turned back to face her children and said nothing more.

Dale silently cursed the storm, cursed himself, then just stared at the coyote. She was pacing again, looking and sniffing, back and forth, but nothing had changed except the water was closer. He wondered if she realized she was finished. He doubted she could grasp a concept like that, and didn't really expect her to start howling as if lamenting her fate. Animals didn't do that. He suspected she would go out with more dignity, anyway. She was lucky. She wouldn't have to stand there helplessly and watch the storm take her pups. The wind screamed at them then, the rain an endless lashing of needles, and they tried to become as small and tightly wrapped as they could. No one made a sound, not even little Dylan who just cowered and shook against his mother, and they waited. Waited for a salvation Dell knew wasn't coming.

The temperature dropped further and they were all shivering, the wind whipping their clothes and buffeting them, trying to push them off. Rain streamed off their bodies, down their cheeks, into their eyes and noses, and the volume of the torrent around them rose, more and more debris cracking off the edges of the roof. Out front, the branches of the big oak were whipping madly, and once in a while a larger limb would snap off with a sound like a gunshot, falling to be pulled away. Abruptly there was a great tearing noise, like a deck of

giant cards being shuffled, and an entire section of shingles was ripped away, one after another in mere seconds, each spinning away into the sky.

Dell scanned the horizon as best he could. He had been through tornados, most Texans had, and twisters were famous for teaming up with hurricanes to add their own flavor of death and destruction. In this low light and masked by the constant shrieking, one could be upon them before they knew it. And there would simply be no way to hide from it.

He palmed the water off his face, rubbing it out of his eyes, squinting into the storm. The sheep shed was gone now, completely submerged and for all he knew, torn away completely. The coyote was gone as well, and no one had witnessed her passing.

The water had risen to within four feet of the peak and his family.

The crunching of another floating tree bumping and brushing against the house made him snap his head to the left, and for an instant he saw the oncoming arms of a hundred black branches, reaching to tear his family away, and then the tree rolled and swept past. Dell let out a gasp, realizing that it was only a matter of time before another tree arrived, floating higher, one that didn't turn away and brushed them off as casually as a man sweeping toast crumbs off a table.

A cracking of branches made him look right again, towards the front yard oak, and he saw his capsized pickup was still firmly wedged against it. Something else had floated up onto it and become stuck. Something wide and silver. Construction site material? It was hard to tell through the gray curtain of rain. After a full minute of staring he realized what it was.

Arlene saw it at the same moment and knew immediately. "My God, is that a boat?"

A wave rocked the silver object, turning it slightly and showing it to be the aluminum hull of a capsized fishing boat, the black prop of an outboard motor jutting out of the water. A red stripe ran down one side, and big, upside-down reflective letters read LEESVILLE FIRE RESCUE.

Arlene gripped her husband's knee in a fierce clench. "Ray Hammond."

Dell stared at the inverted hull. Ray Hammond was chief of the Leesville Volunteer Fire Department, and the crew leader of the town's swift water rescue team.

"What happened?"

Dell shook his head. "Nothing good." People's lives in small towns are hopelessly intertwined, everyone knowing everyone's business and all the little details of their lives. But that was also what made that sort of life so wonderful. Ray, his crew, their families were not strangers, and to the McCalls, were extensions of their own family. The sight of that empty boat shook them, because they both knew it hadn't floated off a trailer somewhere. Ray and his boys would have been aboard, out in the thick of the nightmare as soon as the water started rising, doing their duty and trying to help their friends in the community.

But Dell was thinking more about the boat.

He judged the distance, about twenty yards directly in front of the house, fast moving water in between. Water filled with debris that could sweep him away, providing the current didn't do it first. He could get a head start on it by going off the far end of the roof, buying maybe fifty feet of upstream advantage. Then swim like hell.

A tangle of barbed wire and fence posts rushed past.

Arlene was a better swimmer, no doubt about that, but she wouldn't have the strength to turn the boat upright once she made it. He wondered if he would. Dell was not an

impressive swimmer, but twenty years of ranching had kept him fit. It would have to be enough. The current would fight against the boat, and despite his strength it might take it away before the job was finished. Even if he flipped it and held on, could he get the motor started? It was underwater now. Would it crank? He realized there was a time not so long ago when his biggest problem was lambing, a month-long season of labor and midwiving. He had always thought his life depended upon its success. Funny how quickly things changed.

Dell noticed Arlene was staring at him, and turned to look at her. She raised her voice over the wind. “How am I going to handle three children up here if you drown, Dell McCall?”

“What choice do I have?”

“You can stay alive. You can stay here with your family and hope for rescue.”

He pointed at the boat. “Ray and his crew were the only rescue we were going to get. Bailey was right, they can’t send up helicopters in this, and the water’s going to be up here in two hours, probably less. No one is coming.”

His wife pushed wet hair aside and stared at him, but it fell right back into her eyes. Then a gust hit them, making them both hunch, the force of it ripping away more shingles and creating whitecaps on the water’s surface, howling across the rooftop, adding spray to the downpour.

He kissed her, long and hard, then turned on the peak and started scooting towards the opposite end of the house. Bailey and Ricky saw him going, and cries of “Daddy!” came to him from behind, distant in the wind as he fixed his eyes on the edge ahead of him. Though it seemed longer, it took only minutes before he had crossed the rain-washed roof to where it dropped off at the end, turbulent waves spinning only a few feet below, smashing against the

side of the house before flowing around it. He stared down at the turning current and wondered about whirlpools. Ahead, out over the stormy flats, all manner of debris was floating their direction, mostly trees, but also something big and flat and dark. He watched, entranced by the sight as it slowly rolled over in the water, wheels up.

A boxcar.

Dear Jesus. If that thing hit the house it would take it right out from under them.

He stood, one foot on either side of the peak, arms outstretched as he balanced against the wind, straightening slowly. A forceful gust drove him back into a crouch, but when it passed he straightened again. He didn't dare look back at his family, knowing that if he did he would lose his nerve and crawl back to them. He took several quick breaths and dove.

The sea welcomed him like an expectant killer.

The water was cold, faster than he had anticipated, and no sooner did his head break the surface that he slammed back against the wall of his house, instantly losing whatever distance the dive had given him. He heard a hollow, sucking gurgle and felt it carrying him to the corner, where it would pull him under and around, sending him speeding past his family in seconds.

Dell kicked out against the house and started swimming, pulling hard against the current, straight into it. The draft at the corner tore at him from behind, dragging, and he kicked to get away, to get distance from the suction before he tried turning towards the boat.

Rain and wind beat at his eyes, and he sputtered in the brown water. It was so damn strong, and he felt like he was swimming in place, going nowhere, like he was in one of those fancy motorized lap pools rich folks installed in their houses. Only here there was no switch to shut off the current. This was nothing like swimming in still Texas lakes or slow moving

rivers. He tried to remember the lessons of his youth, swimming in the heavily chlorinated pool at the 'Y' in Brownsville. Face down, stroke, turn to the side and breathe, stroke, face down, stroke, breathe, kicking, kicking all the time, never stop kicking. Fight the urge to dog paddle.

He had moved only a few yards from the house, and still it sucked him back.

Dell began angling to get away from that deadly corner of the house, still into the current, stroke, stroke, kick, breathe. Something caught at his pants leg and tugged hard, a branch maybe, please, God, not more fencing, he would be like a fish in a net. The object pulled free. Stroke, stroke, kick, breathe, stroke *STROKE SWIM LIKE A MAN GODDAMIT!*

He lost track of where he was, didn't dare look. Had he already been carried past the house? Was he struggling towards nothing while his family watched him flailing away into the distance? Stroke, stroke, pulling harder, kick, kick, muscles burning, *oh my God why didn't I take off my boots?* Stupid! Kicking harder still, turning his face to the right for a breath. The long dark shape of the boxcar was closer, tall white letters down one rusting side reading SOO LINE. It was heading for the house. Couldn't think about that, swimming, pulling hard, hard, HARDER!

His shirt caught on debris, jerking him back, and Dell cried out, thrashing at the surface, coughing as water and leaves tried to choke him. He kicked and pulled, but it had him and his rhythm was broken. He curled up and reached back to free himself, knowing he was going to drown now, his head smacking against something, more debris.

He hoped Arlene and the kids wouldn't see him die.

Dell's knuckles rapped against metal and he tried to keep his head above the surface, shaking to clear his eyes. A big black shape was inches away.

A tire.

His shirt was hooked on the bumper of his submerged pickup.

Dell let out a thankful cry and ripped the shirt away, scrambling up onto the undercarriage, feeling the capsized vehicle bob under his feet. Ray Hammond's boat was close enough to touch, hung up on another tire. Branches cracked overhead, and he stood in a balanced, half-crouch in water up to his knees, seeing that the Chevy had lodged in the oak's main fork.

He didn't look for the boxcar, didn't want to. If it hit him, he'd never know it, and would prefer that to a miss, to seeing it tear his house and his family apart upon impact. He moved as quickly as the water allowed, examining the aluminum boat, seeing that the current had already put it on a helpful angle. He wouldn't have to flip it completely over, only about three-quarters.

And then what? Have the water rip it from his hands?

He moved along the truck's undercarriage to where the boat was actually sticking into the air a little, creating a dark, watery gap. Dell held his breath and ducked under, pulling himself up into the boat like a turtle in a shell. Darkness. No, not completely, a bit of gray light coming in through the gap. Flat seats now overhead, nothing else, all washed away. He felt the boat shift above him, the pickup shudder beneath him, and tensed.

It all held.

He pulled himself into the darkness towards the back, the space between the water and air narrowing. Dell had never been in Ray Hammond's boat before, but he had been in plenty similar. There, the center seat, more than just an aluminum plank across the hull, this

one a storage box. Kneeling in the darkness, he felt for the latches, found the one on the left, flipped it, cold hands slapping in the other direction. Found the second latch.

The lid spilled open, gear falling out as if from a ruptured piñata, dumping into the water. Dell's hands scrambled through it until they felt rope, a tightly rolled coil. He quickly wound one end around his waist several times, knotting it tightly. Then he crawled on his knees back towards the light and tied the other end to the front bench seat. Had there been a flashlight in the box? Probably, the kind that floated. He would need it to examine the outboard motor. He started back to look.

Tucked inside the turtled boat, Dell didn't see it coming.

A forest green dumpster, half filled with water, heavy and floating like a boat itself, washed into the rear of the Chevy, striking hard and dislodging it from the tree. The pickup slid away from the oak as the dumpster turned over, hitting the rear of the rescue boat before it sank, knocking it loose from the tire which had held it in place. The current caught the aluminum hull and sent it spinning away. Dell, trapped inside the capsized hull, was pulled with it, his head and shoulder slamming into a metal wall, casting him into deep water as the boat moved off, the rope dragging him along the bottom behind it.

Arlene and the kids screamed as they saw the dumpster break both the boat and the pickup free, and she shouted her husband's name into the storm as the current carried the aluminum shape away from the house and out of sight. Dell's head didn't appear.

Two feet below the family, the surface washed against the shingles as the hurricane sent waves of spray over their huddled figures. Arlene heard a metallic groan and looked over her shoulder to see the boxcar moving in the current, a rusting behemoth turning slowly on the surface, creaking as it moved past the house with only feet to spare. It rotated and then drove into the barn like a great torpedo, and in a splintering crash the structure was torn apart,

the roof collapsing, a whole piece floating for a moment, then breaking up and slipping under. Hay and shattered planks vanished quickly downstream.

Arlene stared into the storm, the shock of seeing the barn torn away quickly replaced with grief for her husband, for the children she would not be able to save, for the life they would never know. Her tears were lost in the rain.

An hour passed, and the water was now touching their feet, the spray a relentless whipping, and all three kids were crying now. Arlene reached out to pull them to herself, and got them started with a prayer. Above them, around them, the storm closed in to finish the killing. In the end, the wind became the sound of a ripping chainsaw.

But it wasn't the wind.

And it wasn't a chainsaw.

Dell McCall's arms and back were a rage of pain from hauling himself underwater along the rope, pulling himself upwards to break the surface and gasp at wet air, clinging desperately to the slick aluminum. Lyle Dawson's orchid truck had gotten stuck against a line of oaks a mile and a half down from the ranch, and when the rescue boat slammed into its cab – the driver's seat was empty – it nearly flipped over. Half drowned, Dell crawled onto the cab's roof and then tore some shoulder muscle flipping the boat the rest of the way over, fighting against the pull of the water to hold onto it long enough to climb in. Ray Hammond had been a man who cared for his equipment, and despite being submerged, the big Mercury outboard fired on the first pull.

Now, that same Mercury growled against the shriek of the storm as Dell guided the craft against the current, one arm locked onto the throttle tiller. He stared with grim purpose at the line of little shapes still clinging to the roof of his house, and when Arlene saw him coming for them and raised one hand, Dell shot his own triumphant fist into the heavens.

The hell with Texas, he thought.

We'll raise sheep in Montana.

THIEVES FROM THE STARS by Rex Mundy

5 Tunnels of the Dark Elves

After a few minutes, the metal corridor branched. Theodric glanced at his dwarven companion.

‘Which way now?’ he asked.

The dwarf shrugged.

‘How should I know?’ he snapped. ‘I’ve never been here before. And the only people I know who have been here have never returned.’

‘Right,’ Theodric nodded. ‘We’ll guess. This way.’

He strode in that direction, glancing over his shoulder at KorraKh. ‘Come on!’ he added impatiently. The dwarf was staring down the passage beyond him in horror.

‘I think we should go the other way,’ KorraKh said, his voice quaking.

‘Why, in Woden’s name?’ Theodric turned round and stopped dead as he caught a glimpse of the thing that was lurching towards him through the mist. Something insect-like, but so big it was almost brushing the roof of the tunnel.

He drew his sword.

‘No!’ shouted KorraKh. ‘It’ll kill you!’

‘What, are you a coward?’ Theodric sneered. ‘A true warrior doesn’t fear death! I shall go to Valhalla with steel in my hand and a smile on my lips.’

‘Don’t be a fool!’ KorraKh replied. ‘We’ve no time for such suicidal heroics. I’m sure you are a brave hero, Theodric, but our priority is to find where they hold Pitu and the others!’

Theodric stared at him for a second, as the creature scuttled relentlessly towards them.

He nodded shortly. ‘Very well,’ he said.

They pelted down the corridor in the opposite direction, as the metal walls rang with the scabbling approach of the giant insect. A doorway in one wall loomed up out of the fog.

‘Can you open this?’ demanded KorraKh, running over towards it. As he did so, it hissed open. The dwarf leapt back, anticipating an attack.

Nothing happened, and after a while, the door slid shut. Theodric glanced over his shoulder.

‘Come on, KorraKh – get the door open! That thing’s gaining on us!’

Tentatively, KorraKh stepped closer. The door hissed open. The dwarf shook his head.

‘Witchcraft,’ he muttered. ‘Come on!’

Theodric followed him into the chamber beyond. The door slid shut behind them. He stared suspiciously at it.

‘Pitu!’

Theodric turned at KorraKh’s cry. As he did so, he saw that – beyond a large and sinister looking table - the far side of the chamber was lined with glass fronted, upright sarcophagi. Floating in a liquid within them were many figures – dwarves like KorraKh, woses like the ones Theodric had encountered in the forest, even a couple of humans. KorraKh was standing before one sarcophagus in which floated a dwarf-girl. Though her white skin and jet black hair was not to Theodric’s taste, he could see that she was beautiful in her own way. KorraKh turned to him, and Theodric noticed that his cheeks were glistening.

‘We must get her out...’ he murmured.

The door hissed open again. Theodric whirled round to find himself confronted by the insectoid creature. It towered above him, its multi-faceted eyes gazing impassionately down at him, its mandibles clicking together. Light glinted off its jet-black carapace and twinkled from its eyes. Theodric drew his sword.

‘I’ll have to fight it!’ he shouted as it lunged for him. ‘Korrakh – you find a way to awake them. I’ll deal with -’

Then the insectoid was upon him, and he had no time for talk.

The chamber rang with the clash of steel on carapace, claw on mail, as Korrakh desperately tried to find a way to get to his beloved. Pitu’s dark eyes were open as she floated in the jelly, and Korrakh’s heart beat fast at the thought that she might be dead. He scabbled along the wall for a button like the one that had controlled the doors.

Theodric dodged a bite from the creature’s mandibles, and parried a slash from a claw. The insectoid’s carapace formed a natural kind of plate armour, and it was worse than trying to fight a Roman; each blow of his sword bounced straight back, seeming to do no harm. He aimed a blow at the creature’s eyes, but its reflexes were like lightning, and two claws came up to protect it.

Korrakh had found not just one button, but a whole panel full of them, on the wall to the left of the sarcophagi. He gazed at them in numb incomprehension. Should he just press any of them? But that could do terrible things – maybe kill the prisoners. Still, they were bound to die one way or another. Nerving himself, he reached out and pressed a button.

The monster had backed Theodric halfway across the room by now, and he had the table at his back. As the insectoid lashed out at him again, he rolled backwards onto the table to evade its attack.

Korrakh pressed another button, since the first had done nothing as far as he could see. As he did so, he saw Theodric roll over the table, and the insectoid leap after him.

‘Don’t bring it over here!’ Korrakh shouted, and pressed another button. Suddenly, there was a whirr from the ceiling, and a great metal apparatus descend at high speed. It caught the

creature a glancing blow and knocked it down onto the table. Korrakh frowned. Presumably, that wasn't what the thing was intended for, but he had saved Theodric with it.

The Saxon glanced up at him.

'What did you do?' he shouted.

'Pressed this button,' Korrakh replied, doing so again. The apparatus retracted into the ceiling again.

The insectoid lumbered to its feet again, still on the table. 'Press it again!' shouted Theodric, as the creature looked woozily around. Korrakh obeyed, and the apparatus descended again, catching the insectoid across the brain-pan. A great crack split open in the thing's skull. It pitched down off the table, almost landing on Theodric, who dodged out of the way in time.

'It's not honourable to stab a foe when he's down. Theodric muttered, 'but needs must.' He reversed his grip on the weapon, and brought it down into the comatose creature's vitals. It lay silently on the floor, oozing ichor.

Theodric turned to Korrakh. 'Have you found a way to free them yet?' he asked.

'No. I was distracted.' He returned to the panel. 'Keep an eye on the door. There must be more dark elves around – get ready to fight them off.'

Theodric turned towards the entrance. As he did so, he heard a hiss from the door.

It opened, revealing nine or ten black-clad dark elves framed in the archway. All of them were holding tubes, not unlike the one that hung from Theodric's belt. They opened fire, and blue lightning sparked from the weapons.

Theodric ducked, and dragged Korrakh behind the insectoid's corpse. Bolts ricocheted around the room above them. One struck a sarcophagus, blowing the front off it. A pool collected upon the floor as the body within – a wood-wose – sank and the compartment emptied.

‘We must fight back!’ shouted KorraKh.

‘How can we?’ Theodric replied grimly. ‘We don’t have any weapons comparable to these lightning bolts!’

KorraKh’s eyes narrowed.

‘There must be something!’ he cried desperately. ‘To have got so near and yet so far!’
Another volley of lightning bolts crackled from the corpse beside them,

Theodric returned his gaze. He shook his head.

‘I’ll see you in Valhalla,’ he muttered. He tightened his grip on his sword, and rose.

VARNEY THE VAMPYRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER LI.

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

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

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

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

"Ay, so we must."

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

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

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

"Haven't we come on purpose?"

"Yes, but do it."

"Ain't we trying it?"

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

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

"I wish we could get in."

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

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

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

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

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

"If you can."

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

"To be sure we can."

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

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

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

"You had better cease that kind of annoyance."

"We want to get in."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, what's to be done?"

"Danged if I know," said one.

"Give it up," said another.

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

"Hurrah! down with the vampyre!"

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

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

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

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

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

"In several places."

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

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

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

"The very point to make an attack."

"Not quite."

"Why not?"

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

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

"Down with the vampyre!"

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

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the mob.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not yet," shouted the servants.

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

Two or three of the mob reeled and fell.

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

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

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted the mob.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXXVI

Grantline led us. We held about level. Five hundred feet beneath us the brigand ship lay, cradled on the rocks. When it was still a mile away from us I could see all its outline fairly clearly in the dimness. Its tiny hull windows were dark; but the blurred shape of the hull was visible, and above it the rounded cap of dome, with a dim radiance beneath it.

We followed Grantline's platform. It was rising, drawing the others after it like a tail. I touched Anita where she lay beside me with her head half in the small hooded control bank.

"Going too high."

She nodded, but followed the line nevertheless. It was Grantline's command.

I lay crouched, holding the inner tips of the flexible side shields. The bottom of the platform was covered with the insulated fabric. There were two side shields. They extended upward some two feet, flexible so that I could hold them out to see over them, or draw them up and in to cover us.

They afforded a measure of protection against the hostile rays, though just how much we were not sure. With the platform level, a bolt from beneath could not harm us unless it continued for a considerable time. But the platform, except upon direct flight, was seldom level, for it was a frail, unstable little vehicle! To handle it was more than a question of the controls. We balanced, and helped to guide it with the movement of our bodies—shifting our weight sidewise, or back, or forward to make it dip as the controls altered the gravity pull in its tiny plate sections.

Like a bird, wheeling, soaring, swooping. To me, it was a precarious business.

But now we were in straight flight diagonally upward. The outline of the brigand ship came directly under us. I crouched tense, breathless; every moment it seemed that the brigands must discover us and loose their bolts.

They may have seen us for some moments before they fired. I peered over the side shield down at our mark, then up ahead to get Grantline's firing signal. It seemed long delayed. An

added glow down there must have warned Grantline that a shot was coming from there. The tiny red light flared bright on his platform.

I turned on our Benson curve light radiance. We had been dark, but a soft glow now enveloped us. Its sheen went down to the ship to reveal us. But its curving path showed us falsely placed. I saw the little line of platforms ahead of us. They seemed to move suddenly sidewise.

It was everyone for himself now; none of us could tell where the other platforms actually were placed or headed. Anita swooped us sharply down to avoid a possible collision.

“Gregg?”

“Yes. I’m aiming.”

I was making ready to drop the small explosive globe bomb. Our search light ray at the camp, answering Grantline’s signal, shot down and bathed the enemy ship in a white glare, revealing it for our aim. Simultaneously the brigand bolts came up at us.

I held my bomb out over the shield, calculating the angle to throw it down. The brigand rays flashed around me. They were horribly close; Miko had understood our sudden visible shift and aimed, not where we appeared to be, but approximately where we had been before.

I dropped my bomb hastily at the glowing white ship. The touch of a hostile ray would have exploded it in my hand. I saw others dropping also from our nearby platforms. The explosions from them merged in a confusion of the white glare—and a cloud of black mist as the brigands out on the rocks used their darkness bombs.

We swept past in a blur of leaping hostile beams. Silent battle of lights! Darkness bombs down at the ship struggling to bar our camp searchray. The Benson radiance rays from our passing platforms, curving down to mingle with the confusion. The electronic rays sending up their bolts....

Our platforms dropped some ten dynamitrine bombs in that first passage over the ship. As we sped by, I dimmed the Benson radiance. I peered. We had not hit the ship. Or if we had, the damage was inconclusive. But on the rocks I could see a pile of ore carts scattered—broken wreckage, in which the litter of two or three projectors seemed strewn. And the gruesome

deflated forms of several helmeted figures. Others seemed to be running, scattering—hiding in the rocks and pit-holes. Twenty brigands at least were outside the ship. Some were running over toward the base of our camp ledge. The darkness bombs were spreading like a curtain over the valley floor; but it seemed that some of the figures were dragging their projectors away.

We sailed off toward the opposite crater rim. I remember passing over the broken wreckage of Grantline's little spaceship, the Comet. Miko's bolts momentarily had vanished. We had hit some of his outside projectors; the others were abandoned, or being dragged to safer positions.

After a mile we wheeled and went back. I suddenly realized that only four platforms were in the re-formed line ahead of us. One was missing! I saw it now, wavering down, close over the ship. A bolt leaped up diagonally from a distant angle on the rocks and caught the disabled platform. It fell, whirling, glowing red—disappeared into the blur of darkness like a bit of heated metal plunged into water.

One out of six of our platforms already lost! Three men of our small force gone!

But Grantline led us desperately back. Anita caught his signal to break our line. The five platforms scattered, dipping and wheeling like frightened birds—blurring shapes, shifting unnaturally in flight as the Benson curve lights were altered.

Anita now took our platform in a long swoop downward. Her tense, murmured voice sounded in my ears:

“Hold off; I'll take us low.”

A melee. Passing platform shapes. The darting bolts, crossing like ancient rapiers. Falling blue points of fuse lights as we threw our bombs.

Down in a swoop. Then rising. Away, and then back. This silent warfare of lights! It seemed that around me must be bursting a pandemonium of sound. Yet there was none. Silent, blurred melee, infinitely frightening. A bolt struck us, clung for an instant; but we weathered it. The light was blinding. Through my gloves I could feel the tingle of the over charged shield as it caught and absorbed the hostile bombardment. Under me the platform seemed heated. My little Erentz motors ran with ragged pulse. I got too much oxygen. I was dully smothering....

Then the bolt was gone. I found us soaring upward, horribly tilted. I shifted over.

“Anita! Anita, dear, are you all right?”

“Yes, Gregg. All right.”

The melee went on. The brigand ship and all its vicinity were enveloped in dark mist now—a turgid sable curtain, made more dense by the dissipating heavy fumes of our exploding bombs which settled low over the ship and the rocks nearby. The searchlight from our camp strove futilely to penetrate the cloud.

Our platforms were separated. One went by, high over us. I saw another dart close beneath my shield.

“God, Anita!”

“Too close! I didn’t see it.”

Almost a collision.

“Gregg, haven’t we broken the ship’s dome yet?”

It seemed not. I had dropped nearly all my bombs. This could not go on much longer. Had it been only about five minutes? Only that? Reason told me so, yet it seemed an eternity of horror.

Another swoop. My last bomb. Anita had brought us into position to fling it. But I could not. A bolt stabbed up from the gloom and caught us. We huddled, pulling the shields up and over us.

Blurred darkness again. Too much to the side now. I had to wait while Anita swung us back. Then we seemed too high.

I waited with my last bomb. The other platforms were occasionally dropping them: I had been too hasty, too prodigal.

Had we broken the ship's dome with a direct hit? It seemed not.

The brigands were sending up catapulted light flares. They came from positions on the rocks outside the ship. They mounted in lazy curves and burst over us. The concealing darkness, broken only by the flares of explosions, enveloped the enemy. Our camp searchlight was still struggling with it. But overhead, where the few little platforms were circling and swooping, the flares gave an almost continuous glare. It was dazzling, blinding. Even through the smoked pane which I adjusted to my visor I could not stand it.

But these were thoughts of comparative dimness. In a patch where the Earthlight struck through the darkness of the rocks, I saw another of our fallen platforms! Snap and Venza?

It was not they, but three figures of our men. One was dead. Two had survived the fall. They stood up, staggering. And in that instant, before the turgid black curtain closed over them, I saw two brigands come rushing. Their hand projectors stabbed at close range. Our men crumpled and fell....

We were in position again. I flung my last missile, watched its light as it dropped. On the dome roof two of Miko's men were crouching. My bomb was truly aimed—perhaps one of the few in all our bombardment which landed directly on the dome roof. But the waiting marksmen fired at it with short range heat projectors and exploded it harmlessly while it was still above them.

We swung up and away. I saw, high above us, Grantline's platform, recognizing its red signal light. There seemed a lull. The enemy fire had died down to only a very occasional bolt. In the confusion of my whirling impressions, I wondered if Miko were in distress. Not that! We had not hit his ship; perhaps we had done little damage indeed! It was we who were in distress. Two of our platforms had fallen—two out of six. Or more, of which I did not know.

I saw one rising off to the side of us. Grantline was over us. Well, we were at least three. And then I saw the fourth.

“Grantline is calling us up, Gregg.”

Grantline's signal light was summoning us from the attack. He was a thousand feet or more above us.

I was suddenly shocked with horror. The searchray from our camp suddenly vanished! Anita wheeled us to face the distant ledge. The camp lights showed, and over one of the buildings was a distress light!

Had the crack in our front wall broken, threatening explosion of all the buildings? The wild thought swept me. But it was not that. I could see light stabs from the cliff outside the main building. Miko had dared to send some men to attack our almost deserted camp!

Grantline realized it. His red helmet light semaphored the command to follow him. His platform soared away, heading for the camp, with the other two behind him.

Anita lifted us to follow. But I checked her.

"No! Off to the right, across the valley."

"But Gregg!"

"Do as I say, Anita."

She swung us diagonally away from both the camp and the brigand ship. I prayed that we might not be noticed by the brigands.

"Anita, listen: I've got an idea!"

The attack on the brigand ship was over. It lay enveloped in the darkness of the powder gas cloud and its own darkness bombs. But it was uninjured.

Miko had answered us with our own tactics. He had practically unmanned the ship, no doubt, and had sent his men to our buildings. The fight had shifted. But I was now without ammunition, save for two or three bullet projectors.

Of what use for our platform to rush back? Miko expected that. His attack on the camp was undoubtedly made just for that purpose: to lure us back there.

“Anita, if we can get down on the rocks somewhere near the ship, and creep up unobserved in that blackness....”

I might be able to reach the manual hull lock, rip it open and let the air out. If I could get into its pressure chamber and unseal the inner slide....

“It would wreck the ship, Anita: exhaust all its air. Shall we try it?”

“Whatever you say, Gregg.”

We seemed to be unobserved. We skimmed close to the valley floor, a mile from the ship. We headed slowly toward it, sailing low over the rocks.

Then we landed, left the platform. “Let me go first, Anita.”

I held a bullet projector. With slow, cautious leaps, we advanced. Anita was behind me. I had wanted to leave her with the platform, but she would not stay. And to be with me seemed at least equally safe.

The rocks were deserted. I thought that there was very little chance that any of the enemy would lurk here. We clambered over the pitted, scarred surface; the higher crags, etched with Earthlight, stood like sentinels in the gloom.

The brigand ship with its surrounding darkness was not far from us. No one was out here. We passed the wreckage of broken projectors, and gruesome, shattered human forms.

We prowled closer. The hull of the ship loomed ahead of us. All dark.

We came at last close against the sleek metal hull side, slid along it to where I was sure the manual lock would be located.

Abruptly I realized that Anita was not behind me! Then I saw her at a little distance, struggling in the grip of a giant helmeted figure! The brigand lifted her—turned, and ran.

I did not dare fire. I bounded after them along the hull-side, around under the curve of the pointed bow, down along the other side.

I had mistaken the hull port location. It was here. The running, bounding figure reached it, slid the panel. I was only fifty feet away—not much more than a single leap. I saw Anita being shoved into the pressure lock. The Martian flung himself after her.

I fired at him in desperation, but missed. I came with a rush. And as I reached the port, it slid closed in my face, barring me!