

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

# Schlock!

WEBZINE

[www.schlock.co.uk](http://www.schlock.co.uk)

THIS WEEK'S FEATURED STORY:

## THE HETFORD WITCH HUNT

BY JAMES RHODES

ALSO FEATURING:

## THE MONSTER MANIFESTS

BY C. PRIEST BRUMLEY

## TAKING OVER THE ASYLUM:

A POLITICAL FABLE

BY GAVIN CHAPPELL

Vol. 2 Iss. 3  
27 Nov. 2011



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

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27 November 2011**

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

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

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

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

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**This week's cover illustration is "Witches' Sabbath" by Francisco Goya.  
Cover design by C Priest Brumley**

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#### EDITORIAL

An editor's job must be the best in the world: I sit here and people send me wonderful stories. And what gems we have this week: the conclusion of James Talbot's *A Weekend Alone*, where too many serial killers spoil the broth; the beginnings of James Rhodes new occult sit-com, *The Hettford Witch Hunt*; C. Priest Brumley's tale of curses and demonic transformation, *The Monster Manifests*; and my own vile little carbuncle, *Taking Over the Asylum*.

In *State of Emergency*, Will and Mercer rally the residents of the security village to defend themselves against the police. And *Varney the Vampire* and *Brigands of the Moon* continue.

Meanwhile, we have two announcements to make. One is of the opening of the [Schlock! Merchandise Shop](#), courtesy of CafePress.com, where you can show your support by purchasing baseball tops, hoodies and mouse mats (more in store!) The others is the publication of our *Fantasmagoriana Anthology*, including the complete *Frankenstein*, now available in print (eBook soon coming!)

*Gavin Chappell.*

## A WEEKEND ALONE by James Talbot

### Part Two

Saul looked dispassionately at the body. It lay face down on the bed, looking faintly ridiculous in its stockings and suspenders, and lay as though waiting for a lover. The final act never failed to surprise Saul with its speed and he often found himself considering what his victim's final thoughts were. He wondered if the incongruous duality of their deaths ever occurred to them. During the final seconds of their lives, Saul would be emptying his life giving fluids inside them as simultaneously he ended their lives.

Working quickly now Saul carefully removed the condom and cleaned himself with alcohol soaked wipes, which he took from his holdall along with the rest of what he liked to refer to as his kit. A large thick plastic decorator's sheet, latex gloves, and a roll of thick black Duck tape. He pulled on the latex gloves before laying the plastic sheet down on the floor, rolling the lifeless body carefully into the middle of it, and wrapping it tightly around the body before securing it with the tape. Saul thought the corpse looked like a modern day mummy and he smiled to himself as he slid Marie's plastic wrapped body under the bed. Still wearing the latex gloves Saul walked through into the kitchen and made himself a sandwich.

\*

Saturday morning and Rosemary was awake early, her senses tingling with barely suppressed anticipation. She had slept little, constantly tossing and turning as her mind worked overtime on what was going to happen at some point today. She showered then made her way downstairs to the dining room where she forced herself to eat some cold meat and fruit. 'I'm going to need some energy today,' she told herself.

Back in her room, she once more laid the clothes out on the bed and thought about how best to carry out her plans. 'It can't be here,' she reasoned. 'So it will have to be another hotel.' She had no doubt that she could persuade her eventual target to book them a room.

‘Men can be so simple when they think they’re onto an easy thing,’ she thought, smiling. Packing the clothes and shoes away, she slipped them and the carving knife into her rucksack.

‘Going out for the day?’ the desk clerk enquired as she walked across the hotel entrance hall.

Rosemary looked over her shoulder at the clerk as she continued to walk towards the door. ‘Yes, I thought I might do some shopping and spend the day looking around.’

‘Have a nice day,’ the clerk said as she left the hotel.

Rosemary gave him a thumbs up as she turned away from the hotel entrance.

The old parts of the city were full of history but Rosemary found it difficult to concentrate and take in the intricate details of the buildings and the detailed descriptions of what had happened in the city over the years that were explained in the guide book. Her mind was filled with images of her own naked body writhing and contorting as she gave vent to her innermost desires and exorcised her demons. As she wandered through the narrow crowded streets, Rosemary was seeking something she could not name. It was ethereal and indefinable yet she knew that when it presented itself she would recognise it.

Her weekends away, although sporadic, had over the years followed a familiar pattern. She would wander around whichever foreign city she had chosen until she came upon what would become the subject of her passions and would deliver the release she craved. She had never failed to find a subject and despite the cravings inside that were now becoming almost unbearable she knew that she would find the focus of her desires somewhere. Time was advancing, though, and the shadows were lengthening as the day wore away and evening approached.

‘Rosemary?’

The voice behind her was familiar and she turned to see who it was that had spoken.

‘Hi. It’s me. Saul. We met at the airport, remember?’

Realisation flooded through Rosemary and the blank look on her face changed as she smiled at Saul.

‘Hello, Saul. This is a surprise, fancy bumping into you.’

Rosemary was tingling all over. She didn’t believe in coincidences, this meeting was meant to happen.

Saul had been as surprised as Rosemary. She had looked a little vacant and spaced out when she first turned to face him but that was gone now. 'This couldn't be better,' he thought to himself as he looked at her smiling face.

'Fate does work in mysterious ways, doesn't it,' Rosemary said, laughing. 'Here I am wandering round the old part of town with a guidebook and I bump into someone who could probably show me more sights than I'd ever find from a book.'

Saul was pleasantly surprised by the friendliness in Rosemary's voice and her warm smile. He had thought he would have to force his way into her room later, which could have been dangerous, but now fate had delivered her to him.

'I want to apologise to you, Saul. I was cruel and unkind to you on the plane and I'm sure you didn't deserve to be spoken to in such a way.'

'Don't let it worry you. I completely understand why you reacted the way you did. I'm just about to go to a local bar and get a drink. Would you like to come with me?'

Rosemary couldn't believe her luck, everything was falling into place.

'I'm not really dressed for going out,' she said, looking down at her jeans and trainers. 'But if you let me buy you a drink as a way of apologising, I'd love to.'

\*

Joel and the rest of his friends were in standing close to the bar in a pub in the city centre. Keith had telephoned Joel earlier in the day to let him know that he planned to meet up with Dave and Phil and watch the late afternoon televised football game.

'Why don't you come down for a few pints? We can get a bite to eat after the game and then maybe go somewhere else?'

Joel had eagerly agreed he didn't relish the prospect of being on his own again for another night. The match had finished and now the small group were laughing and joking amongst themselves.

'Come on, Phil. Tell us what happened when you met up with that couple, then.'

Phil looked at Joel with surprise.

'Bloody hell, it doesn't take long, does it? You lot are like a flaming bush telegraph, passing stories around. Who told you?'

'Well, I was sworn to secrecy,' Joel said, laughing, 'but it was Dave.'

Phil looked at Dave. 'You'd be no good as spy would you? Can't wait to tell everyone what you've heard.'

'You're only pissed off because you didn't get to tell him the story first, you dirty old man.' They all laughed as Dave slipped into an impression of Harold Steptoe as he spoke.

'Yeah, you're right,' Phil said, laughing.

Phil launched into a graphic telling of his encounter with the couple he contacted on the internet. The tale was full of swearing as well as intimate descriptions of the couple involved and what had happened prior to Phil leaving the house.

'So what were their names?' Joel asked as innocently as he could.

'He said his name was Adam and hers was Ruth but there's no guarantee that they were their real names is there? Why, do you know them?' They all laughed at Phil's suggestion that Joel might know the couple.

'No, I just wondered, that's all,' Joel replied, laughing along with them. Inside he was congratulating himself for cancelling the meeting with Adam and his wife. If he had gone ahead with the meeting and a similar thing had happened as Phil had described he didn't know what he would have done.

'So where's Rose gone this time?' asked Dave, intruding into Joel's thoughts.

'Somewhere in Europe. I'm not exactly sure where.' Joel looked a bit sheepish as he spoke.

'What do you mean, you don't know where?' demanded Phil. 'Is she some kind of MI5 agent or something that she can't tell you where she's gone?'

'It's not like that.'

Joel had faced these kinds of questions before but he still found them tedious and if he was honest a little unsettling. His interrogators usually arrived at the conclusion, no matter how much he tried to persuade them otherwise, that Rosemary had gone away for a bit of fun with someone else. Joel knew it wasn't true but he had just about given up telling people.

'She just has to get away on her own every now and then to clear her head. She'll be back tomorrow evening, so it's only two nights'

'Has she gone on her own?' asked Phil continuing his line of questioning.

'Yes, she's gone on her own.' Joel was getting defensive now and the others could sense his discomfort.

‘How do you know she’s not meeting someone, wherever she’s gone?’

‘Look, I trust her! She’s only gone away for a couple of days to have some time on her own so just leave it now, OK!’

‘Alright, Joel, keep your hair on,’ Keith said, trying to defuse the situation. He knew how much Joel thought of Rosemary and if he wanted to let her off the leash now and again, that was up to him.

‘We’re only asking cos’ we don’t want to see you getting shit on that’s all.’

‘No one’s shitting on me! She’s only gone away for a couple of fucking days!’

Joel downed what was left of his pint and put the glass down on the bar.

‘Right, I’ve had enough. I’ll speak to you guys in the week.’ Joel turned away and walked across the bar and out onto the pavement where he disappeared into the bustle of late night shoppers and early evening revellers.

‘What’s up with him?’ asked Phil.

‘You fucking upset him, that’s what,’ said Keith. ‘Why’d you have to put him on the spot like that about Rose? You know as well as the rest of us that every now and again she takes herself off for a weekend.’

‘Do you think someone else is fucking her behind Joel’s back?’ Dave asked, a questioning look on his face.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake! I’m going to get a round in so will you lot just forget about Joel and Rose!’ Keith walked towards the end of the bar where the barmaid was leaning against the counter and watching the TV.

\*

Saul and Rose sat at the table in the bar, sharing a small carafe of wine. Usually Saul would not drink but Rosemary had insisted and now he felt slightly light headed.

‘So do you live around here?’ Rosemary asked.

Saul still had the keys to Marie’s apartment in his pocket and as he considered his response, he could feel the weight of them.

‘About five minutes from here,’ he said, committing himself to his course of action.

Rosemary ran the tip of her finger around the rim of her glass.



‘Do you live alone?’ she asked as innocently as she could.

‘I’m just getting over a relationship,’ Saul said, smiling. ‘My ex said she felt as though I was not giving her enough space so she ended our association.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I hope it wasn’t too upsetting for you, breaking up with her.’

‘On the contrary, it was quite liberating.’ Saul was smiling broadly. ‘She’s flirting,’ he told himself.

Inside, Rosemary was in turmoil. She needed to get Saul on his own.

Saul looked straight at Rosemary ‘Do you want to come back to my apartment?’ he asked.

‘I’d love to.’ Rosemary finished her wine and stood up. ‘Let’s go,’ she said putting her arms through the straps of her rucksack.

\*

Once outside the bar and in the fresh air, Joel began to feel better. He hated it whenever the questions about Rose started. It always ended up the same way. He got angry and whoever was questioning him jumped to the conclusion that Rose was having a fling and he was some kind of cuckold who couldn’t stand up for himself. If he was honest, he couldn’t completely understand why Rose had to get away now and again, but he knew that if she didn’t things would be a lot worse between them. ‘There is a plus side though,’ he thought smiling to himself. Whenever Rose returned home from one of her weekends away, her desire for sex seemed to go into overdrive and he would be even harder pressed keeping up with her demands.

‘Every cloud has a silver lining,’ Joel thought to himself as he walked back to the flat.

\*

Saul slipped the key into the lock and opened the door before allowing Rosemary to walk into the apartment first.

‘This is nice,’ she said looking around the small lounge. The room had a curiously feminine touch to it and Rose wondered if Saul was actually gay.

‘Thank you,’ Saul replied. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘A cup of tea would be lovely.’

Saul disappeared into the kitchen and Rosemary walked slowly around the lounge, touching the delicately patterned curtains and the floral cushions on the small settee. On a side table was a photograph of a pretty woman in shorts and a bikini top. 'Obviously a holiday snap,' she thought. 'Curious it's still on display if they've split up, though.'

'Do you take sugar?' Saul asked as he returned with two cups of tea.

'No thanks,' Rosemary said, taking one of the cups from Saul and placing it on the table in front of the photograph. Turning back towards Saul, she slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him close so she could kiss him.

Saul hadn't expected this at all. Awkwardly he tried to put his arms around Rosemary and the rucksack she was still wearing. The sudden kiss left him wondering if things were beginning to move out of his control. He liked to know what was happening and for things to progress the way he wanted them to. He felt discomfited and restricted by Rosemary as though she was in control and he was merely a willing participant.

'Do you want to fuck me?'

The softly spoken question upset Saul's equilibrium completely. Things weren't supposed to happen like this. He was the one that dictated events.

'Of course,' he found himself replying. It was as though he accepted that he had lost control not only of the situation but also of his judgement. Rosemary was grinding her groin against him and he knew she must be able to feel his reaction as he felt himself harden in response to her thrusts.

Rosemary ran her tongue across his cheek then gently nibbled the lobe of his ear, before whispering, 'Where's the bedroom?'

As though in a dream Saul guided Rosemary from the lounge and into the bedroom. The thought that Marie lay silent beneath the bed brought a brief smile to Saul's face before Rosemary kissed him again then pushed him backwards, forcing him to sit on the edge of the bed.

Rosemary's body was on fire and she could feel her heart thudding in her chest as her excitement increased. Reaching down, she unbuttoned Saul's shirt before easing it over his shoulders and letting it fall on the bed. Slipping the rucksack from her shoulders, she placed it on the bed behind Saul then pulled her T shirt over her head.

Once again, Saul felt that the situation was beyond his control as Rosemary leant forwards, brushing his face with her breasts as she unfastened his trousers then pulled them and his shorts roughly down over his thighs. The sudden jerk caused him to fall backwards on the bed. Dropping her hand to his groin, Rosemary stroked his erection and he moaned with pleasure at her touch.

‘Don’t move,’ Rosemary said, releasing her hold on him. She quickly removed her bra and the rest of her clothes and scooped her T shirt from the floor before carefully placing the bundle on a small chair on the other side of the room.

Stepping onto the bed, Rosemary stood over Saul and ran her hands across her breasts and then down her body to her groin. Slipping her left hand between her legs, she stroked the wetness there and groaned with pleasure.

Saul’s eyes were fixed on Rosemary’s hand as she rubbed her crotch. He knew he should stop this now and get his bag from the other room but he continued to stare as she moved her hand faster.

Dropping to her knees astride Saul’s belly, Rosemary could feel his erection trapped against her hand and she knew she was fast approaching the almost unbearable release she craved. With her free hand, she reached across the bed and groped in her rucksack.

Saul had a sudden moment of clarity as he realised what was happening. ‘So this is what it’s like,’ he thought.

Rosemary’s fingers closed around the handle of the carving knife. Pulling the knife free from the rucksack, she viciously slashed it across Saul’s throat. The razor sharp blade bit deeply into the flesh cutting easily through the skin and severing the carotid artery. Bright red arterial blood sprayed across them both. Saul’s eyes widened as he looked down in horror and saw his life blood splashed across his chest. Rosemary slashed the knife across Saul again and the blade sliced through his cheek, almost cutting his tongue in half before continuing its path through his other cheek. The lower half of Saul’s face dropped downwards as the supporting skin of his cheeks parted. He tried to scream but could only manage a guttural gurgling cry as his partially severed tongue almost fell from his gaping mouth and huge amounts of blood ran into his throat. Saul’s last sight as his eyes clouded and he slipped into death was Rosemary as she moaned and writhed in the throes of ecstasy.

The coppery smell of blood was thick in the room. Rosemary opened her eyes but could see nothing but blackness. Slowly her vision returned as though the sun was gradually rising above the horizon and illuminating the landscape. Saul was beneath her and as she lay sprawled across him, she could feel his still warm body between her legs. Her face was against Saul’s chest and the thick viscous blood was beginning to congeal. As she lifted her head, there was a sound as if something was being pulled free of wet sand, as if it had flowed around someone’s feet as the sea ebbed and flowed across the beach.

Rosemary was exhausted and as she got to her feet, she swayed slightly as though she were about to topple over. She looked down at the bloody knife still in her hand then shook her head trying to shake off the lethargy that threatened to overwhelm her and forced herself to try and think coherently. Had she touched anything in the apartment other than Saul, the fabrics in the lounge and the bedclothes? From somewhere in the depths of her mind an image surfaced of her taking the teacup from Saul. Making her

way carefully around the blood spatters on the floor Rosemary walked naked from the bedroom and into the bathroom. Using a hand towel to avoid touching the controls, she switched on the shower and without waiting for the water to heat up stepped into the shower cubicle. The shock of the ice cold water on her body instantly revived her, bringing her out in goose bumps and causing her nipples to harden. Rosemary stood under the flowing water until all traces of blood were washed from her body and the knife and her head had cleared.

As she dried her wet body, a calm objectivity descended on Rose. She felt at peace and curiously satisfied as though she had completed a difficult task. Calmly she walked back into the lounge and picked up the still full cup of tea before taking it into the kitchen and disposing of its contents down the sink. Carefully she washed the cup before drying it with the towel she had used in the bathroom and replacing it on the cup hanger.

Walking back into the bedroom, she retrieved her clothes from the chair and her rucksack from the bed. Saul lay with the gaping wounds in his neck and face a silent witness to the quality of the blade. The rucksack had escaped the spray of blood from Saul's neck and remained unblemished.

In the lounge Rosemary dressed in the new clothes she had had bought yesterday then packed her other clothes and her trainers in the rucksack along with the damp towel and the carving knife. Carefully and methodically, she walked around the flat retracing her steps since she had arrived. Satisfied that she had left nothing identifiable behind and using a tissue to avoid leaving any marks on the door handle, she left the apartment.

Outside in the cool night air Rosemary walked along the pavement and felt as though her whole body was as light as air and could at any moment lift from the ground and be carried away on the slightest breeze. Her long stocking clad legs, stiletto heels, and miniskirt drew admiring looks from a small group of young men who turned the corner on the opposite side of the street. Rosemary carefully kept her face turned slightly away from them and continued her walk into town. The streets were still busy with late night shoppers and she soon became invisible amongst them. Finding a large department store Rosemary made her way to the customer toilets on the second floor and once in the safety of the cubicle changed back into her jeans, T shirt, and trainers. Nobody seemed to notice the transformation from the high heeled miniskirted young woman who had entered the toilets to the jeans and trainer wearing one that emerged.

'Did you have a nice day today?' enquired the desk clerk politely as Rosemary walked in to the foyer

Rosemary smiled at him and he could almost sense the feeling of joy and happiness that seemed to flow from her as she answered.

'I've had a wonderful day and I feel fantastic. I'm really hungry though so I think I'll drop my bag in my room and go back to the lovely Italian restaurant you recommended last night for a meal and a glass of wine.'

As Rosemary continued past the desk and made her way upstairs to her room, the clerk smiled and put a tick next to the restaurant name in his notebook. 'That's ten people I've sent there this week. He owes me a meal now.'

\*

When Rosemary woke up on Sunday morning, she was filled with a feeling of contentment and satisfaction. The previous evening she had spent a pleasant couple of hours at the restaurant and once again, the food had been delicious. She stretched languorously and ran her hands over her breasts and down to her vulva. 'I can't wait to get home and be with Joel,' she thought as she allowed her fingers gently to stimulate herself.

An hour later and after a hearty breakfast, Rosemary paid her hotel bill and said goodbye to the desk clerk. 'I wonder if he ever takes any time off?' she thought as she walked out of the hotel. On her back she had her rucksack and in her hand a carrier bag containing all the new clothes and the shoes she had bought. On the way to the train station Rosemary stopped at a large green clothes bank and stuffed the bag of clothes and shoes inside.

'Someone will be pleased with them,' she thought walking away.

As she passed a drain cover Rosemary knelt down to tie her shoelace and allowed the cleaned and cling film-wrapped carving knife to slip from her sleeve and slide into the drain. There was a soft plop as the knife disappeared beneath the grimy, oil stained water.

Even though it was Sunday, the station was busy with shoppers laden down with bags and men in business suits pulling wheeled cases along behind themselves. There were also people looking blankly at tourist maps as they tried to decide which way they needed to go when they left the station. Rosemary found herself a relatively quiet seated area and sat down to ring Joel. The telephone seemed to ring for a long time before it was answered.

'Hi Joel,' said Rosemary excitedly, without waiting to hear a hello.

'You're cheerful, aren't you,' Joel replied laughing. 'It's good to hear your voice though,' he quickly added.

'Well, I'll be back over there in a couple of hours and we can have some fun getting to know each other again, can't we?'

'I've missed you, Rose.'

'I've missed you too, Joel, but it's only been a couple of days, you know? I've got us a little present as well, which I think you'll like.'

‘Oh yeah. What’s that then?’

‘Do you remember when you said you wanted to try a bit of bondage?’

‘Yes, but you didn’t seem too keen, did you?’ Joel sounded embarrassed that she’d even remembered the conversation and even more embarrassed that Rosemary was talking about it now.

‘Well, I’ve got something that you might enjoy, then.’ Rosemary giggled which embarrassed Joel even more. ‘But you’ll have to wait until I get back before I tell you what it is.’

Joel decided he might as well be enthusiastic and enjoy whatever surprise Rose had planned.

‘OK,’ he said, laughing. ‘I’ll wait to see whatever it is when you get here. What time does your plane land?’

Rosemary told Joel what time she would be landing and he promised to be there to meet her. The train ride back to the airport and the flight home were uneventful. Nobody spoke to Rosemary and she was pleased about that as it allowed her to explore her memories of the previous night and relive the excitement they brought.

\*

Rosemary ran to Joel as soon as she saw him and threw her arms around his neck, smothering him in kisses. The flowers Joel had in his hand were almost forgotten as he returned her passionate embrace.

‘These are for you,’ he said presenting Rosemary with the bouquet of white lilies.

‘They’re lovely, Joel.’

Rosemary held him close and kissed him again. She could feel his hardness press against her, causing her own desire to increase.

‘Let’s go home and I’ll give you your present,’ she said smiling.

Rosemary was at peace as they walked from the airport arrivals hall, hand in hand. Yet deep inside her innermost being a dark fire still faintly burned.

\*

A week and half after Rosemary arrived home, and following complaints about the smell, the police forced their way into Marie’s apartment. The first officer who walked into the bedroom unavoidably contaminated the crime scene when he vomited profusely at the

sight of Saul's body. At first, the authorities thought they were dealing with a single brutal murder until they found Marie's plastic wrapped corpse beneath the bed. Now they had a double murder to deal with and no obvious suspects. The official line, following reports of a woman in a miniskirt and high heels seen in the vicinity of the apartment, was that a *ménage à trois* had gone wrong. The police were asking the users of internet based adult dating sites as well as the escort and personal services industry for information.

## THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by J Rhodes

### Episode One: Intelligence

1.

Reginald took a swig from his hipflask. Bloody hell, he thought, where did all that go? He put the flask back into his tweed jacket pocket and lowered the peak of his flat cap. He leant over to pick up his rifle; it took him three attempts.

“Bloody thing,” he muttered.

Down towards the bottom of the field, just in front of the hedgerow, stood the most docile and succulent pair of pheasants Reg had seen all year. He raised his rifle so that they were in his sights and stumbled gracelessly toward them.

As he crept closer, the fatter of the two pheasants seemed to notice his approach; it took a step backwards, towards the cover of the hedgerow. Reginald raised the rifle to his shoulder, squinted in the sunlight and set the pheasant in his sites. He took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

2.

“Listen, you turn the knob left to loosen it and right to tighten it, it's not that hard.”

Dan's round face was turning increasingly red. It was roughly the colour of a fire engine before the stress, now it was a glowing coal of anxiety.

“The problem is not whether it's tight or loose, the problem is that the holes don't match.”

“The holes aren't supposed to match; they're supposed to be threaded by the brace pin.”

Milton was used to Dan barking at him. He took one of his 'stay calm' breaths and attempted to explain the problem rationally. It did not work.

“The brace pin doesn’t thread, it inserts. The butterfly screw threads.”

“Well, if you’re such an expert, how come it isn’t working?”

Dan was now more of a burgundy than a red.

“It’s not not working it’s just taking a minute to put it all together. Patience.” Milton tried to sound soothing.

“Look, it’s my camera; maybe I might know how to use it.”

Gary spoke up with the confidence of a man who knew what he was doing and the tameness of a man who expected punishment for knowing what he was doing.

“Go on then.” Dan waved to the camera. “Christ! Just trying to get started.”

Milton and Dan stood and watched Gary fiddling with the tripod stand. They both felt that two minutes was about enough time to give him before they began to hassle him about it. It took him less than thirty seconds. Gary turned around quickly to preempt any, “what’s taking so long?” comments.

“Now, which way do you want it pointing?”

Gary smiled at the senior group members and they tried their best not to look too impressed. Milton surveyed the field, trying to look as if he cared about landscape.

“We’ll want the woods in the background.”

“I don’t want the shot too cluttered,” said Dan. “Not too much woods.”

Gary fiddled with the camera, ever so slightly.

“Here, will this do?”

Gary gently removed his hands from the camera as took a step backwards. The air was shattered by a colossal boom and less than a second later the camera exploded into shards of plastic shrapnel. The tripod remained firmly in place.

“Now will you look at that,” complained Dan.

“It’s alright, I’m OK.”

“I mean, are we such total cock-ups that we can’t even put up a camera without it exploding?”



Dan's impending rant was cut short by the sound of a second large boom. Gary dropped immediately to the ground and his bottom rose a little higher than was necessary. He began to duck crawl towards the shelter of the hedgerows. Without thinking, Gary scrambled upwards and sprinted towards his car. He got there in plenty of time to see Milton and Dan give up on running and after resting their hands on their knees for a few seconds, intermittently jog to join him.

"Good run, lads," wheezed Dan.

"What next, then?" panted Milton.

Dan straightened himself up. He was an impressively tall and round man and he was sweating quite profusely.

"Gary, don't you have another camera?"

"Shouldn't we call the police or something?" Gary was shaking quite vigorously. Talking was not easy.

"You know, the digital one," Dan continued.

"I didn't bring it."

Dan's redness had faded to a bright pink; perhaps the run had done him some good.

"No problem, you nip home and get it and Milton and I will try and see if we can't figure out what happened. We need to rescue your tripod, too."

"Shouldn't we call it a day? I mean, someone's just shot at us."

"You give in to intimidation once and you're marked as someone who gives in to intimidation. Perhaps it was the Witch's lot; perhaps it was someone else trying to stop the truth from getting out. One thing I am certain of is that we are making this report today. Don't you worry about a thing, Gary. You just go home and get us that camera."

"You know what?" said Gary. "You're right; you should stay here - Milton, you coming?"

Milton shook his head. Despite being a good deal more slender than Dan, he was apparently in much worse physical condition. He waved his thumb towards Dan to suggest that he was going to stay with him.

"You're a good lad, Gary, go home and save the day for us."

Dan clapped Gary heavily on the back. Gary got into his car and drove away.

Milton finally got his breath back and flicked his long graying hair from his eyes.

“I should have asked him to pick up some scotch eggs,” he lamented...

3.

Gary carefully opened the front door. He peered around the crack and when he was sure that the hallway was clear, he stepped tenderly inside. Alison stepped out of the shadows like Satan, her arms tightly folded and her lips clenched. At twenty-four, she was a year older than Gary. She was slim, pretty, dark haired and spoke with an accent that most people assumed was from Australia until she corrected them.

Gary kept his cool.

“Oh, hi honey,” he said as casually as he could manage.

“Hmm.”

“Had a nice day?”

“Not too bad, you know.” Alison’s New Zealand accent lilted all over her words. “Painted my nails, read a bit of my book.”

“The Jane Austen one?”

“No, I’m done with her now. I’m on to the Brontës - Jane Eyre.”

“It’s an unusual system - reading all of the British classics in order of how much I’ve slagged them off.”

“It makes them more interesting to me. Anyway, I thought Austen was quite funny.”

“She’s tittersome at best. Why don’t you read Winterson? She’s great.”

Gary began to wipe the sweat from his brow internally.

“It would be going against the system,” said Alison. “By the way, the garage phoned.”

“Oh.”

“They wanted to know if you feel any better.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I said to Karen, it was Karen that phoned, that you were so poorly that you’d virtually vanished in to thin air. So go on then?”

Gary opened his mouth; it took a few seconds for the sound to reach it.

“What?”

“Where have you been?”

“Go easy on me, I was nearly shot.”

“I’ll go easy on you when you tell me where you’ve been.”

Gary winced

“Milton and Dan are doing a report.”

“A report? Who for?”

Gary really winced.

“MI5.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“They think they can pass the witch thing off as a terror threat.”

Alison looked cross. Gary glanced around for an exit.

“Honest to God, Gary, have you any idea what a pile of bullshit that sounds like?”

“Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but with the way things are I thought you’d be mad about me missing work.”

“Well, it’s better than you cheating on me, I suppose.”

“Is that what you thought?”

“Yeah well, I wonder why?”

Gary made the most sincere looking face he could manage to make.

“I am sorry, you know.”

“Great! Well now you’re home you can make me lunch. I’ve got to be at the shop by one.”

“Any requests?”

“Bacon - preferably surrounded by lettuce, tomato, bread and mayonnaise.”

“Does it matter what order they’re in?”

“As long as they’re all there I’ll be happy.”

4.

As Gary pulled up to the roadside, he was unsurprised to find Milton and Dan sat in exactly the same spot they had stood in when he left. As he approached, they both managed to make it to their feet. He climbed out of his car to greet them.

“Been busy, have you?” asked Dan.

“Sorry, got caught up with Alison.”

“Yeah, well next time keep it in your pants. Bloody Hell, it’ll be dark by the time we finish this thing.”

“I wasn’t shagging her,” Gary said in gloomy defensiveness.

“It’s alright, we know how it is,” said Milton. “Still clearing the air?”

“I wish.”

Gary looked down at the ground as he tried to think of a way to explain his situation to two single middle-aged men. He settled on:

“I’m working up to it.”

“Well, don’t do the crime they say,” Milton soothed. “Not getting sick of her are you?”

“She’s my best friend.”

Milton had a look of pensive sympathy as he spoke:

“Women are funny like that, you can be closer to them than anyone and they can be your best friend. But, they can never be your best mate because they’re such a clutch of complete fucking snakes.”

Gary shrugged.

“Shall we get on with it?” he suggested.

“A fine idea,” Dan enthused, “the best thing anyone has said since I last spoke.”

5.

Discount News Newsagents was kept immaculately. Rows of bread and crisps were arranged with an organized authority that bordered on hysterical. Alison stood behind the counter and she observed that the brothers Paul and Saul were passing through the door. Paul and Saul were Hettford's answer to the BNP. That said, neither of them were supporters of the BNP or UKIP because they felt that neither of those parties took a strong enough line on people from New Zealand. Saul, who was the senior of the two by a year and half, was nineteen years of age. He boasted a shaved head and had a tattoo of a swallow on his hand to suggest that he had been in prison, when in actual fact he was merely an unemployed middle class boy that was undergoing somewhat of an identity crisis. Saul was not very bright and although he was a charmless dullard, his younger brother Paul could see no flaws in his personality whatsoever. Paul almost universally wore a woolly hat with the word "Gangsta" sown into the brim. His granny had knitted it for him.

Saul was browsing through the top shelf pornography. Alison marveled that the shop still sold it given that you could get better stuff pro gratis online. Saul chose a copy entitled Bouncy Wives and brought it to the counter.

"Just this," said Saul.

"That will be six pounds and seventy pence please."

"Does it come with a DVD?"

Alison held up the magazine and scrutinized the cover.

"Yes, it says free DVD, right there under the caption that reads – these mothers are ready to fuck."

She fixed her eyes on the boy; he slammed his money defiantly on the counter and then counted out the pennies. Then he picked up his magazine with all the contempt he could muster and walked out without looking back. Once he had walked away, Paul timidly approached the counter holding a packet of super sour electroshocks.

"Is Tajel in today?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, if you see her, tell her I said hi."

He took a deep breath and tried to sound assertive, he slammed his hand on the counter.

"OK?"

“If I see her I’ll tell her you said hi.”

“Good,” said Paul.

He pulled off his hat to reveal a head as shaved as his brother’s, and then shuffled moodily out of the shop. Alison put the super sour electroshocks he had forgotten about back on the shelf.

6.

“Alright, you just start filming and I’ll splice in the informational material during editing.”

Dan stood holding an unplugged microphone.

“No problems,” agreed Gary.

“Introduction, first and final take.”

Dan began:

“In the seventeenth century, in the small village of Hettford, there lived two witches, Geraldine and Ruth Bellows. So famous was the reputation of these witches that Samuel Taylor Coleridge himself later chose to use one of them as the basis for a famous poem... For heaven’s sake Gary what’s the matter?”

“I was just looking around to check no-one was going to shoot at us - you’re still in frame keep going.”

“It was just a farmer,” said Dan dismissively.

“How do you know?”

“We found the gun outside his house, but he wasn’t in or wasn’t answering. Look, can we just get on with this?”

“Come to think of it, how do we know he wasn’t dead?” Milton interrupted. “Shot with his own gun...”

“Who would want to shoot a farmer?”

Dan was going red again, the tone of his voice was beginning to elevate in line with his blood pressure.

“A rival farmer,” suggested Gary, “or a fox.”

“I don’t know, whoever wanted to steal his gun,” Milton looked earnest.

“They’d just take it,” bellowed Dan, “there’d be no need to shoot him.”

“Maybe they were professionals - covert ops trying to stop us getting the truth out there.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Milton; the only one who would want to stop us making this film is the Witch.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“May I continue? Am I still in frame?”

Gary nodded.

“Good to go.”

Dan raised his superfluous microphone a second time:

“Witchcraft - The Hidden Secret, take two. Somewhere in the twelve acres of forest that lie behind us, Ruth Bellows still dwells. She is biding her time to avenge herself upon the world that killed her sister.”

“Oh, mate!” Gary said as gently as possible.

“What is it now?”

“You can’t say that bit about killed her sister.”

“But that’s exactly what happened!”

“Yeah but it sounds like *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Uh-huh, we should be trying to sound more serious,” Milton agreed.

Dan opened his mouth as if he were about to explode but then he settled himself and continued.

“Take three: Biding her time to avenge herself upon the world that she believes has wronged her. Now in these times of high security and global terrorism I feel it is important that every threat to our nation be addressed.”

Gary raised his hand like a nervous pupil, waving to get Dan’s attention.

“What now?”

“The batteries are dead.”

“Then you’ll just have to go and pick some up.”

“From where exactly?”

“Your garage’ll have them.”

“Yes, they will, but as I’ve called in sick with the flu to do this, I don’t think it’s the best idea.”

“What about Discount News?”

“It’s right opposite the garage.”

Milton yawned.

“It can’t be helped then,” sighed Milton.

“Look, what is your problem today?” Dan barked, his dark beard jutting out like a badger’s tail.

“I hate doing these reports, it’s pointless: the best result we can hope for is to be totally ignored. I was nearly arrested that time we sent one to the Queen.”

“Well, we can’t use my name, can we?”

“That’s another thing; I think we’d be taken more seriously if we did use your name instead of just crediting you as Narrator Number One. Gary is missing work and I have had to shut the shop for this. Either it gets done properly or we go home.”

“I suppose you want to be the narrator.”

Dan folded his arms, and dropped his microphone dramatically.

“No, I want Gary to be the narrator; he’s the one with a degree, after all. People would listen to him.”

“Sure, sure.”

“You have to admit that Gary Sparrow BA sounds a hell of a lot better than Narrator Number One.”

The two of them stared at Gary as if they were waiting for confirmation.

“I’m staying well out of this one,” he said.



“So Milton, we should just quit? Just give up? Chalk it off on the board - another win for Ruthy?”

Dan stood with his arms folded, waiting for an answer. He looked from Gary to Milton and back to Gary again. By the time his eyes met Milton’s for the second time, Gary had already been defeated by the sheer awkwardness of the moment.

“Listen, I might have some batteries at home, I’ll go and check. I’ll see you soon if I have enough petrol.”

Gary walked back to his car with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders were slumped and his head tilted forwards. After he drove away, Milton said:

“You want to be a bit more appreciative of him.”

“No one’s forcing him to be here.”

“Come on, whilst he’s gone we’re going to find that farmer and see if we can get his good camera fixed. It’s the least we can do.”

7.

Gary arrived at his front door. He could smell something familiar, but he could not quite place what it was. He placed the key in the lock and opened the door.

“Ah,” he thought, “that’s what the smell is.”

A thick black smoke curled out of his hallway and into the street. Gary glanced down his hallway. He had always been told that where there was smoke there was fire. However, he was not one to accept conventional wisdom without challenge and he opted to find out for himself.

8.

Milton knocked on the door of the farmhouse and waited.

“Here, let me try.”

Dan knocked on the door of the farmhouse and waited.

“Maybe he’s just out.”

“Or maybe he’s dead. No, he is in - there is smoke coming from the chimney. He’s either asleep, or hoping we’ll just piss off.”

“I don’t see that happening, look, I’ve an idea.”

Dan walked to a stationary tractor parked nearby; he sat down in it and pretended he could drive.

“Let’s open this bitch up - I’d make a great farmer.”

“You couldn’t do the mornings.”

“I could if I had to.”

“You couldn’t do this morning. I can’t believe you made Gary pick us up at eight and you didn’t wake up until ten.”

“I’d adjust to it if I did it every day. I used to wake up early all the time.”

“Yes, I remember,” groan Milton.

“Best paper boy in the village I was. But that’s the trouble, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“I started work too young. By the time I was twelve I was already sick of it.”

“Is that why you left school too?”

“I was sick of that by five. What was the point in me staying? You know what O Levels I got? F, O, F and F.”

“F OFF.”

“You have to admit it does sound like a hint.”

Milton laughed and then looked at Dan’s serious face.

“Well, no doubt that’s how you took it. Honestly though, you’d think they’d’ve been a little more compassionate considering what had just happened to you.”

“Expect no compassion from anyone.”

“One of your dad’s maxims?”

“Aye.”

Milton looked around. Nothing much seemed to be happening

“This isn’t working - time for plan B.”

10.

The dull repetitive beeping of the smoke alarm dulled Gary’s mind as he tried to blink away the tears that the smoke was causing in his eyes. There was no disputing the fact that the smoke was coming from the kitchen. It was pushing out of the kitchen door like an indoor firework snake.

Gary made it into the kitchen and then became overwhelmed by it. He dropped to the floor and managed to find a small amount of breathable air. Rubbing his eyes clear, he stood up tall and located the source of the smoke.

He had left the frying pan that he cooked the bacon in on the hob. The heat had burned off the excessive amount of oil he had used to cook it, and then it had burned off all of the bacon grease. Finally it had burned through the Teflon coating. Gary tried to pick it up and put it in the sink but the heat burned his hand?

He wrapped a tea towel around his burned hand and moved it quickly to the sink. The cold water boiled on contact as he turned on the tap.

As the boil slowed to a simmer, he ran to the back door and fell out into the small backyard.

11.

Dan was dancing, with his arms out forward. He was doing his best impression of a rapper. He made a very poor effort at beat boxing some drums. Milton’s voice came in over the beat:

“Ahh yeah, this ud be a propa good place to av a rave, man. What d’ya t’ink, Swampo?”

“Bangin’, Dangle, bring in some phat speakers, put on some swarfega, some buckaroo, some straight up subuteo ma fa.”

Milton and Dan quite sincerely believed that people under thirty talked like that. Dan added some record scratching into his beat box repertoire.

“Inada area,” Milton tried to stay in time with Dan as he spoke, “boogadaboogadaboodagada yo.”

All of a sudden, Milton reverted to his normal voice.

“See, I told you it would work.”

A very angry and inebriated farmer was approaching them; he was pointing a rifle at

them.

“What the bloody hell are you doing on my tractor?”

Dan was not about to be intimidated by a mere rifle, he puffed out his chest as if increasing the size of the target would somehow discourage Reginald the farmer from shooting at him.

“Do you have a license for that firearm, sir?”

“What? Of course I have a license. What the bloody hell are you doing on my land?”

“Today at around about eleven o’clock, did you unload two rounds of ammunition from that firearm?”

The farmer pointed the rifle directly into Dan’s face.

“I’m about to unload two rounds of ammunition right now if you don’t answer my damn question.”

“OK,” said Dan, “At eleven o’clock this morning, my friends and I were filming a small documentary in the public field adjacent to your own. Our camera was struck by a bullet from a rifle just like that one you are holding, it is a 2-2, isn’t it, sir? And it is only providence and quick thinking that prevented any personal injuries.”

The farmer did not blink.

“I don’t know anything about it, now you get the hell off my fields right now.”

“Or you’ll do what exactly, call the police? I tell you what; I’ve got my wireless phone right here. Let us call them together shall we. I can’t remember which is worse these days - is it trespassing or reckless endangerment and misuse of a firearm?”

The thought managed to find its way past the alcohol and into the farmer’s consciousness. His face dropped and he let the rifle fall so that it pointed downwards

“What do you want?”

“A hundred quid and we forget about the shooting.”

“I don’t think so.”

Dan was on a roll:

“Fair enough sir, then, how about two hundred and we forget about the rave?”

“Sixty and I don’t shoot you and feed you to my pigs.”

Dan glanced at Milton. Milton gave his sternest glare at the farmer:

“Alright, sixty, but I want a chicken too. One that lays eggs.”

The farmer shook his head as if they were idiots.

“You’ll be wanting a hen then?” he asked.

12.

The smell of air freshener was becoming as overwhelming as the smoke had been. Gary wandered around the house closing all of the windows. He was quite sure that Alison would not be able to detect his mistake. That was, unless she wanted to cook something in the frying pan, at which point it would become painfully apparent.

With the house in order, Gary began the search for batteries. It was just as well, he thought, that he had come back for them or who knows what might have happened. He kept a drawer in the lounge for miscellaneous items and he dug through it hoping he might find a few loose batteries in there. He was out of luck however, so he tried the drawer upstairs next to his desktop computer.

Taking a risk that he would get home before Alison, he went back downstairs to the lounge and removed the batteries from the TV remote.

13.

“Should I even ask?”

Gary asked Milton, referring to the chicken that he was holding in a small wooden crate.

“Are you alright?” Milton replied.

“Yes, why?”

“Well, you’ve been ages and your eyes are blood red.”

Dan slapped Gary on the shoulder, in what he believed was a paternal manner:

“Look, if Alison can’t forgive you maybe you should just let her go.”

“No it’s not that. I left a frying pan on; when I got home, my house was filled with smoke. It stinks now.”

“Man, you are having a bad day,” Milton observed.

“Tell me about it.”

“Maybe this will cheer you up.”

Milton took some folded twenty-pound notes out of his pocket and gave them to Gary.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a present from our friend Annie Oakley,” Dan told him.

“The farmer? Shit, this is more than it was worth.”

“Well we stuck in a few quid for petrol too. Since you took the day off for us and all.”

Milton shook his head, but he did not correct Dan.

“You didn’t have to but thanks, I do need it.”

“We know,” said Dan, “did you get the batteries?”

“I got some batteries, hopefully they’ll be alright.”

“Good job, good job. If you can just set us up then you can take a rest for until we’re done.”

Gary replaced the batteries on his old digital camera, attached it to the tripod and briefly explained to Milton how it worked. Dan stood in front of it, this time without his microphone. He called the take and attempted his introduction again:

“In Sixteen Seventy Four the villagers of Hettford, finally overcome by the constant fear of Geraldine and Ruth Bellows who would seduce their daughters and spook their cows, the villagers captured the two sisters and, tying them to chairs, prepared them for a trial by water.”

Having got that far into the take, Dan looked mildly surprised but he carried on unabated and his growing grandeur.

“The activities of Ruth Bellows first came to my attention in the year Nineteen Eighty Two [...]”

Milton waved at Gary. When Gary looked up, Milton whispered at him:

“Gary?”

“Yes.”

“What does the memory card do?”

Gary tiptoed up to Milton; Dan was so into the speech he was giving that he had not noticed them yet.

“Well, it’s sort of like the cassette for the digital camera. It’s what it records on to.”

“So what does it mean when it’s full?”

“It can’t be full; I just emptied it before I came out.”

“Do you want to have a look?”

Gary glanced at the unfolded view screen. A large red message clearly indicated that the memory card was indeed full.

“I’ll just see what it is and then I’ll delete it.”

Gary looked at the footage the camera had just taken.

“What the hell?”

“What is it?”

“There’s nothing on it. None of the stuff we’ve recorded today at all. Just this weird light.”

“Let me have a look.”

Dan had noticed them. Gary stepped aside and let Dan look at the video screen.

“Is it broken?”

“I don’t think so; it’d just be blank if it were.”

Dan’s face lit up.

“So you think this is something that’s actually been recorded?”

“Yes, and apparently directly over what we were just filming.”

“Great! This might be it, the proof we’ve been looking for. Can you run it through some filters or something, like they do on telly?”

Gary beamed.

“Actually I can, I spent hours learning how to on my editing software. This is the first time it has ever been useful for anything.”

“Fantastic. Alright, let’s pack up and get on with things.”

Milton gave Gary a paternal pat on the back.

“Are you OK to give us a lift back to the shop?”

“I said I would and I mean to.”

Dan rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

“Well, it looks like we might have had a successful day after all.”

14.

Gary’s car pulled up in front of a small bookshop. A sign in the window read, “gone Witchin’ back soon.” The glass shop windows had an elegant display of some of the merchandise propped between black and red candles and pentagrams. The sign above the door read “Occultivated: The Sole Stop for your Soul Shop.”

“Thanks for the lift, mate. Let us know about that film.”

Gary felt the car elevate as Dan stepped out of it.

“Yeah, cheers man,” Milton agreed.

He stood and watched as Gary drove away.

“Can you do me a favour?” he asked Dan.

“Probably, what?”

“Can you look after my chicken for an hour or so?”

“I don’t see why not, where are you going?”

“I have to run a few errands, chicken wire and such?”

15.

Milton was struggling a little with the chicken wire. He put it down for a few seconds and carried on towards Discount News. Saul and Paul were stood outside the front of the Discount News, as Milton approached they glowered. Saul nudged Paul and he nodded.



Milton stood a clear five inches taller than the two boys did. He repressed a smirk as he passed them. He heard one of them mutter:

“Kiwi lover.”

Alison stood behind the counter serving an old woman. Milton went to the fridge and then joined the queue.

“No, I don’t want this one. I only wanted two random picks and one with my regular numbers,” the old woman sounded quite agitated.

“Isn’t that what I gave you?”

“No, the numbers on this one are wrong.”

“That’s a random pick ticket.”

“Well, it’s supposed to have my numbers on it.”

Alison sighed heavily but maintained a polite smile.

“The first ticket I gave you is the one with your numbers on it.”

“But that’s not right. The first two are supposed to be random picks and the third one is supposed to be my numbers.”

“Oh right, you wanted them in that specific order. How silly of me not to have realised.”

“It’s not your fault love; they probably don’t have the lottery where you’re from, hey?”

To Milton’s astonishment, Alison maintained her smile.

“Well, we do have one but it’s mostly just casting bones. Here, give me those tickets, I’m pretty sure I know how to fix them.”

Alison took the tickets from the woman, rearranged the order and gave them back to her.

“There you go. Maybe this week is the week, hey?”

The woman thanked Alison and moved out of the way.

“Milton, hi.”

“I bet you never had to deal with that when you were working in marketing.”

“You’d be surprised, actually. How can I help you today?”

“First of all - I’d like these.”

Milton handed Alison a packet of scotch eggs.

“One pound, sixty seven please.”

“Secondly,” Milton ventured as they exchanged money, “and I know it’s not really my place.”

“But?”

“But, I was wondering if I could ask you a favour.”

“Go on.”

“Well, as you know, we’ve been filming with Gary today. Anyway, I know you are mad at him (and probably me too) and I understand why. But he really has had a pig of a day honestly - he’s been run round, shot at and nearly set himself on fire.”

“He was shot at?”

“Yeah, some daffy old farmer shooting game but the effect was the same. Anyway, I was wondering if you could find it in your heart to let him off the hook just for the night?”

“We’ll see. I’m not promising anything.”

“You’re a star. A star. I always said so.”

Alison smiled as if she had taken the compliment.

16.

Gary was asleep on the couch, a steaming mug of tea rested on his chest. Alison gently tried to remove it from Gary’s hand. He tightened his grip and murmured at her. She tried again; Gary waved his free arm in the air as if he were swatting invisible flies.

On the third attempt, Alison entered a tug of war with Gary. The result of which was that he woke up to the sudden surprise of being quite badly scalded.

“Alison, oh shit, I meant to make you some dinner.”

“It’s alright, I heard about your day. Just being hysterical indeed, honest to god Gary you’re a weird bastard sometimes.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“So what was it that set on fire?”

“Mercifully just the frying pan. Who did you hear all this from anyway?”

“Milton stopped by the shop; he was carrying a big roll of fence for some reason.”

“That’ll be for his new chicken.”

“OK. So how did the filming go?”

“Weird, I was wondering if you could have a look at it actually.”

“You go take a shower, I’ll bring some food up and we’ll look at it afterwards.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

17.

Gary leaned back in the swivel chair and assessed the image on the monitor, he had been at it for an hour and none of the filters or effects he had added to it had made any difference whatsoever. That was odd in itself; even the filters that should have changed it to a different colour had no effect on it. He continued to talk to Alison about it, though she had given up caring more than half an hour before.

“What’s thrown me off about the whole thing is that I was just filming seconds before. In fact I’d be filming all day, there should have been at least four different files.”

“Something wrong with the camera, I suppose.”

“I don’t know: I could understand the files being corrupted, but this...”

“Didn’t you tell me Milton was using the camera?”

“Yes.”

“Blame human error first.”

“People make machines you know.”

“I know, but they’re normally competent people.”

Gary winced.

“As opposed to?”

“Anyone that you know.”

“As long as we’re clear.”

Gary continued to fiddle with the computer but no matter what he tried, he kept coming back to the same image, a small white light that looked like a candle in a dark room fading in and out to a steady beat.

“Are you getting anything?”

“Not much.”

“Did you try the auto-enhance?”

“Yes. I tried the auto-enhance.”

Gary was getting irritated and Alison was already there.

“Here, if I look at it and there’s nothing there then you’ll agree that there’s nothing there, right?”

“Grudgingly perhaps.”

“And then we can go back to bed.”

“You might have to twist my arm a little.”

“Whatever you want.”

“Excellent.”

Gary gestured towards the computer.

“It’s all yours.”

Alison pulled up a stool and sat next to Gary at the computer.

“So, what have we got?”

“It’s very much just this flashing light.”

Alison fast-forwarded the capture, the same image continued to repeat. Even as she increased the speed, it maintained the same rhythm.

“Boring.”

The film suddenly varied and showed the silhouette of a young couple drunkenly staggering down the street. As they got closer to the camera, it became obvious that the young man was Gary and that the plump gothic girl that he had his arm around was not Alison.

Gary licked the girl's ear; she giggled and reciprocated with a messy wet tongue driven kiss.

The real Gary reached desperately for the computer mouse, but it was too late. Alison put her hand on top of it and the video continued.

Gary and the girl were shown walking to the front of Milton's shop. Dan could be seen opening the door to them. Alison fast-forwarded the image and it showed her boyfriend and the girl in a darkened room. Alison knew that this had happened but seeing it so vividly made the pain of it all the more acute.

The girl pulled off Gary's sweater; she kneeled down in front of him and began to unbutton his jeans.

Alison covered her face and ran out of the room, breathing in heavily to contain the sobbing. Looking back at the computer screen, Gary noticed that it had reverted to its original image of a steady flashing light. He rewound the image to the point where it had showed him being fellated only a few seconds before. However, there was nothing, only the steady flash of the dull light.

## STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

### Chapter Fifteen: Fight or Die

Will aimed, squeezed the trigger, and jerked back as the recoil leapt through the body of the gun. A split second later, another policeman fell to the tarmac, shot in the heart. This definitely had more point to it than shooting grouse.

Mercer fired from cover beside Will. He'd had some weapons training during his time as an actor, although this had all been firing blanks: the security agency had been going to give him proper training in the run-up to the riots, but due to an error in the processing department it had failed to materialise. All the same, he had got a couple of kills.

Suddenly the policemen stopped firing. Their numbers had been considerably reduced, and with Will and Mercer in the hard cover of the security lodge, they had been unable to achieve much.

The police sergeant limped to the gate.

'We're going now, but believe me, we'll be back, and we'll have reinforcements,' he shouted. 'Your time is coming, murdering scum! We...'

Will shot off the man's peaked cap. White-faced, the sergeant stumbled back, turned to run, gave the security village a last bitter glance, and led his men in retreat up the suburban street.

Mercer sighed and mopped his brow. He rose, and said decisively, 'Right. Time we were moving out.'

Will scowled up at him. 'Don't be daft,' he said. 'We can't walk out on these people.'

Mercer shook his head. 'What do we owe to the people who live here? They've done nothing to help. We need to get to Oxford!'

'What about that girl?' Will demanded. 'And the security guard.'

Mercer looked crestfallen. 'I'd forgotten him...' he muttered. 'We'd better see if he's okay. Better do something about your leg first.'

After cleaning the bullet graze and bandaging with the aid of a medikit Mercer found beneath the counter, they walked from the lodge, keeping their guns at the ready in case the police returned. Round the side of the small building, they found the guard, sprawled in an ungainly posture. Will crouched down beside him. Was he dead?

His eyes flickered open. 'Drove them off?' he asked hoarsely. 'Thanks, man.'

'They said they'd be back,' Will told him. 'Are you able to fight? I think we could find you a gun.'

Painfully, the guard shook his head. 'Think it's me done for,' he said. 'Survived twelve effin' tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now I've been shot by the cops. They've done for me.' Fumbling, he gripped Will's hand. 'Keep them safe for me. The people who live here. Snotty bastards, but I said I'd guard this place.... Now you'll have to do it.'

His head sank back, his eyes glazed. Will reached out in trembling horror to feel for a pulse.

He looked up bitterly. Mercer's face was grim.

'We'd better get moving, Will,' he said.

Will rose. He shook his head. 'No. You heard him. We've got to defend this place when the police come back.'

'Defend who?' Mercer barked. 'That stuck up twat who rang up?'

'What about the girl?' Will countered.

Mercer shook his head darkly. 'We should never have got involved,' he said. 'We should have carried on.'

'We're involved now,' Will said. 'We're going to defend this place!'

'They've gone back to get their big brothers, Will,' Mercer replied. 'There's only two of us. We've been lucky so far. But there's too few of us to be the Magnificent Seven.'

'Keep me covered,' Will said. He went to the gate. After a moment of trying to guess the code, he slung his rifle over his back and climbed over.

The street outside was littered with bodies. Gingerly, he went from one to another, gathering up weapons. Mercer kept any eye out from inside the perimeter. The street was deserted.

Will returned, weighed down with the guns of the fallen police.

‘We should have asked that guy for the code,’ he said. ‘God, we didn’t even know his name.’

He handed the guns to Mercer through the bars.

‘It doesn’t matter how many guns we’ve got, Will,’ the man replied. ‘We’re still going to be seriously outnumbered.’

‘Not if we get ourselves reinforcements, too,’ Will replied, and he climbed over the gate.

They put the guns down on the counter in the lodge and went to survey the security village. It was built on a similar pattern to the Liberty Park where Will had grown up. A main road wound between detached houses built in a bland, post modern style. It ended at a kind of turning circle, surrounded by houses. Will guessed there were nine or ten buildings, some houses, some divided up into luxury flats. Trees grew everywhere, big oaks that must surely predate the place by decades.

The perimeter fence surrounded it all, ten foot high and topped with razorwire. That would explain why the police had concentrated their attack on the security gates. Of course, the security was all to keep out what his brother Geoff would call chavs, the underclass criminal element of which their own class was so afraid, not rogue members of the security forces. All in all, it was what Will’s mum would call a nice area.

All the doors were shut; all the blinds were pulled down. Hardly a sound could be heard from the buildings. An air of introspection, even introversion, hung over it all. Will remembered how, while he was growing up, he had never played with any of the other kids in Liberty Park. There’d been precious few families in the community. Everyone Will knew had been from school, a private place on the other side of Leeds. This place seemed much the same. Bleak and sterile.

‘Time we did some knocking on doors,’ Will said.

The first house they tried elicited no response, except a bit of curtain twitching from upstairs. Will considered Mercer and himself, armed and dangerous. He couldn’t really blame them, but there was no alternative. He banged on the door louder.

Finally, it opened on the chain and a frightened eye peered out.



‘What do you want?’ said a mouth. It belonged to a man, about ten or fifteen years older than Will by the look of him. ‘What’s all the noise been about? The committee has banned all fireworks displays.’

‘This place is faced by a serious security risk,’ Will said in tones of pompous officialdom. ‘I’m going to have to ask you and everyone in the community to assemble at the lodge so we can explain the situation and what is required from you.’

The eye flickered back and forth, examining both of them.

‘I don’t know what’s going on in this country,’ the mouth said. ‘I’ve stopped watching the news. Whenever I ring work it goes to the answering machine. I’m afraid to go out. Now you tell me there’s a security risk here.’

‘Will you join us at the lodge in a quarter of an hour?’ Will insisted.

The eye flicked back and forth again. ‘Your friend’s a policeman,’ said the mouth. ‘I trust him. But who are you? You look like a student.’

‘My companion is a plainclothes security consultant,’ Mercer broke in. ‘Could you comply with the request, sir?’

‘Of course, officer,’ said the mouth. ‘I’ll join you presently. Where is the usual security guard, by the way?’

Mercer smiled. ‘I’ll have to ask you to keep your questions for the meeting,’ he said.

‘Very well,’ said the mouth, and the door closed.

Two more of the houses were equally responsive, and each time the person who answered the door agreed to join them. They were very obedient, Will noticed, particularly if Mercer did the talking. The uniform, he supposed, and he wondered how these law-abiding citizens would react when they found out what the real situation was. There was no answer from the other houses or flats, including the building into which the girl had vanished. Will was worried about her, but the defence of Liberty Park had to take precedence.

A motley group of residents assembled in the security lodge a quarter of an hour later. Will and Mercer faced them across the counter, on which lay the guns taken from the policemen.

The residents were all white-faced and worried. A stocky man in a suit, in his late thirties, seemed to have elected himself spokesperson.

‘What’s been going on?’ he demanded. ‘I saw all those bodies outside the gate. More police! Don’t tell me the troubles in Central London have reached this far. I haven’t been able to get to work for a week or more but I didn’t think it would get out this far.’

‘I saw it on the news,’ said a tall, gangling youth with a shock of ginger hair. ‘Central London’s deserted apart from soldiers. The people who lived there are in refugee camps in the Midlands. The American government is highly critical of the police’s handling of the situation.’

A large, matronly woman said in strident tones, ‘We live here for the peace and quiet. We don’t want our children growing up *out there*.’ She indicated the horrible outside with a jerky motion of her hands, and looked queasily at the collection of small arms on the counter.

‘The situation has worsened,’ said Mercer. He seemed to have settled into the role that had been thrust upon him. ‘Rogue units of the security forces are roaming the streets. We have successfully fought off an attack by one group. However, we believe they intend to return.’

‘Those... bodies... in the street?’ said the stocky man. ‘Policemen... You mean they were attacking the place? Why?’

‘They sexually assaulted one of your residents,’ Will broke in. ‘When we rescued her and brought her back, they followed us. They shot the security guard.’

‘And you fought them off?’ The stocky man strode forward and pumped both their hands. ‘Congratulations. It’s good to see that not all police have gone rogue. What times we live in. Let me introduce myself. My name’s Morgan Hunt and I’m a hedge fund manager.’

Mercer muttered something derogatory and Will gave him a quelling glance.

‘I’m Sean,’ said the gangling youth. ‘I’m a business systems analyst. Don’t think we’ve met, Mr. Hunt...’ He shook his fellow resident’s hand.

‘You live practically next door and you don’t know each other?’ Mercer demanded. Clearly he hadn’t grown up in a security village.

‘But what do you want with us?’ the strident lady demanded. She realised everyone was looking at her. ‘I’m Malory Towers,’ she added grudgingly, ‘and this is my husband, who works for the Health and Safety Executive.’ Her husband, a tall, thin, gloomy-faced man with a drooping moustache, said something inaudible.

‘What we want,’ said Will, ‘is for you to help us defend Liberty Park.’ The silence that greeted his explanation was underwhelming.

Hunt stared at him in bafflement. ‘You want *us* to fight?’ he demanded. ‘Don’t be absurd. I don’t know one end of a gun from the other. If maniac gunmen are on the loose, this is a job for the police, if not the army. What do we pay our taxes for, after all?’

‘Can’t you call for backup?’ asked Malory. ‘Surely your colleagues in the force will come to your aid.’ She indicated Mercer’s walkie talkie.

Mercer and Will exchanged glances.

‘We can’t really bank on it,’ said Mercer.

‘I’ll fight,’ said Sean suddenly.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Hunt. ‘Are you combat trained?’

‘I’ve got to the highest level on all the *Call of Duty* games,’ Sean replied with a shrug.

‘This is utter nonsense,’ Malory exclaimed. ‘Isn’t it, Duncan?’ Her husband shook his head and agreed inaudibly.

Hunt nodded, and looked challengingly at Will. ‘You surely don’t expect to let a group of untrained civilians loose with firearms, do you?’ He rounded on Duncan Towers. ‘Surely the Health and Safety Act of 1974 would have something to say about it.’ Duncan blinked waterily at him and muttered something.

Will felt a horrible prickling flush rise through his body. He started sweating uncontrollably. It had seemed the best idea possible when it occurred to him, and he hadn’t stopped to question it as it drove him on to organise all these people. Now even Mercer was looking at him doubtfully. But what options did they have?

The big man took him to one side. ‘We should scarper,’ Mercer said insistently. ‘We’re not throwing away our lives for a bunch of hedge fund managers and civil servants!’

‘What about the girl?’ Will hissed. ‘These idiots won’t stop the bastards getting at her. We’re her only hope.’

‘I haven’t noticed her asking us,’ Mercer replied. ‘She just shut herself up and ignored us even when we came knocking.’

‘She’s just been raped, Mercer,’ Will said, shocked. ‘What do you expect? I don’t understand your attitude.’

‘I don’t understand yours,’ Mercer snarled. ‘We’ve got a job to do. Get that manuscript to Oxford and get it published. Not waste our time playing cop killer in the suburbs.’

‘Look, Mercer...’ Will broke off. Everyone looked up. He felt a chill of dread.

In the distance, he could hear police sirens. Many police sirens.

He rounded on the residents.

‘Okay, you’ve got two options,’ he shouted at them. ‘It’s very simple. You can either fight.... or you can die!’

### THE MONSTER MANIFESTS by C. Priest Brumley

Roderick McAllistair was burning.

The smell of it, the piercing scent of burning flesh and hair mingled with the chokingly thick smoke emanating from his being caused his eyes to fly open. He awoke in agony, screaming at the top of his lungs, no comprehensible sounds being made. Roderick’s face and hands burned in a fierce race to cause as much pain as possible, and he threw off the sheets of his bed in a desperate race for the bathroom and the shower contained within.

The race was a short dash, and in twelve leaping bounds, he reached the goal line. Bursting through the bathroom door, he threw open the clear liner that he and his wife Moira were using for a shower curtain and hurled himself shoulder-first into the cream-white tub. His hands fumbled sweatily for the shower knob, found it and twisted, feeling the cold relief washing over his body in an instant and putting the flames out. Sinking to the floor now, bare legs scratching on the little feet adhered to the bottom of the tub for traction, the cloud of steam still hovering overhead. Relief. Sweet, sweet relief.

It didn’t last long. The pain came back in one agonizing flash of an instant.

The pain started in his arms, under his skin, fire crawling through his veins like spiders injecting their venom in to every nerve they could find along the way. He scrambled and thrashed around the enclosed space, all other thoughts gone as he did so. He even slapped his arms, hoping childishly as he did so that it would help, but it was all in vain. The fire continued to spread to his chest, then from there to his head and legs simultaneously.

Roderick’s face felt unendurably horrific, as though the fire under his skin were bubbling the flesh off and leaving nothing in its wake but a pained skull. He tried to touch his face, tried to reassure himself that everything was still the same, but found his arms seized up

from the trauma. The panic and shock of it all drove him to tears, and the screams subsided to blubbing apologies directed at anyone and everything he had ever wronged in his life. The unending stream of tears mingled with the battering shower water and washed down the drain alongside his prayers and apologies.

Then, at once, everything stopped.

He would have sworn time itself had come to a halt too, if not for the ice-like water still battering down on his head. He breathed deep, muscles still tense from the agonizing experience and twitching on occasion. Hours passed as he lay there, recovering from his nightmarish experience.

Eventually, he became self-aware again.

He tried to stand up slowly, clutching feebly at the white ceramic tiling surrounding him for support. The attempts were made in vain, and he fell back down to the floor with a resounding crash. He tried another approach, crawling out of the tub inch by inch. He found this worked better, as his legs felt like un-set gelatin that couldn't support a toothpick, let alone a full-grown man's weight. His arms, recovering quicker than the rest of his body, did the bulk of the work, dragging him first to the faucet to kill the water, then over the edge of the tub to lay on the bathroom floor.

The bathmat, an obscene mass of pink shag carpeting (Moirra's touch, he recollected), felt like a thousand piercing needles on his sensitive skin, but it was a welcome change from the burning agony. He stopped there, afraid to move any more, afraid even to breathe for fear of the pain returning. His arms would still occasionally twitch, as would his legs, but they were involuntary tics at best and didn't cause any more spasms to occur.

He lay there for what felt like another eternity, every now and then testing his feet for movement, all to no avail. Then, something happened.

His foot moved. All five toes curled and uncurled, his ankle flexed... And Roderick was free. He grasped the bathroom's sink counter, and pulled himself up to a standing position for the first time in two eternities. Then, he glanced in the mirror and let out a horrific shriek that sounded less human and more... animalistic.

He had seen the monster he had become.

Roderick stared disbelievingly at his reflection. His once beautiful face had been contorted and changed, now closer to resembling a monster from some sort of video game than anything else. The skin on his face was stretched and contorted, pulled taut at places and lumped together in others. His complexion had changed, too, from his tanned pink to a sickening greenish shade. He opened his mouth to try and smile, the smile that Moirra claimed to love so much, and gasped in horror and shock. The mouth closed abruptly, then opened again slowly, as though it was afraid to be seen in its current state.

His teeth were there, but barely. In front, they were ground to short pegs, blue from tooth-rot and crumbling away still. His gums, too, were changed from their native pink to a translucent film, packed with some viscous dark brown/black substance he guessed must pass for his blood. He touched his gums in a tentative manner, and sure enough, the liquid reacted like fluid should, shying away from the indentation and revealing more rotting musculature underneath. The back teeth, Roderick noticed, were all sharp and fang-like, and would interlock with each other when his mouth would shut.

It was at this precise moment, when all seemed bleakest, that Moira came home.

He heard the front door close with a slamming heaviness, followed by Moira's angelic voice floating upstairs. It used to be, when he heard her voice for the first time in a given day, his heart would elate, and he pictured lush fields of clover and crumbling castles; a dramatic stereotyping of her native country of Scotland. Now, all thoughts of the UK fled from him. Panicked, he wondered fleetingly where he could hide until she left again.

"Roddy?"

The closet? No, she'll change before she leaves again.

"Where are ya, love?"

The attic? Bingo. Decision made.

Roderick took one tentative step towards his goal. The floor groaned under his weight, announcing his position to anyone in earshot.

*Shit.*

"Oh! Probably can't hear me anyways." Her voice floated upstairs

He went to take another step, but was cut short by the sound of someone advancing on the staircase, light and quick. His pulse quickened at the thought of Moira seeing him like this; what if she abhorred him now?

The thought of Moira's horror at seeing his new, monstrous form strengthened his resolve. He dashed, heedless of being caught, to the middle of the upstairs hallway, reaching up and grabbing the string for the pull-down attic ladder as he came to a stop. The springs groaned in protest as the ladder slowly unfurled itself from the ceiling. He scurried up the steps, each step creaking worse than the last, until he reached his final destination: the quiet, dark attic.

Moira's footfalls sounded louder as Roderick drew the attic door shut behind him. The door groaned in protest once more as the aged springs collapsed, and he feared for his betrayal and discovery. The footfalls stopped underneath the door.

*Knock knock.*

“Roddy, what the hell are you doin’ in there?” She called up, an angry lilt to her voice. “You come down thas instant or I swear to Jesus I’ll drag ya down mahself and you *won’t* like what comes next!”

“You don’t wanna see me right now, baby, trust me!” Roderick called back through the attic door. His voice was low and grumbling, the audible equivalent of a mountain learning to speak. He jumped backwards at the sound of it, darting his eyes through the darkness surrounding him for the source.

Apparently, Moira couldn’t detect the change. Her voice rose in pitch, a sure sign of her increasing anger. “Listen here, you damned right idiot,” she started, “What in the *hell* makes ya thank I don’ wan’ see you?”

Roderick was flabbergasted. *If she knew...*, he started to reason with himself, but cut himself short. *Y’know what? She’s right*, he thought. *She’s abso-fucking-lutely right. Why wouldn’t she love me? ‘For Better or Worse,’ right? She’ll love me regardless.*

Judging by the fading sounds of her steps, she was already storming away in anger. Roddy let loose a deep breath he hadn’t even known he was holding. He sat there inside the attic for a few minutes longer, struggling with his conscience for control, until, at long last, his conscience won out.

He turned to the attic door and pushed it open with his heels, then bent forward and unfolded the ladder packed tight against it. The rusty springs cried out in protest as they settled in place, forming a slanted line against the hallway floor. He descended with practiced ease, dropping to the floor in an almost cat-like manner, and folded the ladder behind him up onto the door in one fluid movement. The final groans of the attic door faded as soon as they sound out.

He turned to go to their bedroom, only to find Moira standing in his way, unperturbed. She had a shined sword in her right hand, held at the hilt and point resting on the carpet below them.

“Ah knew it. Look an’ what you’ve done. Set tha curse off an’ everythin’.” *Curse?*  
“Well, my mum was right about tha’... Never trust an American man.”

The sword in her right hand whistled as it swung upwards, the ferocity in her attack amazing Roddy. He made a leap backwards to avoid being hit, the top of his head brushing the string for the attic door, and landed a few feet back.

“What the hell are you playing at, woman?” he called out in his low voice, chest rattling with the sound. She screamed in return, her curly black hair flying maniacally behind her as she ran towards him to cover the gap.

She lunged forward with sword held high, paraphrasing Exodus 22:18 and screaming “Thou shalt not suffer a demon to live!”

Roderick stood dumbstruck. *Demon? Am I really? Why is she...*

The sword did not strike true, but instead managed to pierce his abdomen above the navel. She drove it in to the hilt, twisting slightly as she did so. A snarl formed on her lips, the hair that had flown behind her splayed around her neck and shoulders in a chaotic pattern. Roderick was still in shock at it all; at her ferocity, her accusations, her attacking him. He stood there, a questioning look on his face, staring at Moira’s once-gentle features that were now torn asunder by utter savageness. He saw no pity in her eyes, no love, nothing recognizable. In her eyes, he was already dead. All she had to do was remove the sword.

The pain spread slowly from the wound, a numbness coming with it, enveloping his groin and legs in next to no time. His legs buckled out from beneath him as he hit the floor, yanking the sword from Moira’s grasp.

“Thou shalt not suffer a demon to live,” she repeated quietly; a chilling sound. Smiling now, she walked forward until her lithe form towered over Roderick’s prone body. Moira bent forward, pale pink cleavage showing over the top of her blouse, and yanked the sword out of Roddy’s chest. She pulled a folded wad of paper towels out of her pocket and wiped the length of the blade.

“Why?”

The snarl returned to her lips upon hearing Roddy’s weakened voice.

“Cheating bastard,” was all he heard before the whistling sword decapitated him in one clean, graceful stroke.



## A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME by Obsidian Mercurio Tesla

It was after midnight when Rose Ellis sank into her well-worn sofa, opened the leather-bound photo album on her lap, and warmed her frail liver-spotted hands on the mug of hot chocolate she was holding. She sighed wearily, sipping the sweet frothy head on her drink and glanced down at the faded photographs in the book. She leaned forward, reaching over to put the mug on the table. There was a drip of milky brown chocolate snaking its way slowly down the side of the ceramic mug. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes darting instinctively over to Harry's armchair, the offending mug suspended in mid air. The armchair was empty, though she could still make out the bulky indentation where he sat for so many years. She hesitantly put the mug down on the table, her eyes still focused intently on his chair. Tears built up slowly, a silver trickle tracing its course down her left cheek, only stopping when it reached her jaw line. She sighed more deeply, wiping her face with a moist handkerchief held between trembling fingers, her mind still struggling with the newly-realised concept of what it was to be 'a widow.'

Harry had been so ruggedly handsome...that much was certainly true. The first photograph, taken on their wedding day, was proof enough of that. Harry, or 'Harold' as his middle-class parents called him, was the only child from a wealthy family, *and* was educated at a good university. That latter fact circulated in conversation endlessly as far as her own proud mother was concerned. Whenever Rose bumped into her mum's bingo cronies in town, they always asked about him, each probing question more invasive than the last. They were first harping on about the engagement months before Harry had even asked her. Next it was endless speculation about the wedding details, once again many months before they'd even set a date. Mum, true to form, had paraded Rose's engagement ring, having gone to the jewellers herself to find out how much Harry had spent on it. Then there were her mother's constant barbed comments in public, each one picking away remorselessly at the strands of Rose's self-confidence.

Her mother would coo proudly to her friends, nodding animatedly to reinforce each supposedly 'jovial' comment she made at her youngest daughter's expense. "Oh, Harry is from *such* a good family too! And just look at him! He's obviously a young man who's going places in life. I know I'm her mother and I love her dearly *but* I honestly don't know how our Rose got such a good catch! I mean she is a well-meaning girl *but* she *is* a bit of a plain Jane!" Her mother would laugh among her friends at this scathing observation, the cackling noise reminding the younger Rose of those haggard witches in Macbeth.

On the photo, she looked tiny in the gown standing next to a grinning Harry. Petite and plain looking, as her mother would no doubt agree. The contrast between them was stark. He was six foot four and powerfully built, the kind of man who drew admiring glances from other women and looks of envy from 'lesser' men. She'd often seen women's faces when they went to dances together, the side-on looks, sly smiles and whispered comments. She'd even heard her own so-called friends when she was in a toilet cubicle only two months after her wedding day. *That* night at the dance-hall had yielded an unwelcome revelation that changed her life forever.

Rose glanced at the next black and white picture, her three bridesmaids. One was Rose's older sister Lizzy, the tall pretty one in the middle was her best friend Katy and the third girl was Claire, a good friend from work. Rose smiled as she ran her finger affectionately over Lizzy's image. Lizzy was still married to her childhood sweetheart, Greg and was a matron in an exclusive nursing home. She had formally retired years before, but had to supplement her pension by working on into her late sixties. Now Rose was all alone, she might nip up and pay them a visit. This house held far too many memories now. As she gazed at the photographs her mind wandered, the memories of *that* fateful night at the dance-hall emerging slowly from the backdrop of her memory.

*Even in the closed toilet cubicle in the ladies rest room, she could still hear Eddie Cochran singing 'Come On Everybody,' his energetic voice thundering through the hall from the crackly sound system. Once again, Harry was working late, so she decided to go out for the night with Claire and Katy. Sitting in staring at the bare walls with just a wireless for company was driving her insane. Of course, her mother didn't approve of her actions at all. "Married women don't go swanning around at dance-halls with their friends, Rose. What would poor Harry make of it all? How on earth do you expect him to trust you?" Quite how her mother found time to cook meals between her duties as judge, jury, and executioner Rose never understood. The swing door to the ladies toilets burst open and Eddie Cochran's voice briefly rose and fell in volume as the door swung shut again. She could now hear girls' excited voices and smiled when she recognised them as Claire and Katy, both girls a little worse for wear due to excessive white wine.*

*Claire said, "So come on! Am I gonna have to guess who this secret bloke of yours is or what?"*

*Katy's laugh echoed around the bathroom. "Why do you think I brought you in here while Rose is at the bar?"*

*Rose grinned and leaned forwards on the toilet seat, pleased to be a fly on the wall, privy to some great social revelation! She heard the squirt of a perfume spray then Claire asked, "Is it that guy who's been buying you large gins all night?"*

*Katy's girlish laughter rang out again. When she spoke, she did so in a loud drunken whisper. "You've got to promise not to say a word to Rose."*

*Claire half laughed, saying "Why? Is he that much of a monster? I thought with your high standards you'd ...."*

*Katy cut in hurriedly, unable to contain her dark secret any longer. "I'm sleeping with Harry."*

*Rose heard a sharp intake of breath from Claire as her own hand involuntarily covered her mouth, her blood freezing instantly in her veins. The world seemed to swim dreamily out of focus as her stomach clenched, the thought that she may give her presence away to the girls by vomiting in the tiny cubicle flitted through her swirling mind.*

Things were very different after that night. Harry denied everything when she eventually built up the courage to confront him about it, had called Katy all the names under the sun before going on to say how hurt he was that his own wife didn't trust him. Rose had backed down completely, feeling bad that she'd hurt Harry so badly with her accusation. Perhaps she had got it terribly wrong after all? He was furious, kicking a small table over and slapping her hard across the face. As she lay on the floor sobbing her apologies he made her promise to break her friendship off with Katy, saying that Katy was obviously 'sick' or 'jealous' of Rose. He then told her that Katy had made a crude pass at him and that he had rejected her advances. Obviously the woman was dangerously ill and not in control of her emotions. Katy had tried calling at the house several times, but Harry always insisted on answering the door to her. Rose could never make out their hushed voices and after a while, Katy stopped calling round.

Rose picked up the mug and took another sip. Maybe the milky drink would settle her nerves. The question of how she was going to live now that Harry was gone echoed through her mind. She certainly didn't want sympathetic glances from family and friends, old well trodden platitudes that are handed out like canapés to the recently bereaved. She turned the next page of the album, fresh tears welling up as she saw the picture of her parents.

Their deaths had been a devastating blow to her. Her father died first of a heart attack, her mother three years later, the victim of an emotional heart breaking. Despite the fact the woman had made a career of putting Rose down emotionally, she was still her mother when all was said and done and Rose had missed them both dreadfully. The family business, custom furniture restoration and design, had become hers and Lizzy's. This was the start of Harry's entrepreneurial disasters. He insisted that she rent out her parent's house, paying the rent directly to his account. He assured her that he knew just the person

who would rent it off them, a secretary from his company. All Rose had to do was win Lizzy over to the idea and sign all the necessary paperwork. Things were fine until eighteen months later, when the secretary in question turned up on the doorstep with a baby in her arms. Even at that tender age, the resemblance to Harry was uncanny.

Harry didn't deny anything this time. In fact, he proudly gloated over it, blaming Rose's own infertility for his actions. He said he wanted a 'real' woman as a wife as he stood there, a glass of sanctimonious self-important whisky in his hand. She sat in the armchair sobbing as he admitted his infidelity with Kate years earlier, adding that there'd been many other women since. It was just that she'd been too damn stupid to see it. On that night, Rose made her fatal error of judgement, the marital 'mortal sin,' as her mother would have viewed it. She threatened to divorce him.

The blow of the exploding whisky glass against her jaw was as much as she had wanted to remember for many years afterwards. The pressure of him holding her down in the chair as he'd beaten her with his clenched fist over and over again was little more than a hazy blur. Him dragging her by the hair across the room then kicking her repeatedly on the living room floor was something she'd tried to block out altogether. In fact, the thing she remembered most clearly was the blank look in his eyes as he tidied his immaculate quaffed hair and left the house to see his mistress and son as if nothing had happened. Of course, he'd dealt with the nurses at the hospital, explaining that his wife had fallen down the stairs while he was out, hitting a glass ornament on the landing. She was just 'clumsy' like that...always had been, even as a child.

Rose sipped the now cool chocolate, her moist eyes moving from the sticky ring on the laminated table to the empty armchair. She was reminded of Harry holding her face down on a kitchen work surface, using her tear-stained cheek to rub off a faint coffee ring that had caught his ever-critical eye. Of course, over the previous forty years there had been many other 'accidents,' many other women for him to visit when he wanted to feel like a 'real man' again. As the years slipped past, she'd grown desensitised, each beating or infidelity hurting her less and less. Her parent's house had been sold off years ago, Harry having squandered her half of the proceeds on numerous fruitless 'business ventures.' She had always been aware that the money had also been used to cover up his marital indiscretions, having financed several abortions for his seemingly endless fleet of mistresses. The family business had gone too, the car sold and their house was re-mortgaged to the absolute hilt. Now, in the sorry twilight of her life, she was effectively destitute.

In fact the only things that still remained of her old life were the numerous power tools and wood-working equipment stored away in the garage. Never one to miss out on a money-making scheme, Harry had even organised for them to be sold off, completely unaware that his own mortality would come to fruition before the customer could arrive to pick them up.

Of course, Lizzy had been a tower of strength for her over all these tribulations, always there to lend an ear or to help out with more practical matters. She was a priceless and

loving sister. In many ways, she had been the only thing that had kept her going over all this time. There had been several occasions where Rose had even contemplated ending her life, permanently to purge herself of the Hell that seemed completely to define her daily existence. Lizzy had always been there to catch her at such dark times, always nurturing her back and breathing new life into her heart.

Harry had always told Rose he'd kill her if she ever tried to run away or divorce him and, after the incident with the whiskey glass, she had no reason to disbelieve him. He even threatened Lizzy on several occasions, blaming her for trying to destroy his marriage with her 'incessant lies.' Rose had always hoped that old age would mellow him, but it only seemed to make him more moody and sullen. His bad back and medication hadn't helped the issue and even at seventy years of age, he was as viciously sadistic as he had been at twenty. After the last beating, where she'd had to stay indoors for a month to hide the swollen black eyes, she'd phoned Lizzy, completely at her wits' end. After much debate, Rose and Lizzy decided that the issue would be best resolved with a 'change of medication' for Harry.

Lizzy had only been able to send Rose the warfarin tablets in ones or twos in the post, but Rose had collected them diligently in her make up box. Lizzy told her that the normal dose for an adult was around ten milligrams daily, so Rose thought it best to start Harry on forty and see where they went from there.

After a few days, he was getting more grumpy than usual when the blinding migraines started, so she upped his dose to sixty milligrams by way of curious experimentation. Towards the end of the week the spontaneous nose bleeds started. On the previous Friday Harry was feeling really poorly, so she diligently pretended to call the doctor to make an appointment for him. As usual, Harry vehemently cursed her lack of affection from his armchair, hunched up in pain like some bad-tempered troll. She even went to the effort of preparing his favourite meal, chicken korma and rice, complete with five hundred milligrams of warfarin. While she prepared this veritable feast, she found herself humming a tune to herself, something jaunty and light-hearted by Elvis Presley... 'Love Me Tender'! The irony of her song choice was not lost on her as the korma sauce bubbled away noisily in the pan.

How long had it been since she had genuinely felt excitement? Or was it the sense of imminent liberation that was making her heart beat with such vigour? She watched him closely as he hungrily tucked into his treat, an uncharacteristic glow of well-being filling her chest, a warm satisfaction that made her heart beat with excited expectation. Rose then went upstairs to run a nice hot bubble-bath, only pausing to unplug the phone in the hallway on her way past as a precaution.

As it turned out, she didn't really need to unplug it. She'd heard him calling up to her in the bathroom and blissfully ignored his curses and weak cries, instead turning up the volume on the CD player she had placed by the side of the bath. The machine sat on a side-table next to the steaming tub, a nice glass of chilled Australian white wine keeping it company in easy arm's reach. After her luxuriant bath, she put on her thick woollen

dressing gown and came downstairs almost one hour later, her body and soul feeling relaxed and at peace for the first time in decades.

She found Harry sprawled halfway down the hall, his body contorted into the foetal position, lying in a pool of his own un-clotted blood. His bleeding eyes were still open, his mouth twisted into an agonised snarl of rage. She delicately stepped around his mess on her way to the kitchen to make a bit of supper, wondering if Harry had left some of that nice turkey roll in the fridge. After a turkey sandwich and another glass of chilled wine, she could turn her attention to disposing of the rubbish.

Rose put the empty mug down on the table and the tears of relief flowed freely down her face. She dabbed her eyes with her hankie, closing the photo album and putting it on the table next to the sticky chocolate ring. That nice young man would arrive at lunchtime tomorrow to pick up the wood chipper, the laminating machine, and the hand tools. She'd had a very busy weekend. The hall and living room carpets had been replaced and she'd made a set of matching wardrobes, two bedside cabinets and the laminated table that the mug and album were resting on. She had a customer for the wardrobes and cabinets, but she'd keep the table as a victorious keepsake.

She hauled herself up off the sofa and moved towards the door wearily. She'd cleaned the chipping machine earlier, but would check the blades one last time for evidence of Harry's 'passing.' She reached the door and turned back to the table, the sticky ring looking back at her like a glaring Cyclops eye. "Goodnight Harry, you bastard," she said with a smile and switched off the light.

TAKING OVER THE ASYLUM – A POLITICAL FABLE by Gavin Chappell

In an explosion of debris, the door burst in and the lunatics poured into the corridor. Behind them lay an asylum devastated, littered with the bodies of murdered warders. At last, they had reached the hallowed halls of the administration.

They were looking for the Director. They had issues.

‘Hey! Look at this!’ said Derek, pointing at the nameplate on a door. It read: *I Higginson, Head of Admin.* ‘That’s your name! I Higginson. Ignatius Higginson. That’s you!’

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Iggy dismissively. ‘It’s just a coincidence.’

‘Carl Jung said there’s no such thing as coincidence,’ said Eddy owlshly. He’d spent much of his incarceration in the library.

‘Where is everyone?’ Derek said suddenly.

‘Maybe they evacuated when they heard we were taking over,’ Iggy suggested.

Derek digested this doubtfully. He had serious reasons to want a chat with the Director.

They forced their way into the main office and looked around, blinking in the light that fell from the grilled window on the other side. Dust rose. Silence hung heavy.

Eddy jemmied open a filing cabinet and started going through the correspondence. After a while, a troubled expression appeared on his face. Derek poked around in the drawers. He found a nameplate and peered at it uneasily.

‘What’s up with you, bollocks?’ Iggy asked after a while.

Derek looked up, puzzled.

‘I...’ he began.

‘Derek?’ said Eddy suddenly. ‘I’ve just been rooting through the files. There’s loads of letters in here, and they’re all addressed to *us*. Ignatius Higginson, Admin. Eddy Black, Personnel. Derek Clyde, Director.’

Bewildered, Derek scratched his head.

‘That’s odd...’ he said slowly. ‘That’s really odd.’ He was baffled.

‘What is?’ Iggy demanded.

Derek shrugged. ‘Well... it looks like we’ve been running this place all along...’

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

#### CHAPTER LIII.

#### THE DESTRUCTION OF SIR FRANCIS VARNEY’S HOUSE BY FIRE.—THE ARRIVAL OF THE MILITARY, AND A SECOND MOB.

Thus many moments had not elapsed ere the feelings of the rioters became directed into a different channel from that in which it had so lately flowed. When urged about the house and grounds for the vampyre, they became impatient and angry at not finding him. Many believed that he was yet about the house, while many were of opinion that he had flown away by some mysterious means only possessed by vampyres and such like people.

“Fire the house, and burn him out,” said one.

“Fire the house!”

“Burn the den!” now arose in shouts from all present, and then the mob were again animated by the love of mischief that seemed to be the strongest feelings that animated them.

“Burn him out—burn him out!” were the only words that could be heard from any of the mob. The words ran through the house like wildfire, nobody thought of anything else, and all were seen running about in confusion.

There was no want of good will on the part of the mob to the undertaking; far from it, and they proceeded in the work *con amore*. They worked together with right good will, and the result was soon seen by the heaps of combustible materials that were collected in a short time from all parts of the house.



All the old dry wood furniture that could be found was piled up in a heap, and to these were added a number of faggots, and also some shavings that were found in the cellar.

“All right!” exclaimed one man, in exultation.

“Yes,” replied a second; “all right—all right! Set light to it, and he will be smoked out if not burned.”

“Let us be sure that all are out of the house,” suggested one of the bystanders.

“Ay, ay,” shouted several; “give them all a chance. Search through the house and give them a warning.”

“Very well; give me the light, and then when I come back I will set light to the fire at once, and then I shall know all is empty, and so will you too.”

This was at once agreed to by all, with acclamations, and the light being handed to the man, he ascended the stairs, crying out in a loud voice,—

“Come out—come out! the house is on fire!”

“Fire! fire! fire!” shouted the mob as a chorus, every now and then at intervals.

In about ten minutes more, there came a cry of “all right; the house is empty,” from up the stairs, and the man descended in haste to the hall.

“Make haste, lads, and fire away, for I see the red coats are leaving the town.”

“Hurra! hurra!” shouted the infuriated mob. “Fire—fire—fire the house! Burn out the vampire! Burn down the house—burn him out, and see if he can stand fire.”

Amidst all this tumult there came a sudden blaze upon all around, for the pile had been fired.

“Hurra!” shouted the mob—“hurra!” and they danced like maniacs round the fire; looking, in fact, like so many wild Indians, dancing round their roasting victims, or some demons at an infernal feast.

The torch had been put to twenty different places, and the flames united into one, and suddenly shot up with a velocity, and roared with a sound that caused many who were present to make a precipitate retreat from the hall.

This soon became a necessary measure of self-preservation, and it required no urging to induce them to quit a place that was burning rapidly and even furiously.

“Get the poles and firewood—get faggots,” shouted some of the mob, and, lo, it was done almost by magic. They brought the faggots and wood piled up for winter use, and laid them near all the doors, and especially the main entrance. Nay, every gate or door belonging to the outhouses was brought forward and placed upon the fire, which now began to reach the upper stories.

“Hurra—fire! Hurra—fire!”

And a loud shout of triumph came from the mob as they viewed the progress of the flames, as they came roaring and tearing through the house doors and the windows.

Each new victory of the element was a signal to the mob for a cheer; and a hearty cheer, too, came from them.

“Where is the vampyre now?” exclaimed one.

“Ha! where is he?” said another.

“If he be there,” said the man, pointing to the flames, “I reckon he’s got a warm berth of it, and, at the same time, very little water to boil in his kettle.”

“Ha, ha! what a funny old man is Bob Mason; he’s always poking fun; he’d joke if his wife were dying.”

“There is many a true word spoken in jest,” suggested another; “and, to my mind, Bob Mason wouldn’t be very much grieved if his wife were to die.”

“Die?” said Bob; “she and I have lived and quarrelled daily a matter of five-and-thirty years, and, if that ain’t enough to make a man sick of being married, and of his wife, hand me, that’s all. I say I am tired.”

This was said with much apparent sincerity, and several laughed at the old man’s heartiness.

“It’s all very well,” said the old man; “it’s all very well to laugh about matters you don’t understand, but I know it isn’t a joke—not a bit on it. I tells you what it is, neighbour, I never made but one grand mistake in all my life.”

“And what was that?”

“To tie myself to a woman.”

“Why, you’d get married to-morrow if your wife were to die to-day,” said one.

“If I did, I hope I may marry a vampyre. I should have something then to think about. I should know what’s o’clock. But, as for my old woman, lord, lord, I wish Sir Francis

Varney had had her for life. I'll warrant when the next natural term of his existence came round again, he wouldn't be in no hurry to renew it; if he did, I should say that vampyres had the happy lot of managing women, which I haven't got."

"No, nor anybody else."

A loud shout now attracted their attention, and, upon looking in the quarter whence it came, they descried a large body of people coming towards them; from one end of the mob could be seen along string of red coats.

"The red coats!" shouted one.

"The military!" shouted another.

It was plain the military who had been placed in the town to quell disturbances, had been made acquainted with the proceedings at Sir Francis Varney's house, and were now marching to relieve the place, and to save the property.

They were, as we have stated, accompanied by a vast concourse of people, who came out to see what they were going to see, and seeing the flames at Sir Francis Varney's house, they determined to come all the way, and be present.

The military, seeing the disturbance in the distance, and the flames issuing from the windows, made the best of their way towards the scene of tumult with what speed they could make.

"Here they come," said one.

"Yes, just in time to see what is done."

"Yes, they can go back and say we have burned the vampyre's house down—hurra!"

"Hurra!" shouted the mob, in prolonged accents, and it reached the ears of the military.

The officer urged the men onwards, and they responded to his words, by exerting themselves to step out a little faster.

"Oh, they should have been here before this; it's no use, now, they are too late."

"Yes, they are too late."

"I wonder if the vampyre can breathe through the smoke, and live in fire," said one.

"I should think he must be able to do so, if he can stand shooting, as we know he can—you can't kill a vampyre; but yet he must be consumed, if the fire actually touches him, but not unless he can bear almost anything."

“So he can.”

“Hurra!” shouted the mob, as a tall flame shot through the top windows of the house.

The fire had got the ascendant now, and no hopes could be entertained, however extravagant, of saving the smallest article that had been left in the mansion.

“Hurra!” shouted the mob with the military, who came up with them.

“Hurra!” shouted the others in reply.

“Quick march!” said the officer; and then, in a loud, commanding tone, he shouted, “Clear the way, there! clear the way.”

“Ay, there’s room enough for you,” said old Mason; “what are you making so much noise about?”

There was a general laugh at the officer, who took no notice of the words, but ordered his men up before the burning pile, which was now an immense mass of flame.

The mob who had accompanied the military now mingled with the mob that had set the house of Sir Francis Varney on fire ere the military had come up with them.

“Halt!” cried out the officer; and the men, obedient to the word of command, halted, and drew up in a double line before the house.

There were then some words of command issued, and some more given to some of the subalterns, and a party of men, under the command of a sergeant, was sent off from the main body, to make a circuit of the house and grounds.

The officer gazed for some moments upon the burning pile without speaking; and then, turning to the next in command, he said in low tones, as he looked upon the mob,—

“We have come too late.”

“Yes, much.”

“The house is now nearly gutted.”

“It is.”

“And those who came crowding along with us are inextricably mingled with the others who have been the cause of all this mischief: there’s no distinguishing them one from another.”

“And if you did, you could not say who had done it, and who had not; you could prove nothing.”

“Exactly.”

“I shall not attempt to take prisoners, unless any act is perpetrated beyond what has been done.”

“It is a singular affair.”

“Very.”

“This Sir Francis Varney is represented to be a courteous, gentlemanly man,” said the officer.

“No doubt about it, but he’s beset by a parcel of people who do not mind cutting a throat if they can get an opportunity of doing so.”

“And I expect they will.”

“Yes, when there is a popular excitement against any man, he had better leave this part at once and altogether. It is dangerous to tamper with popular prejudices; no man who has any value for his life ought to do so. It is a sheer act of suicide.”

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXVII

We crouched in the shadows, the Earthlight filtering down to us. The skulking figure of Miko had vanished; but I was sure he was out there somewhere on the crags, lurking, maneuvering to where he could strike us with his ray. Anita's metal-gloved hand was on my arm; in my ear-diaphragm her voice sounded eager:

"What was the signal, Gregg?"

I told her everything.

"Oh Gregg! The Martian ship coming!"

Her mind clung to that as the most important thing. But not so myself. To me there was only the realization that Anita was caught out here, almost at the mercy of Miko's ray. Grantline's men could not get out to help us, nor could I get Anita into the camp.

She added, "Where do you suppose the ship is?"

"Twenty or thirty thousand miles up, probably."

The stars and the Earth were visible over us. Somewhere up there, disclosed by Grantline's instruments but not yet discernible to the naked eye, Miko's reinforcements were hovering.

We lay for a moment in silence. It was horribly nerve straining. Miko could be creeping up on us. Would he dare chance my sudden fire? Creeping—or would he make a swift, unexpected rush?

The feeling that he was upon us abruptly swept me. I jumped to my feet, against Anita's effort to hold me. Where was he now? Was my imagination playing me tricks?...

I sank back. "That ship should be here in a few hours."

I told her what Grantline's signal had suggested; the ship was hovering overhead. It must be fairly close; for Grantline's telescope had revealed its identity as an outlaw flyer, unmarked by any of the standard code identification lights. It was doubtless too far away as yet to have located the whereabouts of Grantline's camp. The Martian brigands knew that we were in the vicinity of Archimedes, but no more than that. Searching this glowing Moon surface, our tiny local semaphore beams would certainly pass unnoticed.

But as the brigand ship approached now—dropping close to Archimedes as it probably would—our danger was that Miko and his men would then signal it, join it, and reveal the camp's location. And the brigand attack would be upon us!

I told this now to Anita. "The signal from Grantline said, 'Unless you can stop them.'"

It was an appeal to me. But how could I stop them? What could I do, alone out here with Anita, to cope with this enemy?

Anita made no comment.

I added, "That ship will land near Archimedes, within an hour or two. If Grantline can repair the ports, and I can get you inside...."

Again she made no comment. Then suddenly she gripped me. "Gregg, look there!"

Out through the gully break in our bowl the figure of Miko showed! He was running. But not at us. Circling the summit, leaping to keep himself behind the upstanding crags. He passed the head of the staircase; he did not descend it, but headed off along the summit of the crater rim.

I stood up to watch him. "Where's he going!"

I let Anita stand up beside me, cautiously at first, for it occurred to me it might be a ruse to cover some other of Miko's men who might be lurking near.

But the summit seemed clear. The figure of Miko was a thousand feet away now. We could see the tiny blob of it bobbing over the rocks. Then it plunged down—not into the crater valley, but out toward the open Moon surface.

Miko had abandoned his attack on us. The reason seemed plain. He had come here from his encampment with Coniston ahead to lure and kill Wilks. When this was done, Coniston had flashed his signal to Miko, who was hiding nearby.

It was not like the brigand leader to remain in the background. Miko was no coward. But Coniston could impersonate Wilks, whereas Miko's giant stature at once would reveal his identity. Miko had been engaged in smashing the ports. He had looked up and seen me kill Coniston. He had come to assail me. And then he had read Grantline's message to me. It was his first knowledge that his ship was at hand. With the camp exits inoperative, Grantline and his men were imprisoned. Miko had made an effort to kill me. He did not know my companion was Anita. But the effort was taking too long; with his ship at hand, it was Miko's best move to return to his own camp, rejoin his men, and await their opportunity to signal the ship.

At least, so I reasoned it. Anita and I stood alone. What could we do?

We went to the brink of the cliff. The unlighted Grantline buildings showed vaguely in the Earthlight.

I said, "We'll go down. I'll leave you there. You can wait at the port. They'll repair it soon."

"And what will you do, Gregg?"

I did not intend to tell her. "Hurry, Anita!"

"Gregg, let me go with you."

She jerked away from me and bounded back up the stairs. I caught her on the summit.

"Anita!"

"I'm going with you."

"You're going to stay here."

"I'm not!"

This exasperating controversy!

"Anita, please."

"I'll be safer with you than waiting here, Gregg." And she added, "Besides, I won't stay and you can't make me."



We ran along the crater top. At its distant edge the lower plain spread before us. Far down, and far away on the distant broken surface, the leaping figure of Miko showed. He plunged down the broken outer slope, reached the level. Soon, as we ran, the little Grantline crater faded behind us.

Anita ran more skillfully than I. Ten minutes or so passed. We had seen Miko and the direction he was taking, but down here on the plain we could no longer see him. It struck me that our chase was purposeless and dangerous. Suppose Miko were to see us following him? Suppose he stopped and lay in ambush to fire at us as we came leaping heedlessly by?

“Anita, wait!”

I drew her down amid a group of tumbled boulders. And then abruptly she clung to me.

“Gregg, I know what we can do! Gregg, don’t tell me you won’t let me try it!”

I listened to her plan. Incredible! Incredibly dangerous. Yet, as I pondered it, the very daring of the scheme seemed the measure of its possible success. The brigands would never imagine we could be so rash!

“But Anita—”

“Gregg, you’re stupid!” It was her turn to be exasperated.

But I was in no mood for daring. My mind was obsessed with Anita’s safety. I had been planning that we might see the glow of Miko’s encampment and decide on some course of action.

“But, Gregg, the safety of the treasure—of all the Grantline men....”

“To the infernal with that! It’s you, your safety—”

“My safety, then! If you put me in the camp and the brigands attack it and I am killed—what then? But this plan of mine, if we can do it, Gregg, will mean safety in the end for all of us.”

And it seemed possible. We crouched, discussing it. So daring a thing!

The brigand ship would come down near Archimedes. That was fifty miles from Grantline. The brigands from Mars would not have seen the dark Grantline buildings hidden in the little crater pit. They would wait for Miko and his men to make their whereabouts known.

Miko's encampment was ahead of us now, undoubtedly. We had been following him toward the Mare Imbrium. Or at least, we hoped so. He would signal his ship. But Anita and I, closer to it, would also signal it; and, posing as brigands, would join it!

"Remember, Gregg, I remain Anita Prince, George's sister." Her voice trembled as she mentioned her dead brother. "They know that George was in Miko's pay, and I as his sister, will help to convince them."

This daring scheme! If we could join the ship, we might be able to persuade its leader that Miko's distant signals were merely a ruse of Grantline to lure the brigands in that direction. A long range projector from the ship would kill Miko and his men as they came forward to join it! And then we would falsely direct the brigands, lead them away from Grantline and the treasure.

"Gregg, we must try it."

Heaven help me, I yielded to her persuasion!

We turned at right angles and ran toward where the distant frowning walls of Archimedes loomed against the starlit sky.