

DAYS OF HIGH ADVENTURE BEGINS!
GODS OF THE NORTH BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Schlock!

WEBZINE
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ALSO FEATURING:

KRAMPUSZ
BY NATHAN ROWARK

STATE OF EMERGENCY:
ESCAPE FROM LIBERTY PARK
BY DAVID CHRISTOPHER

Vol. 2 Iss. 5
11 Dec. 2011



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

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

**Vol. 2, Issue 5
11 December 2011**

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This Edition

**This week's cover illustration is "The Devil in Iron" by Margaret Brundage.
Cover design by C Priest Brumley.**

Editorial by Gavin Chappell

Days of High Adventure: Gods of the North by Robert E Howard - *Conan pursues a beautiful girl across the ice-fields. But who is she? And who is her father?* SWORD AND SORCERY

Krampusz by Nathan Rowark - *A twisted Father Christmas...* POETRY

The Hettford Witch Hunt Part Three by James Rhodes - *Shakespeare's Sister turns fortune-teller...* OCCULT SIT-COM

State of Emergency - Part Seventeen by David Christopher - *Will and Mercer seek escape from Liberty Park ...* SCIENCE FICTION

The Doom of the Norns by Catriona Green - *Two brothers go to war against each other in this retelling of Old Norse saga...* SWORD AND SORCERY

By Thy Side I Stand by Obsidian M. Tesla - *By thy side I stand, resolute and blood soaked...* POETRY

What Surrealism Means to Me by Obsidian M. Tesla - *A thousand hungry penguins marching over a purple sand-dune...* SURREALISM

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

Schlock! Classic Serial: Brigands of the Moon (Part 28) by Ray Cummings - *As I peered into the faces of these men from Mars, I cursed myself for the wilful rashness which had brought Anita into this...* SPACE OPERA

EDITORIAL

Two announcements to make: the publication of the long awaited PSEUDONOMICON – SCHLOCK ANTHOLOGY #1 and FANTASMAGORIANA – TALES OF THE DEAD FROM THE VILLA DIODATI. See their own pages for details.

This week also sees the beginning of *Days of High Adventure*, a collection of short stories and novellas written by the Texan writer Robert E Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian and many other steely-thewed heroes.

In this addition, we have more poetry from Nathan Rowark, who is also appearing in [Deadman's Tome](#), as is our very own C Priest Brumley, with his *On the Subject of Funerals*. James Rhodes, whose *Hettford Witch Hunt* continues, has also been published this week in [Mungbeing Magazine](#). Meanwhile, Todd Nelsen's story [Master Apprentice](#) has featured in Aphelion Webzine, while David Christopher, (whose *State of Emergency* continues this week with Chapter 17: Escape from Liberty Park), is appearing in Leeds Crown Court, charged with offences relating to the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005. We also see the return of Catriona Green, with another sword and sorcery mini-epic retelling of Old Icelandic saga, and two poems from Obsidian Tesla, who has apparently been at the absinthe.

Gavin Chappell.

DAYS OF HIGH ADVENTURE: a selection of the works of Robert E Howard

Robert E Howard was a Texan pulp writer whose promising literary career ended dramatically in 1936 when he committed suicide. The son of an itinerant physician, he had spent much of his childhood wandering Texan towns during the oil boom, before his

family settled in Cross Plains. Here Howard developed his literary interests, studied at the local college, and became an amateur boxer. This combination of intellectual pursuits and violence infuses much of his work, almost all of which was one form or another of adventure fiction.

His first break as a writer was with the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, which accepted his caveman story *Spear and Fang*, which will appear later in this series. He went on to invent the subgenre of fantasy that Fritz Leiber named *swords and sorcery*, with characters such as Solomon Kane, Kull of Atlantis, and most famous of all, Conan the Barbarian.

His career as a pulp writer for this and other magazines during the Depression meant that at one point he was the best-paid man in Cross Plains. However, his close relationship with his mother and her development of a terminal illness, culminated in his tragic suicide at the age of thirty.

His pulp fiction was of a far higher quality than that of many of his contemporaries, and although too racy to strike a chord amongst literary critics, his phenomenal influence has been recognised posthumously. Only JRR Tolkien has been more influential in the development of the fantasy genre. In particular, Conan has joined the ranks of pulp immortals such as Tarzan and James Bond, inspiring artists like Frank Frazetta and Boris Vallejo, spawning pastiches, comic strips, blockbuster movies, and cartoons.

Gathered together in this collection are stories that feature Conan and other heroes; Solomon Kane, Bran Mak Morn, Kull and many more. Welcome to *Days of High Adventure*.

GODS OF THE NORTH by Robert E Howard

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures glared at each other. In that utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a dead world. In the brooding silence they stood face to face.

Both were tall men, built like tigers. Their shields were gone, their corselets battered and dented. Blood dried on their mail; their swords were stained red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes. One was beardless and black-maned. The locks and beard of the other were red as the blood on the sunlit snow.

“Man,” said he, “tell me your name, so that my brothers in Vanaheim may know who was the last of Wulfhere’s band to fall before the sword of Heimdul.”

“Not in Vanaheim,” growled the black-haired warrior, “but in Valhalla will you tell your brothers that you met Conan of Cimmeria.”

Heimdul roared and leaped, and his sword flashed in deathly arc. Conan staggered and his vision was filled with red sparks as the singing blade crashed on his helmet, shivering into bits of blue fire. But as he reeled he thrust with all the power of his broad shoulders behind the humming blade. The sharp point tore through brass scales and bones and heart, and the red-haired warrior died at Conan’s feet.

The Cimmerian stood upright, trailing his sword, a sudden sick weariness assailing him. The glare of the sun on the snow cut his eyes like a knife and the sky seemed shrunken and strangely apart. He turned away from the trampled expanse where yellow-bearded warriors lay locked with red-haired slayers in the embrace of death. A few steps he took, and the glare of the snow fields was suddenly dimmed. A rushing wave of blindness engulfed him and he sank down into the snow, supporting himself on one mailed arm, seeking to shake the blindness out of his eyes as a lion might shake his mane.

A silvery laugh cut through his dizziness, and his sight cleared slowly. He looked up; there was a strangeness about all the landscape that he could not place or define--an unfamiliar tinge to earth and sky. But he did not think long of this. Before him, swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman. Her body was like ivory to his dazed gaze, and save for a light veil of gossamer, she was naked as the day. Her slender bare feet were whiter than the snow they spurned. She laughed down at the bewildered warrior. Her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains, and poisonous with cruel mockery.

“Who are you?” asked the Cimmerian. “Whence come you?”

“What matter?” Her voice was more musical than a silver-stringed harp, but it was edged with cruelty.

“Call up your men,” said he, grasping his sword. “Yet though my strength fail me, they shall not take me alive. I see that you are of the Vanir.”

“Have I said so?”

His gaze went again to her unruly locks, which at first glance he had thought to be red. Now he saw that they were neither red nor yellow but a glorious compound of both colors. He gazed spell-bound. Her hair was like elfin-gold; the sun struck it so dazzlingly that he could scarcely bear to look upon it. Her eyes were likewise neither wholly blue nor wholly grey, but of shifting colors and dancing lights and clouds of colors he could not define. Her full red lips smiled, and from her slender feet to the blinding crown of her billowy hair, her ivory body was as perfect as the dream of a god. Conan’s pulse hammered in his temples.

“I can not tell,” said he, “whether you are of Vanaheim and mine enemy, or of Asgard and my friend. Far have I wandered, but a woman like you I have never seen. Your locks blind me with their brightness. Never have I seen such hair, not even among the fairest daughters of the Aesir. By Ymir--”

“Who are you to swear by Ymir?” she mocked. “What know you of the gods of ice and snow, you who have come up from the south to adventure among an alien people?”

“By the dark gods of my own race!” he cried in anger. “Though I am not of the golden haired Aesir, none has been more forward in sword-play! This day I have seen four score men fall, and I alone have survived the field where Wulfhere’s reavers met the wolves of Bragi. Tell me, woman, have you seen the flash of mail out across the snow-plains, or seen armed men moving upon the ice?”

“I have seen the hoar-frost glittering in the sun,” she answered. “I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows.”

He shook his head with a sigh.

“Niord should have come up with us before the battle joined. I fear he and his fighting-men have been ambushed. Wulfhere and his warriors lie dead.

“I had thought there was no village within many leagues of this spot, for the war carried us far, but you can not have come a great distance over these snows, naked as you are. Lead me to your tribe, if you are of Asgard, for I am faint with blows and the weariness of strife.”

“My village is further than you can walk, Conan of Cimmeria,” she laughed.

Spreading her arms wide, she swayed before him, her golden head lolling sensuously, her scintillant eyes half shadowed beneath their long silken lashes. “Am I not beautiful, oh man?”

“Like Dawn running naked on the snows,” he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.

“Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me?” she chanted in maddening mockery. “Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools, Conan of the black hair. You can not follow where I would lead.”

With an oath the Cimmerian heaved himself up on his feet, his blue eyes blazing, his dark scarred face contorted. Rage shook his soul, but desire for the taunting figure before him hammered at his temples and drove his wild blood fiercely through his veins. Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being, so that earth and sky swam red to his dizzy gaze. In the madness that swept upon him, weariness and faintness were swept away.

He spoke no word as he drove at her, fingers spread to grip her soft flesh. With a shriek of laughter she leaped back and ran, laughing at him over her white shoulder. With a low growl Conan followed. He had forgotten the fight, forgotten the mailed warriors who lay in their blood, forgotten Niord and the reavers who had failed to reach the fight. He had thought only for the slender white shape which seemed to float rather than run before him.

Out across the white blinding plain the chase led. The trampled red field fell out of sight behind him, but still Conan kept on with the silent tenacity of his race. His mailed feet broke through the frozen crust; he sank deep in the drifts and forged through them by sheer strength. But the girl danced across the snow light as a feather floating across a pool; her naked feet barely left their imprint on the hoarfrost that overlaid the crust. In spite of the fire in his veins, the cold bit through warrior's mail and fur-lined tunic; but the girl in her gossamer veil ran as lightly: as gaily as if she danced through the palm and rose gardens of Poitain.

On and on she led, and Conan followed. Black curses drooled through the Cimmerian's parched lips. The great veins in his temples swelled and throbbed and his teeth gnashed.

"You can not escape me!" he roared. "Lead me into a trap and I'll pile the heads of your kinsmen at your feet! Hide from me and I'll tear apart the mountains to find you! I'll follow you to hell!"

Her maddening laughter floated back to him, and foam flew from the barbarian's lips. Further and further into the wastes she led him. The land changed; the wide plains gave way to low hills, marching upward in broken ranges. Far to the north he caught a glimpse of towering mountains, blue with the distance, or white with the eternal snows. Above these mountains shone the flaring rays of the borealis. They spread fan-wise into the sky, frosty blades of cold flaming light, changing in color, growing and brightening.

Above him the skies glowed and crackled with strange lights and gleams. The snow shone weirdly, now frosty blue, now icy crimson, now cold silver. Through a shimmering icy realm of enchantment Conan plunged doggedly onward, in a crystalline maze where the only reality was the white body dancing across the glittering snow beyond his reach--ever beyond his reach.

He did not wonder at the strangeness of it all, not even when two gigantic figures rose up to bar his way. The scales of their mail were white with hoar-frost; their helmets and their axes were covered with ice. Snow sprinkled their locks; in their beards were spikes of icicles; their eyes were cold as the lights that streamed above them.

"Brothers!" cried the girl, dancing between them. "Look who follows! I have brought you a man to slay! Take his heart that we may lay it smoking on our father's board!"

The giants answered with roars like the grinding of ice-bergs on a frozen shore and heaved up their shining axes as the maddened Cimmerian hurled himself upon them. A frosty blade flashed before his eyes, blinding him with its brightness, and he gave back a terrible stroke that sheared through his foe's thigh. With a groan the victim fell, and at the instant Conan was dashed into the snow, his left shoulder numb from the blow of the survivor, from which the Cimmerian's mail had barely saved his life. Conan saw the remaining giant looming high above him like a colossus carved of ice, etched against the cold glowing sky. The axe fell, to sink through the snow and deep into the frozen earth as Conan hurled himself aside and leaped to his feet. The giant roared and wrenched his axe free, but even as he did, Conan's sword sang down. The giant's knees bent and he sank slowly into the snow, which turned crimson with the blood that gushed from his half-severed neck.

Conan wheeled, to see the girl standing a short distance away, staring at him in wide-eyed horror, all the mockery gone from her face. He cried out fiercely and the blood-drops flew from his sword as his hand shook in the intensity of his passion.

“Call the rest of your brothers!” he cried. “I'll give their hearts to the wolves! You can not escape me--”

With a cry of fright she turned and ran fleetly. She did not laugh now, nor mock him over her white shoulder. She ran as for her life, and though he strained every nerve and threw, until his temples were like to burst and the snow swam red to his gaze, she drew away from him, dwindling in the witch-fire of the skies, until she was a figure no bigger than a child, then a dancing white flame on the snow, then a dim blur in the distance. But grinding his teeth until the blood started from his gums, he reeled on, and he saw the blur grow to a dancing white flame, and the flame to a figure big as a child; and then she was running less than a hundred paces ahead of him, and slowly the space narrowed, foot by foot.

She was running with effort now, her golden locks blowing free; he heard the quick panting of her breath, and saw a flash of fear in the look she cast over her white shoulder. The grim endurance of the barbarian had served him well. The speed ebbed from her flashing white legs; she reeled in her gait. In his untamed soul leaped up the fires of hell she had fanned so well. With an inhuman roar he closed in on her, just as she wheeled with a haunting cry and flung out her arms to fend him off.

His sword fell into the snow as he crushed her to him. Her lithe body bent backward as she fought with desperate frenzy in his iron arms. Her golden hair blew about his face, blinding him with its sheen; the feel of her slender body twisting in his mailed arms drove him to blinder madness. His strong fingers sank deep into her smooth flesh; and that flesh was cold as ice. It was as if he embraced not a woman of human flesh and blood, but a woman of flaming ice. She writhed her golden head aside, striving to avoid the fierce kisses that bruised her red lips.

“You are cold as the snows,” he mumbled dazedly. “I will warm you with the fire in my own blood--”

With a scream and a desperate wrench she slipped from his arms, leaving her single gossamer garment in his grasp. She sprang back and faced him, her golden locks in wild disarray, her white bosom heaving, her beautiful eyes blazing with terror. For an instant he stood frozen, awed by her terrible beauty as she posed naked against the snows.

And in that instant she flung her arms toward the lights that glowed in the skies above her and cried out in a voice that rang in Conan’s ears for ever after: “Ymir! Oh, my father, save me!”

Conan was leaping forward, arms spread to seize her, when with a crack like the breaking of an ice mountain, the whole skies leaped into icy fire. The girl’s ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue flame so blinding that the Cimmerian threw up his hands to shield his eyes from the intolerable blaze. A fleeting instant, skies and snowy hills were bathed in crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen crimson fires. Then Conan staggered and cried out. The girl was gone. The glowing snow lay empty and bare; high above his head the witch-lights flashed and played in a frosty sky gone mad, and among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling thunder as of a gigantic war-chariot rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies.

Then suddenly the borealis, the snow-clad hills and the blazing heavens reeled drunkenly to Conan’s sight; thousands of fire-balls burst with showers of sparks, and the sky itself became a titanic wheel which rained stars as it spun. Under his feet the snowy hills heaved up like a wave, and the Cimmerian crumpled into the snows to lie motionless.

In a cold dark universe, whose sun was extinguished eons ago, Conan felt the movement of life, alien and unguessed. An earthquake had him in its grip and was shaking him to and fro, at the same time chafing his hands and feet until he yelled in pain and fury and groped for his sword.

“He’s coming to, Horsa,” said a voice. “Haste--we must rub the frost out of his limbs, if he’s ever to wield sword again.”

“He won’t open his left hand,” growled another. “He’s clutching something--”

Conan opened his eyes and stared into the bearded faces that bent over him. He was surrounded by tall golden-haired warriors in mail and furs.

“Conan! You live!”

“By Crom, Niord,” gasped the Cimmerian. ‘Am I alive, or are we all dead and in Valhalla?’”

“We live,” grunted the Aesir, busy over Conan’s half-frozen feet. “We had to fight our way through an ambush, or we had come up with you before the battle was joined. The corpses were scarce cold when we came upon the field. We did not find you among the dead, so we followed your spoor. In Ymir’s name, Conan, why did you wander off into the wastes of the north? We have followed your tracks in the snow for hours. Had a blizzard come up and hidden them, we had never found you, by Ymir!”

“Swear not so often by Ymir,” uneasily muttered a warrior, glancing at the distant mountains. “This is his land and the god bides among yonder mountains, the legends say.”

“I saw a woman,” Conan answered hazily. “We met Bragi’s men in the plains. I know not how long we fought. I alone lived. I was dizzy and faint. The land lay like a dream before me. Only now do all things seem natural and familiar. The woman came and taunted me. She was beautiful as a frozen flame from hell. A strange madness fell upon me when I looked at her, so I forgot all else in the world. I followed her. Did you not find her tracks? Or the giants in icy mail I slew?”

Niord shook his head.

“We found only your tracks in the snow, Conan.”

“Then it may be I am mad,” said Conan dazedly. “Yet you yourself are no more real to me than was the golden-locked witch who fled naked across the snows before me. Yet from under my very hands she vanished in icy flame.”

“He is delirious,” whispered a warrior.

“Not so!” cried an older man, whose eyes were wild and weird. “It was Atali, the daughter of Ymir, the frost-giant! To fields of the dead she comes, and shows herself to the dying! Myself when a boy I saw her, when I lay half-slain on the bloody field of Wolraven. I saw her walk among the dead in the snows, her naked body gleaming like ivory and her golden hair unbearably bright in the moonlight. I lay and howled like a dying dog because I could not crawl after her. She lures men from stricken fields into the wastelands to be slain by her brothers, the ice-giants, who lay men’s red hearts smoking on Ymir’s board. The Cimmerian has seen Atali, the frost-giant’s daughter!”

“Bah!” grunted Horsa. “Old Gorm’s mind was touched in his youth by a sword cut on the head. Conan was delirious from the fury of battle--look how his helmet is dented. Any of those blows might have addled his brain. It was an hallucination he followed into the wastes. He is from the south; what does he know of Atali?”

“You speak truth, perhaps,” muttered Conan. “It was all strange and weird ... by Crom!”

He broke off, glaring at the object that still dangled from his clenched left fist; the others gaped silently at the veil he held up--a wisp of gossamer that was never spun by human distaff.

THE END

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT

PREVIOUSLY ON HETTFORD...

A mysterious package arrived in the post for Dan. A little research finds the package to be a powerful death curse that Dan managed to pass on to Milton.

Carrie made her first appearance and gave Milton some crucial information. Gary was offered his first "real" job as an A Level teacher. Whereas Alison received some very unwelcome attention from Saul and Paul.

Episode Three: Quiz Night at The Quiet Woman Inn

1.

The serene haze of the twilight was roughly perturbed by the guttural throttle of a battered Rover failing to start.

Gary turned the key in the ignition a fourth time. The engine threatened to catch and then choked out, leaving only silence and an orange light indicating he should "Check Engine." Gary internally grumbled about the warning light's grammar but glancing at the look of irritation on Alison's face, he opted not to voice the concern.

"What's wrong with it now?"

There was a scathing tone to Alison's voice that Gary neither felt ready to chastise or accept.

"It won't go."

"I know that, why won't it go?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Every other bloke in the world would know."

"No they wouldn't, at best they'd say something like, I think the timing belt's slipping, I'll have to get Ron to tighten it, I don't have the tools."

Alison folded her arms.

“This would happen the one night I actually want to use it.”

“Yes, funny that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Gary waved his arms in frustration.

“I’ve told you, the damn thing’s sentient.”

“In what respect?”

“In the respect that it hears what you say about it and reacts accordingly.”

“Nothing to do with it being seventeen years old, I suppose? Try it again.”

“We can’t force it; we’ll just have to wait for it to come around.”

Gary sat, gently rubbing the dashboard.

“We could take it to the garage?” Alison suggested.

“No need to. Look, it is this simple - you can’t say anything nice about him because he gets embarrassed and then stops working.”

“Oh really.”

Gary did not have the expression of a man who was joking.

“I have told you this before. Remember you were talking about him last night.”

“All I said was that it was running well.”

“And now he’s stopped running.”

“So this is my fault?”

“No,” Gary made his voice as gently as possible, “it’s the car’s fault. You just inadvertently caused it to happen.”

“So it’s my fault?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, you wouldn’t would you? It’s all implied with you.”

Gary let the comment hang for a few seconds whilst he tried to think of a retort.

“For Christ’s sake, Alison. What’s an educated woman like you doing going to a fortune teller anyway?”

Alison sighed.

“OK, without even starting on the fact that you’re a witch hunter,” Alison paused until she was sure the comment had sunk in. “You remember the video of you and your little friend? How it appeared for one grainy showing and then reverted to the weird flashing light?”

“How could I conceivably forget?”

“Well that, you constantly shouting things like, “they’re burning Gilgamesh” in your sleep and the general weirdness around here has convinced me that there might be more to life than just our immediate surroundings.”

“But a fortune teller?”

Gary opened his hands and lifted them slightly.

“Everyone in the shop keeps talking about her and I’m just curious. Anyway, you were going there to meet up with your club for quiz night. It’s not inconveniencing you.”

“I’ll have to sit by myself for an hour.”

“Well, it’ll be no different to what you do at work.”

Gary tried the ignition again. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Do you want me to call a taxi?”

“Can we afford it?”

Gary looked nervous.

“Of course we can,” he told her.

2.

Dan and Carrie were sat at the kitchen table. Milton was milling around, trying to out-busy the nervousness he felt about seeing Carrie again. She was dressed in jeans, boots and a very flattering blouse, it was almost too much for him to cope with.

“How was it you took your tea again?” he asked her.

“Orally and with milk.”

“Good job. One milky oral coming up.”

Milton considered what he had just said. He clenched his lips together. Much to his relief Carrie chuckled at him. Then, she turned her attention to Dan.

“So Dan, tell me about this test.”

Dan was holding a newspaper and pretending to be interested in its contents. It was more dignified than Milton’s approach to handling nerves.

“All will be revealed in due time.”

“Mysterious,” Carrie said, “Are you this thorough about everything?”

“We’re very selective about new members.”

“He’s not joking,” Milton interjected, “we only fully trusted Gary after he got himself captured.”

“What happened?”

Dan let his newspaper drop so that he could maintain serious eye contact.

“It was a classic boy in cage event, right out of the fairy tales.”

“So how did you rescue him?”

“Shoved the witch in the oven,” Milton quipped, “Did you want any biscuits? I’ve got digestive and rich tea.”

“I’ll have a couple of digestives.”

Dan frowned in disapproval.

“You should wait until after the test before you eat anything.”

Milton held the plate full of biscuits towards Carrie.

“Go on, a couple of bickies won’t hurt.”

Carrie took a few and dunked one in to her cup of tea. With a mouthful of biscuit she asked:

“So what’s the itinerary for tonight?”

“Well, first the test,” Dan declared.

“And if you’re still up for it after the test, there’s the quiz night at the Quiet Woman - our local. We always lose but it’s a laugh.”

Milton tried to compose his expression to suggest that having fun was something that he and Dan regularly indulged in. However, he was a touch concerned that he might have pulled that same expression upon soiling himself.

“No witch hunting?” Carrie asked.

“Not tonight,” said Milton, “believe me, the quiz is more fun anyway.”

“Alright, well let’s get the test out of the way then. What do I have to do?”

“Hang on.”

Dan stood up and left the room. Milton clenched his fists and then stretched out his fingers.

“So how are you with trivia?”

“I’ve got a really good memory,” Carrie told him, “but not usually for stuff that might ever come in useful.”

“Did you ever go to college or anything?”

Before Carrie could answer him, Dan burst back into the room holding an unusually thick and ancient Bible in one hand and a set of bathroom weighing scales in the other.

“I’m back,” he declared with bombastic glee.

“What’s that for?”

“Basically we have to weigh the Bible and then weigh you to see which weighs the most.”

Carrie stared from Dan to Milton.

“You’re kidding right?”

The two friends shook their heads in unison.

“Why?”

“It’s an old test dating from the Seventeenth Century. Basically the idea was that if you weighed less than the Bible then you weren’t equal to its truth.”

Carrie shook her head in amazement.

“That’s completely stupid.”

“Yes it is. However, there was some truth behind the idea. Witches, because of their unique cellular structure, have a very low density. Actually that’s how they are able to fly. If your own mass is lesser than that of this little book then we can safely say that you’re a witch.”

Milton stepped in:

“Which we’re sure you’re not, it’s just a precaution after all. One rule for everybody.”

“And you’ve both done this test?”

“We have very boring lives,” Milton confessed.

“Let’s get started then.”

Dan placed the weighing scale on the floor, then placed the Bible on top of it. He stared at the scale and when he was sure of its reading, he looked up at Carrie.

“Your turn now. You have to step on the scale.”

“No way, you cheeky git.”

“There’s no other safe way,” Dan responded, “we have to check your weight.”

“You don’t meet many women do you?”

Milton and Dan shook their heads in unison.

“I’ve an idea, why don’t you put the Bible on Milton’s knee? Then when you take it off, I can sit on it and he can see which was the heaviest.”

“I really must insist...”

“I’ll be able to tell.”

Milton patted his knee. Dan eyed him.

“If there’s any doubt, Carrie will do it your way, won’t you Carrie?”

Milton shot a conspiratorial wink at Carrie.

“Oh, sure,” she said.

“Go on then,” Dan puffed.

Milton sat down. With great solemnity, Dan placed the Bible on Milton’s knee. Then, after he had removed it, Carrie wiggled to get comfortable in its place.

“See, I’m much heavier.”

“Is she?”

“She’s very light actually. Why don’t you shift on to my right knee? Dan, you put the Bible on my left knee, then we can be certain.”

Dan and Carrie both obliged Milton. He considered the matter:

“Well, there’s not a huge amount in it but I can at least say categorically that Carrie weighs more than the Bible.”

Carrie jumped up and cheered:

“Hooray, now can we go to the pub?”

“Best to eat first, do you like pizza?” Milton reached for the phone.

“Everybody likes pizza, Milton, it’s like kittens,” Dan declared, “But we’ll have to go now or we’ll be late.”

3.

Gary and Alison walked into the Quiet Woman Inn holding hands. It was a typical mock-Tudor village pub, replete with a selection of draught beers from local breweries. The bar was almost entirely empty.

“So let’s get the plan sorted out,” said Gary, “you go in to the back room and have fun and I’ll just sit out here all alone.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive. Anyway, your mates’ll be along in a minute.”

“Thirty minutes if I’m lucky.”

“I’ll see you later, OK?”

Alison gave Gary a peck on the cheek.

“I love you.”

Gary waved her off.

“Go on, you’ll be wiping dirt off my face with your saliva next.”

Alison walked into the back room.

4.

There was very little room in the back room of the Quiet Woman Inn, it was literally filled with customers. There was almost nobody waiting at the bar and Alison waved to the bored looking barmaid.

“Pint of McGluckens please,” said Alison.

“Coming up.”

The barmaid pulled the muddy ale out of the tap as if it were resisting her.

“Are all these people here for the quiz night?” Alison asked.

“No, the quiz night’s in the other room, these are here for Julie - the fortune teller.”

“Is there a queue?”

The barmaid gave an indifferent shrug.

“I don’t know how it works; you’ll have to ask around. Two pounds eighty five, please.”

5.

The front room of the bar was rapidly beginning to fill. Gary had shooed several people away from the empty chairs at his table and people were starting to eye him with menace. He couldn’t even get a drink because he’d lose the table if he did. In front of him, three pint glasses stood empty except for the sticky white residue of their heads. There was also a white sheet of paper and a pencil.

“Eh up!” Milton said from behind him.

“Started early, did you?” Dan motioned at the empty glasses.

Gary nodded:

“It’s your round, I already got the first one in.”

Milton pulled up a chair for their newest member.

“Carrie, this is Gary - Gary, Carrie. Please accept the introduction because I don’t plan on repeating it after a drink.”

“Pleased to meet you - are you all staying?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then either sit down or get me a drink, it’s been hell keeping this table.”

Milton sat down and Dan gave him a mean spirited glare.

“Usual? Usual?” Dan asked of Gary and Milton.

They nodded their consent.

“And Carrie, what’ll it be?”

“Do they do cocktails?”

“Not unless you count gin and tonic,” Milton smiled.

“See if they’ve got that alcopop that tastes like Vimto, and if they don’t have that I’ll take a snakebite and black.”

“A pint?” Dan asked.

“Why not?”

Milton and Gary gave quiet golf style claps.

“Keen choice,” Gary observed.

As Dan disappeared to the bar, Milton took charge of the answer sheet and pencil.

“First order of business, let’s pick a team name.”

“There’s no point, Dan’ll just argue it when we get back.”

“I don’t know why we bother trying to be clever with it. We never win the name bonus anyhow.”

Gary shrugged:

“We do it because it makes Dan tolerable.”

“We should pick something funny,” Carrie suggested, “like the Jug Lickers.”

“I’m up for that,” Milton said with greater enthusiasm than he would have preferred.

“Jug Lickers it is,” agreed Gary.

Dan’s thick fingers broke through the centre of the conversation as he placed all four pints on the table.

“Did we pick a name?”

“I think we’ve settled on the Jug Lickers.”

Dan sat down.

“Oh, you’re joking, you know they only give the prize to the clever ones.”

“Never us though.”

“Still, they only ever like double entendre if it’s being ironic.”

“We tried that with the Psychoanalytic Mother Focus,” Gary reminded him.

“And with Ditches and Hoes,” said Milton.

Gary took a large swig from his pint and wiped his lips with his hand:

“If we’re going to be ironic and clever we should just call ourselves something completely unexpected like The Application of Post Pre-Raphaelite Art within Neo-Post-Colonialism.”

Carrie laughed.

“Or aspects of naturalism within post-absurdist realism,” she suggested.

Milton and Dan looked concerned.

“No, we need to keep it simple,” Dan said, “funny and clever.”

“The Jug Lickers it is. Or shall we vote on it?”

“No, no, fine, keep your jugs joke.”

Milton leaned forward.

“Don’t worry, Carrie, he does this to everyone’s name suggestions.”

“Oh it’s fine, I’m getting used to Dan.”

“He’s an acquired taste,” said Gary, “like pigs feet.”

Dan went a little red.

“I just think if you’re going to do something you should do it right.”

“That all depends on whether you’re doing it for a laugh or not.”

“They’ll start the first question in a second. So now we’ve got you, hopefully we’ll at least place in the top ten.” Milton internally cursed his over enthusiasm when speaking to Carrie for the millionth time that evening.

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“We have to do better than with just these two,” Dan told her.

“I tell you, for someone with a degree in literature, Gary sure doesn’t know a crap about anything. Who wrote Anthony and Cleopatra? Plutarch, says Gary. He’s a bright lad, except when it comes to thinking and that. Isn’t that right Gary?”

Gary was unable to defend his literary allusion as his attention was focused elsewhere:

“I don’t fucking believe it.”

“What?”

Gary pointed to the other side of the room, where his nemeses the brothers Saul and Paul were chuckling over their pints.

“Those twats!”

“Who are they?” Carrie asked.

“Saul and Paul - our local xenophobic pranksters,” Milton explained. “They have a problem with Gary’s girlfriend.”

“They look harmless enough,” Carrie suggested.

“It’ll be alright,” Dan soothed with mild sarcasm, “you had a word with them, right?”

“Yeah, I reasoned that as Alison was from New Zealand by their own anti-immigration views they should be happy that she's come back to England. Also, that if they followed her home again I would stab them.”

“And they haven’t, right?”

“That’s not the point, their presence here offends me. “

“Let’s just leave it for tonight,” said Milton. “We’re here to win a quiz.”

The two brothers noticed Gary staring at them and Paul held two fingers up at him. Gary stood up, a look of fierce determination on his face. Milton stood up and intercepted him.

“Come on mate; let’s go grab something to eat.”

6.

Milton and Gary inhaled the fresh air as they walked.

“Now that I think of it, I’m not sure I’ve enough money for food.”

“On me mate,” said Gary.

“It’s OK, we can go to the garage: I’ll just steal it.”

“The offer still stands. Oh, and I want to buy your beer for the night.”

“Did you win the lottery?”

“No, but I tried that idea of yours about the horror books. Damn things have been selling like hotcakes. I even sold four books on Wicca off the back of it.”

“Glad to hear it. I hope it’s left you time to sort out your other problem.”

“Well, we’ve still got seven weeks to sort that out. I reckon I should stick with what’s going right for now.”

“Alright. Well, I’m on call if you need me.”

“You’re a good lad Gary. How’s it with you and Alison?”

“Dreadful, she’s at the fortune teller tonight.”

“You told me.”

Gary scratched his head.

“I figure she must be really sick of me if she’s asking for spiritual advice.”

“You believe in all that?”

“Fuck no, there’s no evidence to support it.”

“Me either,” said Milton, “but sometimes it can help people I suppose. You know, a lie to stop an aching pain. It must be nice to believe all your dead loved ones are happy and content.”

“I suppose it depends on who’s doing the telling. Let’s face it, you’ve got to be a bit of arse-bag to want to talk to dead people. So, this new girl?”

“Carrie.”

“Yes, she’s nice. Right?”

“Yeah,” Milton admitted, “she’s very nice.”

“So? You know?”

“You’re kidding right? I’m old enough to be her dad.”

Gary laughed.

“Her daddy perhaps, but not her dad.”

“Shut up. I’m not going to start a relationship with imminent death hanging over my head.”

“Sure, but you can sell pulp novels and go to the pub quiz.”

“Are you not interested in her?” Milton asked, “I thought with you and Alison on the outs...”

“Believe me, if Alison and I break up I’m becoming a wandering monk. Relationships are emotional hell - not to put you off. It hasn’t helped that we’re returning to the scene of my crime tonight.”

They arrived at Ron’s All Night Garage.

“Still at least Julie hasn’t shown up tonight,” Milton said with encouragement.

“Julie?”

“Shakespeare’s Sister.”

“Is Julie her real name?”

“Yup.”

“I wish I known that while I was doing it, I spent the night saying, “excuse me” every time I needed her attention.”

Gary pushed the door and they entered the garage. Gary began to pick out food items.

“You want some scotch eggs?”

“Why not.”

Gary took the food to the counter where a slender woman in her late forties was smoking a cigarette.

“Can I get a bag for all this?”

“Are you actually going to pay for it?”

“Of course not, I work here.”

Karen handed him a plastic bag.

“Here you go.”

Gary thanked her and turned to exit the shop.

7.

Dan and Carrie were sat staring at the compare in silence.

“Question Two, which British Prime Minister was shot for ignoring a letter from a constituent? A little clue, he is the only British Prime Minister ever to be assassinated.”

The announcer’s voice was needlessly emphatic for a pub quiz.

“I don’t know that one,” said Dan, “why don’t you just put down Pitt? It’s normally the elder or younger or something. Him or Gladstone. Or better still just write down the question.

Carrie wrote something down.

“It’s a shame the world never learnt anything from that.”

“What’s that?”

“A politician ignoring a letter and getting shot for it.”

“It can’t be anyone recent. Still, I suppose it must have been even more frustrating to have your letters ignored back when only about twelve people in the country were literate.”

“It’s always frustrating,” Carrie sighed.

“You don’t know the half of it. I wrote a virtually a novel’s worth of letters a week every week for ten years. I never heard back from one.”

“You’re more tenacious than me, I gave up after two months.”

“Witches?”

“I tried referring to them as sectarian activists in hope of being taken seriously.”

“If only people had lived my life, they’d see how serious it is - my dad, my mum, my granddad - all gone.”

Carrie nodded:

“It’s serious stuff. I wonder what the next question will be about.”

Dan shrugged. The announcer’s jaunty vowels interrupted them:

“Glad to hear that last question causing a bit of a stare. I know Jan’s looking to shake the hand of that gunman.”

The eponymous Jan raised a cheer, somewhere in the back of the room. Milton and Dan arrived back at their table placing their bag of ill-gotten gains in its centre.

“We haven’t missed much have we?” Milton asked.

“Shhh.”

The announcer had raised his microphone.

“OK if everybody’s ready, it’s a famous phrase and I’m sure you all think you know the answer. What does “sieg heil” actually mean?”

The announcer did an impression of Freddy Starr doing an impression of Hitler.

“It’s hail Hitler isn’t it?” Milton suggested.

“No,” barked Dan, “it’s victory (or triumph), welfare.”

“You would know.”

Dan smiled at the table.

“You know me, former war nerd. Being in the army cured me of that.”

Gary leaned over to look at the sheet of paper.

“Carrie, let’s see what you’ve got down there. Question two, Spencer Perceval - The only Prime Minister to be murdered?”

“Very good,” she told him.

“I know you didn’t get that one, Dan.”

“I might have.”

Gary pointed to the top of the paper.

“Question one - question mark.”

“Neither of us got that one.”

“What was the question?” Milton asked.

“Which band recorded the album *Congratulations I’m Sorry?*”

“Don’t all look at me,” said Gary.

Milton gestured at the other side of the room:

“I’m watching that team that always wins, right? And after every question they phone someone.”

“Winning is no price to pay for owning a mobile phone,” said Dan.

“Hey, I’ve got a mobile,” Carrie told them.

“Phone someone!” demanded Dan.

“I’ll check on Google, shall I?”

Milton and Dan stared at her in amazement.

8.

Alison was sat at a table on her own, nursing a pint. She was thinking about giving up and joining her boyfriend and his weird friends in the main bar. She was disturbed by the sound of a chair pulling up next to her.

“Oh, hello Alison,” said Mrs. Fuller, “do you know if Gary’s thought any more about the job?”

“Yes, thinking comes easy to Gary; it’s actually doing anything he has a problem with.”

“I’m sure he’ll come around in the end.”

“Yes, which is more than you can say for our turn at the fortune teller. Is there any queuing system here at all?”

“I think it’s like the accident and emergency room,” observed Mrs. Fuller, “she’s picking patients in order of severity.”

“Then I guess we should be flattered that we’re last in line.”

Julie’s voice called out from the other side of the room:

“I’m looking for someone whose name contains the letters J and E.”

“Hey, that’s me.”

Joan Fuller stood up to receive her fortune, then immediately sat down again.

“Someone else already got there.”

9.

“This one is ridiculously obscure,” said Carrie, “what was the name of the horse that Eadweard Muybridge first captured with motion photography?”

“They do seem more than usually hard tonight. I wonder why,” mused Gary.

“Let’s ask?”

Milton waved at a nearby glass collector.

“Excuse me. Why is the quiz so hard tonight?”

“They’re trying to cut down on people cheating with their phones. Hello Gary, nice to see you back.”

“Nice to be back.”

“Been avoiding her, have you?” asked the glass-collector. “Can’t say I blame you. Did you see her new hair?”

“No.”

“She’s gone blue now.”

“I’m surprised she’s not here tonight? I was stressing out about it.”

“She’s in the backroom. It’s packed back there. Are these empty?”

The glass-collector took their glasses and went about his job.

Milton raised his eyebrows at Gary.

“Are you worried - both of them in the same room?”

“No, now if I was back there... Besides I don’t think Alison will recognise her if she’s dyed her hair.”

“Ah,” said Dan, “but will she recognise Alison?”

“I don’t see why she would.”

“What’s going on?” Carrie asked.

“His girlfriend and his one night stand are both in the queue to see the fortune teller.”

Carrie chuckled.

“You better hope the fortune teller is not actually psychic.”

“Mercifully, I think that’s one thing I can actually hope for.”

“It’s all action for you tonight, hey?”

“In my experience all action leads to no action,” Gary told her.

Dan nodded his approval.

“Very Taoist.”

They were interrupted by the sound of the announcer.

“Question Six, according to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle is an electron a wave or a particle?”

“An easy one at last.”

Carrie wrote down the answer.

“You know,” Dan speculated, “I think we might win this week.”

“It’s a laugh anyway,” said Carrie. “Do you do this every week?”

“Without fail,” Dan told her.

“So when do you find time to do the Hettford Hunt stuff?”

“We’ve been doing it so long it’s just sort of blended in to our daily lives,” Milton told her.

“So if I keep coming to meetings I’ll be what?”

“Helping with the quiz night,” said Dan.

“We’ll call you up if there’s actually any work to do.”

Gary suddenly slapped the back of his neck.

“Ow!”

“What is it?”

“Something...”

Gary pulled his hand forward to reveal a paper clip.

Dan held up one finger like the great detective.

“Someone must have an elastic band.”

“I wonder who,” Gary said with undisguised irony.

Paul and Saul were behind him, their bodies animated by exaggerated nonchalance.

Gary clenched his fist.

“They’re just stupid kids,” said Carrie.

“You’re probably right.”

“Harmless,” agreed Milton.

Saul and Paul were having the following conversation:

“That little prick, thinks he can tell us what to do,” said Saul.

“Yeah well, we’re gonna get him tonight.”

“One way or the other.”

“Let’s do both,” sniggered Paul.

10.

The backroom was no less full than it had been an hour before.

“If I drink anymore I’ll be drunk,” said Mrs. Fuller.

“This hasn’t turned out to be much fun has it?”

“I don’t know, I’m quite enjoying it. It’s nice to have a bit of female company for a change. My Barry’s got two topics of conversation, football and cleaning.”

“I wouldn’t have taken him as the domesticated type.”

“It would be OK if he was domesticated, no, what Barry does is stand there and say things like, “this sink could do with a quick scrub.” I know, I say, if only there was someone near enough to the sink to reach it.”

“Gary’s the opposite, he doesn’t notice anything. You put up curtains and he’ll walk by them as if they’d always been there. I got a new couch two months ago and he still hasn’t noticed it.”

“Haven’t you said anything?”

“No, I’m keeping a diary. I want to see if there’s some kind of record or something.”

Julie’s voice piped up from the back of the room, it was beginning to get croaky.

“I’m afraid that I only have time to see one more person. I’ve put out a book and all of you that write your name in it will be seen first next week.”

“Should have had a proper queue. Shall we put our names down?” asked Mrs. Fuller.

“I suppose so. Are you at all interested in doing the quiz night?”

“Lovely.”

The two of them stood up and went to write their names down in Julie’s book. As Alison signed her name, Julie spoke up again:

“I’m looking for someone to whom the initials G. S. are significant.”

Mrs. Fuller nudged Alison.

“Ooh, that’s you.”

Alison shook her head, in feigned innocence. She just wanted to leave.

“You know, Gary Sparrow.”

“You’re right. But it doesn’t matter I think I can wait ‘till next week now.”

“No, it won’t be a minute or two. You go on, I’ll wait right here.”

Alison walked over to Julie and sat down. Julie smiled at her.

12.

Saul and Paul were talking to the barmaid.

“I’ll have a look in the back,” she told them.

“Cheers, Jelly love,” said Saul.

“Don’t call me Jelly, you know I hate it, and love.”

“You’ll always be Jelly to us.”

“Try and make it Angela when I’m at work. You better not be starting any trouble with this. ’Cause if you are...”

“We wouldn’t dream of it. We’re trying to do the right thing for once.”

“Is there anything else you need?”

“Well, now that you mention it.”

Saul was grinning from ear to ear.

13.

Julie drew a pentagram on the table in front of Alison and let her head fall backwards.

“OK, don’t tell me anything, I have to be able to hear the spirits. This can sometimes disturb.”

“I’ll try and contain my trepidation.”

“You are not from here, the spirits are calling but they’re distant.”

“How did you guess that,” said Alison in her New Zealand accent, when Julie didn’t answer she asked:

“Can’t they fly here or something?”

“Shhh, they want me to speak to you about G.S. G.S. is your lover right?”

Alison nodded cautiously.

“When the spirits show him, he looks like a tiny bird. Frightened.”

“Those are some good spirits.”

“He is a little bird, looking so vulnerable, but in his mouth are the teeth and tongue of a serpent. He has betrayed you, no?”

Julie was affecting the voice of a television gypsy for no good reason that Alison could ascertain. However, she was curious about the level of accuracy that the girl had reached, so she encouraged her:

”Go on.”

“They are showing me a place a huge green hill. It misses you.”

Julie flinched as if something had struck her face.

“The bird is in your way of this place; it spreads its wings and blocks the view. It spits poison one second and sings prettily the next.”

Julie slammed her hands on the table and let her eyes roll into the back of her head.

“An elemental hates you. You are interfering in a curse, staying where you should not. The stagnant pond is not to be drunk from, it has only entrapment and death. The lamb is dying away from its hill. Save the lamb.”

Julie slumped forward. Alison poked her to see if she was still alive.

“I’m sorry, it doesn’t normally come on me that heavily.”

“That’s OK, is there anything else?”

“That’s all I saw.”

“How much will that be?”

Julie held up her hand dramatically:

“I’m not going to charge you, but please, something out there must be worried about you. Listen to the spirits - go.”

“Thank you, you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Alison walked back to her friend.

“Well, that looked spooky,” said Mrs. Fuller.

14.

“Fifteenth and final question,” called the announcer, “which American president wrote the satirical story *A Witch Trial at Mount Holly*?”

“Lincoln,” said Dan, “he was the clever one wasn’t he?”

“If you ask me, William Henry Harrison had the most sense.”

Gary’s joke drew a table full of blank stares.

“He died thirty days in to his first term,” he explained.

“Was it Washington?” Carrie asked.

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Milton.

“As keeper of all knowledge in the whole cosmos I have to tell you that you’re both wrong.”

“So?”

“It was Thomas Jefferson,” Gary told them, “super intelligent human rights activist and barely sane white supremacist.”

“Are you sure?” asked Dan.

“Yeah, the man had about fifty billion slaves.”

“No, are you sure it’s him?”

“Yes, it is actually pretty funny. I mean, considering it was written by a racist ass.”

Alison and Mrs. Fuller appeared behind Milton and Dan.

“Hey guys, do you mind if me and Joan join in?”

“The quiz is over,” Milton told her, “but you’re welcome to join us.”

Gary stood up.

“Have a seat,” he offered.

Mrs. Fuller sat down.

“I’ll go and find some more chairs.”

Gary wandered off.

“So how was the fortune teller?” Milton asked.

“You mean - The Mystic Julie?”

Dan and Carrie glanced at each other and bit their lips to suppress a giggle.

“Is that her name?”

“Yes, except for the mystic part. She was a little intense for the setting, but she was cheap and reasonably entertaining.”

“We think we may have cracked the quiz this week,” Dan interrupted.

“It must be the new member, I’m Alison by the way.”

“Carrie.”

“And this is Joan.”

Gary returned, with nothing in his possession but a glum look.

“No free chairs in the whole place, looks like we’re standing,” he told Alison.

“I was just telling everyone about the fortune teller.”

Gary put his finger to his temple.

“I’m looking for someone who was born in October.”

“Very good impression,” said Mrs. Fuller.

“Can I get you a drink, Joan?” Alison inquired.

“Get for everyone Gary.”

Milton slipped Gary a twenty pound note.

“Same?”

Everybody at the table nodded.

“Mrs. Fuller?”

“Joan. Dry white please.”

“Come on,” said Alison “I’ll give you a hand.”

Alison walked to the bar with Gary. He ordered the drinks.

“Look I’m glad I got a chance to get you alone.”

“Sounds promising.”

“Be serious.”

Alison had on her serious voice.

“I was being serious and anyway, no, I’ve been serious enough today.”

“Look, that fortune teller got me thinking about a few things.”

“If they’re unpleasant things you can tell me later.”

“Oh, you can rely on it. You’re just lucky that I ran into Joan.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want my night to be ruined.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m tired of you always being angry at me.”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t be angry if you’d just behave normally.”

“What have I done?”

“Nothing, Gary, as ever.”

Gary threw up his arms in total frustration.

He was saved from having to express himself properly by the arrival of their drinks.

15.

Gary and Alison stood on opposite sides of the table to each other. They deliberately avoided eye contact. Carrie nudged Milton with her elbow.

“I see that announcer getting ready to come back up.”

“To tell everyone that we won,” Dan assured the table.

“It’ll be a few more minutes before they do the actual quiz. There’s the winners of best name to announce yet,” Milton told Carrie.

“Oooh, what are we called?” Mrs. Fuller asked.

The announcer took the opening letter “a” of his sentence into an extended vibrato:

“AAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand the winner of tonight’s best name goes to Harry Shaft and Harry Ball.

“Ridiculous!” Dan snorted.

“A close second place was The Jug Lickers, but no prize for that I’m afraid.”

Milton clapped towards Carrie:

“It’s better than we’ve done before.”

“I’ll be back in two minutes with the results of this week’s quiz.”

“Good name choice, Carrie. Dan?”

Gary waited for Dan to acknowledge what he had just said.

“Uh-huh.”

Gary's face turned a bleak, ashen stern. He stared directly at Alison, she looked at herself to see if there was something wrong. Then she glanced over her shoulder.

Saul and Paul were standing behind her, with their arms folded behind their backs.

“Our cousin Jelly told us you were in the back room tonight,” Saul told her.

“And anyway, we’ve been thinking a lot about what your boyfriend said to us and we’ve been thinking that maybe we have been a bit hard on you. I mean you’d be from here if your ancestors hadn’t moved right?”

“I suppose so.

“Anyway, we got you these.”

Saul handed her a box of chocolates that he had hidden behind his back.

“By way of an apology.”

Paul produced a card from behind his back and handed it to Alison.

Looking completely bemused, Alison accepted the gifts.

“Thank you.”

Saul and Paul turned their backs and went back to their own table.

Alison put the chocolates on the table and opened the card. As she pulled it out of the envelope, a photograph fell out of it. It was a picture of the fortune teller she had just been to see with her arm draped over Gary's shoulder. Gary was holding up his pint to the camera and winking so hard that the left side of his face looked like it was in spasm. His visible eye was bloodshot and yellow.

Alison showed the picture to Mrs. Fuller.

“That’s her isn’t it? The fortune teller?”

Joan went red and took a quick slug of her wine glass.

“Looks like she's dyed her hair, but yes.”

Alison held up the picture so that Gary and the rest of the table.

“This better be the same one from the video,” she cautioned him.

“It is,” Dan affirmed.

“He’s right,” said Gary. “Sorry.”

Alison took a deep breath, her eyes darkened. She spoke in slow deliberate syllables:

“That little bitch.”

Alison stormed off towards the backroom.

Gary stormed off towards Saul and Paul.

“This is way better than watching the telly,” said Carrie.

“I know,” Mrs. Fuller agreed.

16.

The back room was entirely empty except for the Angela the barmaid.

“Show’s over I’m afraid,” Angela said.

“Is Julie still here?”

“No, love, she left right after her last reading.”

“Know where she lives?”

“I’ve not the foggiest,” Angela told her, “You must be Gary’s lass.”

“How do you know?”

“The accent. Between me and you, if I were you I’d want to kick the shite out of her too. She’s not worth it though, a stinky little minger who has to get men blind drunk before they’ll even touch her.”

Alison struggled to control her temper through relaxed breathing.

“Have a drink on me, love. She’ll be here next week if you’re still angry.”

Angela poured a large vodka and splashed some coke to it.

“Thank you.”

Alison took a hearty swig. Angela smiled at her.

“I can help you with something else too.”

“What’s that?”

“Saul wet the bed till he was fourteen and Paul shat himself at the Christmas party last year.”

Alison grinned.

“Thank you.”

“Girls got to stick together, right?”

Alison nodded.

“Plus, if they ever call me Jelly again, I’m going to take their balls.”

17.

Gary loomed over the two brothers, they were too drunk to be scared of him. They had half empty glasses in front of them and full pints ready to replace them.

“Alright lads.”

“Gary,” said Saul.

“I suppose you think that was pretty funny, right?”

Paul almost choked on his beer:

“It was hilarious, mate.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Saul raised his glass with politic charm.

“We’re glad that you’re glad.”

“I don’t think you are. You see, the irony is...”

Saul opened his mouth to speak but Gary raised a hand to silence him.

“It’s alright, I know you don’t know what that means. What you idiots have inadvertently done, is proven that I was drunk on a certain night, and somebody else was sober. You boys have made me a victim in the eyes of the law.”

They stared at him blankly.

“That aside, I am going to get you.”

He pointed his finger at Saul.

“We’re shaking,” said Paul.

Gary looked at him.

“You’re a harmless idiot.”

Gary picked up one of their beers and began to drink it.

“Anyway, just wanted to say thanks. Have a good night, you little tossers.”

Gary downed the pint in one. He picked up the second pint on the table and walked away.

Alison and Gary were together on the couch in their front room. Gary had his head in Alison's lap and she stroked his hair with one hand and drank another vodka with the other.

“Now that was worth coming home early for.”

“You can consider yourself marked territory,” Alison told him.

“I’m in no fit state to consider anything. Who was it on the phone?”

“It was Milton, they came third place,” Alison said.

“Great. They weren’t mad that I snuck off where they?”

“No, I think they understand.”

“Did Mrs. Fuller get home alright?”

“Yes, apparently Dan walked her home.”

Gary laughed heartily.

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Believe me, that isn’t something I’d wish on anyone, let alone hope for.”

Gary yawned:

“I’m so tired.”

“You go to sleep then, my lovely lover.”

Gary made a few noises that sounded as if he were eating his favourite food. Then he began to snore. Alison stood up and went to get him a blanket. Gary sat up, his eyes open but rolled into the back of his head.

“Alison, the lamb is dying away from its hill.”

“What?”

Gary mumbled incoherently.

“Hello, Gary?”

Gary was soundly asleep. Alison shook him.

“Gary, did you say something?”

“No.”

“Are you awake?”

“I’m awake.”

“Do you love me, Gary?”

“I love all of the trains,” he told her.

Alison shook her head and went to get the blanket. She spread it over Gary.

STATE OF EMERGENCY by David Christopher

Chapter Seventeen: Escape from Liberty Park

Police flooded through the broken down gates of the security village. Dressed in dark blue fatigues, wearing forage caps and carrying guns, they seemed more disciplined than the other police, who they overran without any real effort. A couple of shots rang out, and one of the rogue policemen fell dead to the tarmac.

The rest surrendered abjectly and in response to shouted orders, knelt on the ground with their hands on their heads, like naughty schoolchildren. Will watched the scene in the distance from where he stood at the end of the cul-de-sac.

‘Looks like the US Cavalry made it,’ said Mercer with an incredulous grin.

Will stared down dumbly at the gun in his hand. Rescue! It seemed unreal.

Then he saw it. Those gun-crazy rapists hadn’t been the real police, they were security contractors provided by an agency like Mercer, or more like those two guys who’d been with him; lunatic criminal mercenaries who’d learnt their craft terrorising Arabs in the Middle East before being dragooned in to do the same to the people of the UK. Will couldn’t even remember the men’s names now. Too much had happened since then.

He turned to see that the Towers family had vanished into their house nearby. Why was that respectable middle class couple running from the police? Hadn’t they realised that it was like Mercer said, the cavalry was here?

Once the newcomers had the rogue police secured and handcuffed, they turned their attention to the two gunmen at the end of the cul-de-sac. A man in the uniform of a police inspector produced a loudhailer.

'Put down your guns and surrender,' the distorted voice exhorted them. Mercer and Will exchanged glances. Mercer flung his gun down.

'Never liked the things anyway,' he said.

Will copied him. A feeling of relief spread slowly across his body. For the last few months, he had felt like he was living in a nightmare existence, a dark age where every man's hand was against him, where even the forces of law and order were his enemy. But now he saw that this wasn't true.

They both raised their hands as the armed police approached. The inspector bellowed:

'Get down on the ground! Down on the ground, face-down!'

'Look, inspector, what's all this about?' Will asked reasonably. *'These men, these rogue police, were attacking this place. We were helping the people here defend it...'*

A policeman clubbed him down with the butt of his gun. Will went down without further argument.

Voluntarily, Mercer joined him on the tarmac. The inspector stood over them, lowered his loudhailer.

'We know what you've done,' he snarled. *'We got a call from a woman here. She told us you'd raped her.'*

Will was in real pain. He tried to look up, but strong hands forced his face to the tarmac.

'There must be some mistake,' he said, his voice muffled. *'It was those fascist pigs who raped her. We...'*

He wheezed with increased pain as a rifle butt sank into his ribs.

'Talk nice, mate,' the inspector said. *'My lads are on a hair-trigger. We've seen enough disorder recently. You had guns in your hands when we saw you. You're killers and rapists. You'll be coming with...'*

The roar of a car engine drowned out the inspector's voice. The hands gripping Will suddenly withdrew. He heard the roar of car wheels and the screech of brakes, and rolled over, wincing.

The policemen were retreating frantically down the cul-de-sac. An SUV loomed over Will and Mercer's prone bodies, its engine still running. Beyond it, Will could see the open garage door of the house into which the Towers had vanished. Then he saw that Mr and Mrs Towers were looking down at them through the windscreen.

Mr Towers flung open the back door.

‘Get in!’ he shouted.

Will rose up on his elbows. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the fleeing police had halted and were regrouping halfway down the street, their guns at the ready.

‘Come on, Will,’ Mercer, said, rising and hauling him to his feet. ‘Get in the fucking car!’

Will scrambled to his feet, wincing at the pain from his wounds; grabbed his gun seeing Mercer had got his own, and let the big man drag him into the back of the SUV. As he sat down, Mr Towers turned to grin boyishly at them.

‘Belt up in the back!’ he cried, then slammed his foot down on the accelerator. They took off down the street. Will saw the policemen lift their guns. Two loosed off shots, one of which ricocheted off the side of the car before Towers drove them off the road. He roared onwards at about seventy miles an hour. More stalwart upholders of law and justice bounced off the bonnet as Towers screeched past the security lodge, turned into the side-road beyond, and hurtled towards the main road.

Mrs Towers craned her neck to smile at Will and Mercer.

‘We didn’t think it was a good idea to stay here, what with more of those *fascist pigs* turning up,’ she explained, sounding like Lady Bracknell.

Will and Mercer exchanged bemused glances.

They roared down the empty A40 for several miles until Mrs Towers, who seemed to be in charge of the operation, decided the police weren’t yet in pursuit.

‘I think we’d better keep an eye out for patrol cars...’ Will said worriedly. ‘They’ll have radioed out our details ...’

‘They must have other things to occupy them,’ Mrs Towers said complacently.

‘What, like the complete breakdown of civilisation in the south east of England?’ Will suggested.

‘This is what comes of voting Liberal,’ Mr Towers said.

‘Keep your eye on the road,’ Mrs Towers snapped. She turned and smiled charmingly at Will.

‘We were thinking of visiting our relations up North.’

Mercer looked nervously at Will, who shrugged. 'We need to get to Oxford,' he said awkwardly.

'Well,' said Mrs Towers, 'that's fine. Our relations...'

'*Your* relations...' Mr Towers said drily.

She shot him a slitted glance. 'You married me,' she reminded him. She turned back to Will and Mercer. '*Our* relations live in Leamington Spa. We could drop you off in Oxford on the way.'

'Cool,' said Will. He lay back against the SUV's padded backrest and sighed. 'I still think we'd better keep an eye out for the police, though.'

Despite this nagging worry, it really looked like things were finally going his way. He looked outside. It was getting dark. They drove down the main road, meeting very little traffic, witnessing absolutely no kind of conflict apart from the arguing of Mr and Mrs Towers.

This was a bit embarrassing, but Will didn't really mind it. It reminded him of going on family outings when he was a kid. He grinned at Mercer. The bulky man in his grime-smear'd police uniform made a pretty peculiar big brother, but Will felt more comfortable than he had done in a long time. He found himself starting to nod off.

It was the bickering of the Towers couple that woke him. He came to with a grunt, and looked blearily around him. They seemed to have ground to a halt at the edge of the road. Sodium yellow lamplight drifted into the back of the car. It was night.

'You should have *checked* that the tank was full,' Malory Towers said.

'I could hardly fill it up in the situation we were in, could I, woman?' her husband replied.

Will looked at Mercer. Mercer shrugged and leaned forward.

'Why don't we just pull into the next petrol station?'

'Because we don't even have enough petrol to get there,' Mrs Towers snapped. 'Thanks to my husband here.'

Will rubbed his eyes and yawned. 'Mercer and me will get out and push,' he suggested placatingly.

Mr Towers turned to look at him.

‘I forgot to bring my wallet,’ he said.

‘He’s such an idiot,’ commented his wife.

‘Don’t you have any money on you?’ Mercer asked.

‘*He* always carries it,’ said Malory. Apparently, like the queen, she never carried money.

‘Oh,’ said Will. ‘Well, don’t worry. I’ll pay.’ He felt in his pockets, then cursed. ‘I must have left my own wallet at home,’ he explained, feeling absurdly inadequate. Shit, how long ago was that? He’d been living in a world where money no longer had any meaning for what seemed like an eternity.

Mercer sighed. ‘I don’t have any cash on me,’ he said. ‘But if we can find the nearest ATM I’ll get some out. I should have something in there. The agency must have paid me by now.’

Will peered out into the yellow-lit dark. ‘Looks like we’re near a town,’ he observed. ‘Me and Mercer can push until we get near a petrol station. There should be an ATM there.’

Mercer grunted. ‘I suppose we can,’ he said after a moment. Will looked at him, startled.

‘Sorry,’ he said, as they both got out into the surprisingly cold night air. ‘I thought you’d be happy to. We’re not going to get to Oxford otherwise.’

‘Never mind,’ said Mercer heavily, putting his shoulder to the back of the car. ‘Come on.’

Feeling as if he’d spoken out of turn, Will copied him.

They heaved against the back of the car in the gloomy amber murk. The vehicle started rolling, and Towers gave an encouraging cry from inside, waving his hand at them. Will and Mercer pushed and pushed. God, they must have been driving on fumes for miles.

‘Where are we, anyway?’ Will groaned.

Mercer looked at him.

‘The Chilterns somewhere,’ he panted. He glanced at a passing road sign. ‘High Wycombe,’ he elaborated.

Will digested this. ‘That’s about halfway to Oxford, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ Mercer replied, panting. ‘I’m an actor.... Dammit... Not.... A geography teacher.’

Will grinned at the *Star Trek* reference, and kept pushing.

He was pretty sure they *were* at least halfway to Oxford, maybe more. All they needed was fuel enough to get there... Soon as they found the petrol station and Mercer withdrew some of his earnings. Then they'd be on the road to Oxford, and all this might get sorted out at last. Assuming the pigs didn't catch up with them.

And maybe he'd see Daisy again.

They were passing thirties' semis. God, Will hated thirties' semis. Okay, they weren't as bad as sixties' tower blocks; they weren't as bad as Barretts' Homes. But in the last half hour of heaving this overgrown tank up the main road, he had seen enough thirties' semis to last him several lifetimes.

They all looked the same. He was sick to *death* with thirties' semis... 'Here we are!' Mercer said suddenly.

Wearily, Will looked up. He saw a petrol station on the other side of the road. 'About time,' he said. His various wounds were hurting, like fucking, cuntin', shithead bastards. He signalled to the Towers then pushed the car into the garage forecourt. Then he followed Mercer past the pumps.

The fluorescent light from the shop window depressed him. He waited to one side as Mercer inserted his debit card in the ATM, and he stared gloomily in through the armoured glass, hungrily eyeing plastic-wrapped Cornish pasties. It was weird. This was a world he remembered from when he was a student. Aimlessly wandering around the country, living off shite, never knowing what was going to happen next – and *enjoying* it; enjoying the chaos and uncertainty. Fucking nutters that he and his mates had been.

That had been before Caroline, of course

'Motherfucker!' Mercer said suddenly.

Will looked at him. Sounded like the big man was as pissed off as he was. 'What's up, mate?' he said.

Mercer turned to him, eyes blazing.

'The bastards haven't paid me!' he exclaimed.

'Why not?' Will demanded.

Mercer shrugged violently and grimaced. 'How should I know? They just haven't. Fucking bastards! Fucking agency bastards! Fucking bastard scum!' He punched the keyboard futilely.

‘Can’t you ring them?’

‘It’s the middle of the night, Will,’ Mercer said impatiently, rubbing the heel of his hand. ‘No one will be in the office at’ – he looked at his wristwatch – ‘3.42am.’

Will sighed. No wonder he was so tired. He remembered coming home from gigs like this when he was younger. Why had that seemed like fun? He felt old.

‘What do we do now?’

Mercer glared at him.

‘We walk,’ he said.

Will looked at him incredulously. He was about to say something when suddenly the skies above them burst into ear-splitting noise. He looked up to see blazing lights roaring through the sky out of the north west.

Before he knew what was happening, bombs were falling.

‘And you say the other one was a youth, in his twenties?’ Tarrant asked.

The police inspector shrugged. ‘Yes. *He* wasn’t wearing a uniform. Looked like a civilian.’

They were standing in the security lodge. Tarrant could tell that the policeman resented his presence.

‘And if your goons would let my men go,’ the inspector added pointedly, ‘we could get after them.’

Tarrant stared meditatively out at the darkness of the street.

‘You tell me none of your men thought to note down the car registration number,’ he said. ‘And the CCTV system in here’ – he indicated the shattered screens in the back office – ‘was destroyed in the fire, so there’s no record there. Your work here is done and I can’t see promotion resulting. I’m taking you off the case.’

‘With whose authority?’ the inspector demanded. ‘You swan in here and start giving orders left and right, interrogate me....’ A thought struck him. ‘You... you’re a spook, aren’t you?’

Tarrant smiled thinly. 'That's on a need-to-know basis,' he said. 'And all you need to know is I'm after Will Youds. It looks like he's long gone thanks to your incompetence, but no doubt the CCTV will pick him up soon enough. You'll release your prisoners to me. They'll help me track down the fugitive. I'll...'

He broke off suddenly as a thunderous rumble came from the north west. Flashes lit up the dark horizon beyond the houses. Again and again.

'The war's beginning,' he said to himself, ignoring the look of incredulous horror on the police inspector's face. 'The war's begun.'

KRAMPUSZ by Nathan Rowark

Standing at my window in a Christmas tide of joy;
A European figure steps to peephole with my toy.
Full bags of cotton candy; he has not come to be alone;
He brings with him a yin yang friend, in chains with bell and moan.

He's not a Jacob Marley guest but rather uninvited;
Travelling with old Nic as guest, not devil but ones sighted.
It's Santa's friend, the one with sticks who beats bad children senseless.
He'll find the naughtiest child in town and then render them defenceless.

Horns on head that's full of teeth, his furry tail to wander;
Upon the snow to mark the spot where un karmic angels squander
Good deeds made for old start year then out their shoes must go;
Waiting for St Nicholas gifts, yet demonic pet does show.

Christmas tree lit up in flames, the bulbs of glass to smoulder;
Upon the sin of youth kindling kin for the Krampusz rules are older.
So when early air of Jack Frost chill does turn the front yard crisper,
Remember the crispier furnace birth that brought forth hell hearths mister.

THE DOOM OF THE NORNS by Catriona Green

'Come on!'

The ten thralls crept through the darkness, stolen swords glinting in the starlight.
Their leader reached a corner between two tents, and held up his hand. They halted, while he looked around the corner.

He saw the doors to the king's hunting pavilion at the end of the little camp, with eight guards standing before them, leaning on their spears in the light of a campfire. Within, the leader thought King Heidrek would be sleeping in the arms of his young Hunnish wife, amidst splendours he had looted from the kingdoms of half the world.

He watched the guards intently, waiting for any indication of relaxed vigilance, shivering a little in the cold night air. One of his companions crept closer.

'Isn't it time we made a move, Myrkjartan?' he hissed. 'We'll freeze waiting here. It's a cold night.'

Myrkjartan looked at his companion. Though his face was invisible in the gloom, the man's voice identified him as wary young Var, a former landholder in Gaul who had been enslaved during one of Heidrek's raids. Myrkjartan sympathised with his plight, having been taken as a thrall out in Ireland under similar circumstances, but this was a time for cunning not rashness.

'We wait,' he said. 'Don't worry; it'll soon grow hot – at least for our great king. Now be silent.'

He turned back to watch the guards. One of them was passing a wineskin back and forth, each taking swigs against the cold. Unconsciously, Myrkjartan rubbed his hands together. But he was used to the cold by now, having worked out in the fields of Heidrek's great estates under the lash of the overseer. He could wait patiently, while those soft guards were growing sotted with their wine-bibbing.

He saw one slump in his place, leaning against his spear negligently. Wait just a little longer, and soon the guards would be easy pickings.

'Now!' he hissed, and the ten thralls charged round the corner in a silent rush, their bare blades red in the firelight. The chief of the guard looked up, dropped the wineskin he was draining, and scrambled for his sword. Before he could draw it, Myrkjartan cut him down.

The rest of the guards staggered forward, their spears levelled, but the thralls overwhelmed them hastily. Swords flashed in the light of the fire, guards cried out, and soon they were all lying in pools of blood before the tent-flap of Heidrek's pavilion. Var had a wounded leg, while two other thralls had flesh wounds. But all in all it had been a masterly attack, Myrkjartan thought, making a mental note that when he regained his land in the west, he would never enslave warriors.

'Inside!' he cried. As he tore the tent-flap open, his comrades rushed in ones and twos through the widening gap, swords lifted.

He followed them in, hearing the brutal sounds of butchery. As he entered, he almost tripped over a lifeless corpse. Bending to check it, he saw with satisfaction that it was Heidrek's Hunnish queen. He looked up.

The thralls were thrusting their blades into the thrashing bodies of nobles who had been sleeping in the king's pavilion. Ahead of them, Heidrek had risen from his furs, his grizzled face confused. Myrkjartan ran the length of the pavilion as the king reached for the sword that lay on cushions nearby.

'No you don't!' Myrkjartan cried out. He knew what would happen if Heidrek unsheathed that dwarf-forged sword. He seized the hilt and drew it himself.

'Who are you?' Heidrek gasped. 'Why are you doing this?'

Without answering, Myrkjartan ran him through with Tyrfing. The king fell against the side of the tent, head hanging back. Myrkjartan placed his foot against Heidrek's chest and tore the sword back out. Then he cut Heidrek's head off.

As the blood gushed across the cushions, he turned to the others. The pavilion was littered with bodies, but the thralls were all still on their feet. He sheathed the sword Tyrfing, and indicated the treasures that lay around the room.

'Take as much as you can carry,' he told them. 'But don't weigh yourselves down.' He looked at Heidrek's decapitated body and the spreading scarlet stain on the cushions. 'We won vengeance here,' he told them. 'But we must flee. We can make our way back to our own lands eventually.'

'Where shall we go now?' asked Var.

Myrkjartan led them quickly from the pavilion. 'This camp lies in the shadow of the Carpathians,' he told them. 'Cross them and we will escape Gothland. We shall follow the River Graf up into the hills. We can survive by fishing. We'll take one of the smaller tents. Quickly!'

The ten thralls fled into the night.

Angantyr was in Arheimar, on the far side of the kingdom, when word reached him of his father's death.

'My lords, earls of Gothland,' he said bleakly, at the council he called on hearing the tidings, 'tragic news has reached us. The bodies of my father and some of his closest friends and guards were found at their camp on the banks of the Graf River. It seems some group entered the camp, killed the sentries, and killed... my father.' He looked around at the assembled men whose bearded faces were solemn.

There was Ormar, his half-sister's foster-father, his grizzled hair quite white now. Beside him sat one-eyed old Gizur, who his father had given control of the kingdom of the Gauts, in reward for long years of friendship and service. Much had changed since Angantyr's childhood. He was now a youth of twenty summers, a young age to lose the father he now closely resembled.

'It is not known who did this,' he added, 'or from whom we should seek vengeance. But it is known that they murderers stole my father's sword Tyrfing and much treasure. I would willingly give the man who avenges my father half that stolen treasure. I will myself be searching for a sign to show me who did this deed. I...'

Gizur broke in. 'Commendable,' he said gruffly. 'But before you seek vengeance, the kingdom needs steering. We must not let it descend into anarchy.'

Earl Ormar nodded. 'We need a king,' he said. 'The obvious choice is you, Prince Angantyr. Agreed?'

The assembled nobles were unanimous in their support for Angantyr's succession. He looked around him as the earls and nobles encouraged him to rule as wisely and well as his father, with a sick feeling in his heart. All that interested them was that the kingdom should not fall into civil war. No one seemed to care about the most important fact.

‘My lords,’ he said, addressing the older men sternly, ‘I accept your request. But I will swear by my sword and by all the Gods of Asgard that I shall not sit in my father’s throne until I have avenged him!’

Heidrek’s body was brought back to Arheimar, where it was buried with due solemnity in a barrow outside the town. Afterwards, Angantyr found himself obliged to tend to a hundred and one matters, few of which seemed of any great importance. As soon as he was able, Angantyr broke away from the business of rule and rode east across his kingdom. If he were to accept all the duties his nobles were heaping upon him, he would have no time to find the men who had killed his father.

He tried to explain this to Gizur, but the old man had only spoken wise words on the subject of the duties of a king, and how sometimes they were more important than the duties of a son. But Angantyr was determined he would avenge his father.

When he reached the camp where his father had been killed, he began to cast around for tracks. He had learnt the craft of a hunter in the forest of Mirkwood, and was sure if he could follow days-old spoor of deer or boar, he could follow the trail of murderers. He found some tracks in the mud near the pavilion that led away from the main path, down towards the riverbank nearby.

This intrigued him, and he spent some days riding up the river towards the Carpathians. One evening, as the sun was setting over the mountain peaks that marched across the horizon before him, he came to the shores of a grey-watered lake in a wooded valley.

From a distance away, he saw a fishing boat out on the lake, and three men fishing. For days now, Angantyr had not seen so much as a hunter or a trapper. It seemed a long way to come from any settlements simply to go fishing. Scanning the farther shore, he saw a tent with a smoking fire beside it, and several other figures.

Dismounting, Angantyr crept closer, halting at the edge of the reeds that fringed the pool. He watched as one of the men pulled in a pike.

‘Get the bait knife to behead it,’ the man shouted to his companions. ‘It’s struggling. I can’t chance letting go.’

‘Where’s that knife?’ asked another man. ‘Where did you put it?’

‘Oh, get that old sword from under the headboard and give it to me,’ said the first fisherman. The other man took a sheathed sword from the bottom of the boat and handed it to the first man. The first man unsheathed the blade, shouting in wonder as it shone out across the darkening waters of the lake. He cut the head of the fish with a clumsy swipe. Then the sword seemed to slip in his hand before plunging into the chest of the second man, who fell with a splash into the lake.

‘Tyrfing,’ Angantyr thought to himself as the terrified man sheathed the sword, and he and his remaining companion grabbed feebly at the sinking corpse. Angantyr turned and made his way back to his horse, mounted, and rode slowly into the woods.

As soon as it was dark, Angantyr made his way round the lake towards the fiery ember that glowed in the night until closeness resolved it as a campfire. Beside it was the tent Angantyr had seen earlier that evening, and the fishing boat had been pulled up on the shingle nearby.

Creeping up beside the tent, he listened to the snores from inside; at least seven or eight men, he told himself. Deftly he unpegged the tent and let it fall down on the sleeping men. They woke, cursing and thrusting at the fallen tent as it pinned them down. Angantyr drew his sword and began to stab at them.

Tidings of his father's death reached Hlod some time after it came to his half-brother Angantyr; so long, in fact, that word of Angantyr's succession came with it. The moment he heard of it, he went rode to the tents of his foster-father King Humli.

'Foster-son!' Humli said, welcoming him with outspread arms. 'Son of my unfortunate daughter!'

Hlod stood in the entrance to Humli's yurt, wearing a long byrnie and a ring-welded helmet, a sword and a dagger at his belt. He was the most handsome man in the kingdom, taking partly after his mother Sifka, and partly after his father. Humli looked at him with melancholy pride.

'Foster-father,' Hlod said abruptly, 'great tidings have come to me. My father, King Heidrek, is dead – murdered, though none knows whom. My half-brother Angantyr has been made king of the Goths.'

Humli nodded, and his thin white beard wagged. Upon his head, he wore a felt cap embroidered with the stag emblem of the Hunnish nation, and a long sheepskin cloak hung from his back. 'It was inevitable that the nobles of Gothland would make him king, Hlod,' he said. 'But has no word come regarding your own patrimony?'

Hlod shook his head. 'It seems to me, foster-father, that my brother needs reminding that he is not King Heidrek's only son.'

Humli rose slowly. 'Go with my blessing,' he said, 'and remember, you have my support in all your ventures.' Hlod nodded sharply, embraced his old foster-father, and then went to mount his horse.

Hlod rode westward across the plains, through the forest of Mirkwood, until he came to Arheimar on the Banks of the Dnieper, where he learnt Angantyr had prepared a great feast to celebrate his accession and his avenging of his father. His informant was a sentry on guard outside the palace.

'Go into the high hall,' Hlod told him, looking down from his horse as his host waited patiently in the plain, 'and tell Angantyr his brother requests him to come and talk.'

The guard hurried inside and made his way up the bustling feasting hall to the high table where Angantyr was drinking with Ormar, Gizur and the other nobles.

'Hlod the son of Heidrek has come here,' he said when the king asked him his business. 'Your brother is armed for war.'

Angantyr flung his knife down on the table, dropped the meat he was eating onto a platter, and went to the wall where his byrnie hung. He put it on, took a white shield, and girded Tyrfinn upon him, ignoring the clamour from the nobles and warriors. Intent on arming, he did not notice Gizur rising from the high table and coming after him.

Striding to the door, he found Hlod sitting his horse patiently outside, his handsome Hunnish face impassive.

‘Welcome, brother Hlod,’ Angantyr said. ‘Come within and we shall drink mead for our father, for peace, and for our own honour.’

Hlod shook his head, tight-lipped. ‘I want half of my father’s goods; awls and spearheads, cows and calves and mills, slaves and servants. I want that well-known forest called Mirkwood for my own, and the holy grave on the road of the Goths, the famous rock on the Banks of the Dnieper. I want half the arms and armour that our father owned, half his lands and his folk and his wealth.’

Angantyr shook his head. ‘There will be war first, and many men slain before I give half my inheritance to the son of a treacherous Hun or split Tyrfin in two.’

Hlod’s nostrils flared, and Angantyr halted, considering the harshness of his words. He owed his brother something, even if it was not half his kingdom. ‘I’ll give you spears and treasures, twelve hundred men and horses and shield-bearing servants. Each man will carry treasure, each will have a maiden with him, and each maiden shall wear a necklace of gold. Where you sit I will cover you in silver, and where you walk I’ll shower you in gold, and I’ll give you rule over a third of the Gothic nation.’

Hlod looked at him inscrutably. Then Gizur stepped forward. ‘That’s a fine offer for the son of a thrall, even if he is a king’s bastard.’

Hlod looked at Gizur in cold rage. ‘You call me a bastard?’ he hissed. ‘You call my mother, daughter of the king of the Huns, a thrall? We’ll hear more about this.’

He spurred his horse right at Gizur, who scuttled to one side like an old spider, and then he rode away from the palace, back towards the river.

Angantyr looked angrily at his foster-father. ‘Why did you say that?’ he demanded. ‘He was willing to accept my offer.’

Gizur was silent, his single eye enigmatic.

Hlod returned to Hunland in a rage. When he reached his foster-father’s encampment it was early morning, but with no respect for etiquette, he forced his way into Humli’s yurt while the old man was refreshing himself with a breakfast of mares’ milk.

‘My brother Angantyr refused me a half share in our patrimony,’ he declared as Humli looked up calmly.

‘What did he say to you?’ the Hun king asked. Quickly, Hlod told the old man. Humli was silent for a moment, and then his wizened old face slowly reddened with rage. ‘He called you the son of a thrall?’ he hissed at last.

Hlod nodded. ‘What shall we do?’ he asked, impressed despite himself by the intensity of his foster-father’s anger. But the fires seemed already to be beginning to fade.

‘This winter we will remain in the warmth of our tents,’ Humli said slowly, ‘drink deep as the snow falls on the steppes without. Our smiths shall fashion war gear, hauberk and harness, spears and arrows.’

‘In the spring I will summon warriors from across the kingdom, gather the hosts of the Huns. Then, when the summer wind sighs across the withering grass, we shall ride upon the kingdom your brother rules.’

In the spring, a host began to gather around the yurts of the king, a sea of tents where warriors of all the Hunnish tribes were present. All Hunland was emptied of

fighting men to join the host Humli had gathered for Hlod, who surveyed them as they rode into the ever-expanding camp with a cold smile. He watched as the Hunnish warriors gathered in legions and tribes, each tribe with its own horsetail standard, each tribe with five legions of men, each legion with thirteen battalions and each battalion made up of one hundred and sixty men.

As spring turned to summer, the horsetail banners flew in the wind and the warriors sat their horses in perfect lines across the valley where Humli's tent was pitched. Hlod knew he would teach his brother to respect him.

Once the host had been assembled, Humli rallied them with a long speech that Hlod listened to in cold satisfaction. As the warriors cheered and brandished their bows, Humli's standard bearer flourished his horsetail banner and rode forward, followed by Humli and Hlod. Then the entire Hunnish horde rode after them, galloping across the dusty plain of withered grass beneath the blazing sun. Now Hlod knew his vengeance was close.

Two days later, they came to the dark eaves of the forest of Mirkwood that lay between Hunland and Gothland. The progress of the host began to slow as they rode into the forest, and Hlod feared that riders might lose themselves among the winding paths, but after three days journey the best part of the host reached the far side of the forest, and rode out into the plains and fields of Gothland as the sun was rising.

A grim-looking fortress stood before them. Hlod knew that it was all that stood between them and his revenge.

Hervor, daughter of Heidrek, stood upon the ramparts of her foster-father's stronghold, gazing out across the fields and the forest that stood stark and black against the rising sun. Gothland had been on a war footing since Hlod's visit last year, and her brother King Angantyr had entrusted her and her foster-father Ormar with the boundary defences.

She placed a gauntleted hand on the hilt of her sword and strode up and down the rampart to warm herself in the morning chill, her byrnie clinking as she moved back and forth. Suddenly she halted, peering to the south where a cloud of dust was beginning to rise from the eaves of the trees.

As she watched, the dust cloud grew and grew, billowing upwards to hide the rising sun. Something flashed and glittered below the dust cloud, many points of light winking like sun on metal, and she thought that it was gold, as if the light came from gold-chased shields, helmets and byrnies that had been gilded. With a chill, she realised that it must be the long awaited host of the Huns. She had not realised it would be so vast.

Hurriedly, she rushed down the ladder and entered the inner bailey. She shouted at the hornblower who stood nearby:

'Sound the alarm!' she cried. 'Call the troops to assemble.' The hornblower put his horn to his lips and blew.

Hervor met her foster-father Ormar hobbling across the garth. 'What is it?' the old man demanded. 'Are they here at last?'

‘Aye,’ said Hervor, looking at his white beard and gnarled limbs. Here was one who surely would not survive battle with the Huns. Other warriors were assembling now as the hornblower continued to blow his horn.

‘Take your weapons and prepare for battle!’ Hervor called out to the Goths. She turned to Ormar. ‘Foster-father, ride to the Hunnish horde and challenge them to fight us at the south gate.’

‘I’ll ride to them and challenge them,’ Ormar promised her.

Moments later, Ormar was riding out of the stronghold southwards in the direction of the oncoming host. As he came closer he saw rank upon rank of mounted warriors, lancers and horse archers, each clad in gold worked armour, their cruel faces alight with the desire for pillage and rapine. As they saw him coming, someone within the ranks gave the order to halt.

Ormar sat his horse and gazed down at the endless ranks. He raised his voice and cried:

‘Ride to the stronghold and we shall fight you on the plain before the south gate; whoever gets there first shall wait for the other.’

The Huns seemed to acknowledge his words, and he spurred his horse and rode back the way he had come. In the distance behind him, the Hunnish horde began to advance.

When Ormar rode back into the fortress, he found the Goths prepared, with Hervor mounted at their head. He surveyed the force, much smaller than the host of Huns that he had seen, and rode to his foster-daughter’s side.

‘Did they receive your message well?’ Hervor asked.

Ormar shrugged. ‘They are advancing to meet us,’ he said. ‘I told them we would wait for them in the plain if they don’t get there first.’

‘Warriors of Gothland!’ Hervor shouted shrilly to the assembled men. ‘Your country is in the hour of its greatest peril! Riding to do battle are the endless hosts of the Huns. We stand between them and the fields of the Goths. It is our duty to stand and fight them, and die if need be for our kingdom!’

The Goths roared in answer to her words. She brandished her sword and led them at a gallop from the stronghold.

Ormar rode at her side as they passed under the south gate and came out onto the plain. Less than a quarter of a mile away, the Huns were still advancing.

‘Foster-daughter, Hervor,’ he murmured, ‘they outnumber us.’

She gave him a bleak look, but a fey light seemed to dance in her sea-blue eyes. ‘I will see you again after the battle,’ she vowed, ‘in Gothland or in Valhalla.’

The Gothic lines drew up on one side of the field, while the Huns ground to a halt on the other side. The morning sun gleamed from their spears, their helmets, their shield bosses. Silence fell over the windy plain, broken only by the crack and flap of banners. Ormar looked across at the enemy, seeing a small group at the centre, clustered round the largest horsetail banner. King Humli must be there, he realised, and Prince Hlod with him. Was Ragnarok nigh, that brother should go to war against brother?

Again he saw that the Huns vastly outnumbered them. They would be doomed. The Huns would ride them down and slaughter them. What if no word came to King Angantyr in Arheimar?

Horns blared on the far side of the field, and the ground rumbled as the Huns began to charge. Ormar sat in his saddle watching as the Goths prepared to take the brunt of the attack, the foot soldiers lining up in a shield wall as the Huns on their steppe ponies rode nearer and nearer. Arrows whipped across the closing gap as horse archers loosed from the saddle.

The line of Hunnish lancers collided with the Gothic shield wall and chaos was unleashed. Lances thrust, horses screamed, men fell, swords crashed against shields. Steel clashed against steel, the sound resounding beneath the wide blue sky. At a note from the hornblower, the Gothic cavalry, split into two divisions, came round on either side of the fight. Hervor led one group, Ormar the other. They attacked the Hunnish lancers side on, hacking and hewing at the nomads with long Gothic swords.

Ormar found himself fighting two Huns, both armed with lances. A savage cut with his sword sliced the tip of one man's lance while the other's attack was deflected by Ormar's shield. He rode closer to the first Hun as the man fumbled for his scimitar. As the nomad lifted the curved blade, Ormar smashed it from his hand and split his skull to the teeth.

The second Hun thrust at him again, piercing the Goth's linden shield. Ormar wrested his hand from the shield straps and swung at the Hun, wielding his sword two-handed. The Hun tried to shake the shield from his lance. Ormar sank his blade into the rider's breast.

He tore it out again and looked around, searching for foes. The Huns swarmed across the field, bringing down Gothic warriors everywhere they went. The din of battle was deafening, the ring of metal, the desperate, angry shouting of embattled men. Banners dipped and swooped in the air above the milling figures. But the Goths were failing.

Ormar spurred his horse and rode into the battle to the point where he saw Hervor and her horsemen battling the encircling Huns. Arrows and javelins flew in the sky like carrion crows. Goths fell to the churned up turf, their bodies bloody. The roar of the warriors made it impossible to speak, but Ormar tried to shout to his foster-daughter.

'We must retreat!' he screamed. 'We must retreat...'

For a moment, he caught Hervor's eyes and they gazed at each other across the noise and confusion of the battlefield. Ormar saw Hervor mouth something to him. Then a Hunnish sword sank deep into Hervor's breast and she fell.

Forlorn, Ormar gazed around the battlefield. Dead Goths littered the scene, while triumphant Huns trotted back and forth, looting the dead, and despatching the wounded. Ormar realised that the safety of Gothland was at stake. The king must hear of this defeat. He spurred his horse again, and rode north from the field.

A mile away he looked back to see the stronghold itself blazing and billowing smoke as the Huns danced around it. They began to spread out across the surrounding countryside. As Ormar rode on, north towards Arheimar, more pillars of black smoke rose to the skies.

Days afterwards, he rode into Arheimar, exhausted and feeble. Guards hurried to his side to help him down from his horse.

'Take me to the king,' he croaked.

When he was brought into the great hall, King Angantyr looked at the old man in horror, but Ormar brushed aside all offers of aid until he made his report.

‘I’ve come from the south to bring you my tidings. The heath of Mirkwood and the forest is burnt. The Goths lie dead. Heidrek’s daughter is slain, your sister Hervor. The Huns killed her and many others. She was happier in battle than in love-play with men.’

Angantyr’s face locked in a cold, savage rictus and said little. Finally, he muttered; ‘It was an unbrotherly game Hlod played with you, my sister.’

He looked around the hall at his thanes and earls, and it seemed there were only too few. ‘I remember many followers more when we were drinking mead,’ he commented. ‘But now we need many I see only few. I can see no man who will ride to speak with the Huns.’

Gizur stepped forward, and he said: ‘I shan’t ask for payment, but I’ll gladly ride to the Huns and speak with them.’

‘Tell them we shall meet them,’ Angantyr told him as the old man leapt onto the horse the stable boys brought for him. Gizur looked down, magnificent on his horse with his flowing white beard, and asked:

‘Where shall I tell them to meet us?’

‘Tell them to ride to Dunheid in the Dylgja Dales, before the Jassar Fells. Goths have often fought victoriously there.’ Gizur nodded, and he rode from the town.

Many days ride to the south he encountered the outliers of the Hun host as they charged through a barren waste of burnt-out steadings and ravaged fields where corpses lay in the ditches and dead cattle and sheep were piled in farmyards. Ahead, Gizur saw the host slowly advancing through the smoke of the desolate land.

He rode closer, and called out: ‘Fear sits on your faces, your chieftains are fated with doom. As the war banner flutters above you, Odin is angered. Come meet the Goths at Dunheid, beneath the Jassar Fells. Each one of you will die. Odin let the spear fly as I deem.’

Hlod rode forward from the host, his handsome face set in a sneer. ‘Be careful, Gizur, warrior of the Grytings.’

Humli said: ‘We shouldn’t harm this lone messenger.’

‘We’re not afraid of Huns,’ Gizur shouted as he spurred his horse away from them. Again he rode back across the wasted land, back towards Arheimar.

‘Greetings, Gizur.’ Angantyr welcomed the old man as he strode into the hall. ‘Did you find the Hun king and my brother?’

Gizur nodded. ‘I spoke with them and challenged them to fight us at Dunheid in the Dylgja Dales.’

‘How large is the Hunnish horde?’ the king asked.

‘They have six companies of men,’ Gizur replied. ‘In each company they have five legions; in each legion, thirteen battalions, and four hundred and eighty men in each battalion.’

Angantyr looked troubled. He gave orders to a messenger to send heralds to every quarter of the kingdom, calling every man who wished to support him to join him in Arheimar.

‘Once my host is gathered,’ he told Gizur and Ormar, ‘we will meet the Huns at Dunheid.’

Over the following few days, Gothic leaders and their war bands rode into Arheimar, until Angantyr's host swelled its ranks until ninety thousand men were encamped around the town. But as Angantyr surveyed the ranks, Gizur shook his head.

'This is nothing besides the host of the Huns. They have more than twice that number.'

Angantyr looked sadly at his old comrade. 'This is all Gothland would spare us. Come. We must ride to Dunheid.'

The next day the host set forth south towards the Jassar Fells and the heath of Dunheid in the Dylgja Dales. Angantyr rode at their head with Ormar and Gizur, banners flying above them as the long line of mounted men stretched back down into the Gothic lowlands: helmets flashed in the sun, spears rose like the trunks of a forest, hauberk and harness jingled and shield bosses glinted.

They had pitched their tents and established their lines in the empty valley of Dunheid, a wide, windswept area of moorland that had seen many a battle between the Goths and their invaders. The Jassar Fells loomed on either side, great craggy hills whose slopes were streaked with grey scree and purple heather, whose peaks rimmed the skyline like fangs. The Dylgja River wound through the middle of the heath, a slash of blue fringed with green amidst the desolate heather and rock of the moor. Angantyr heard a raucous cry from above and looked up to see a dark dot detach itself from the lowering cliffs and fly above them, followed by another, wings outstretched, wing feathers spread like hands waiting to grasp.

'Two ravens,' Gizur remarked. 'The word has spread. The sky will be thick with them ere this day is over.'

Horns blew in the distance and Angantyr felt a chill of dread as he gazed down the wide valley to see a dark mass of figures moving up from the slopes below. The summer sun shone on burnished helmet and gold-chased byrnie as the Hunnish horde began to advance onto the moor.

Over the next few hours, as the sun descended and the blue sky began to darken with circling ravens and carrion crows, the Huns drew up their battle lines at the far end of the moor. Standards fluttered in the breeze, horns blew, mounted men waited in long lines that stretched from one slope to the other, entirely cutting off that end of the valley. Angantyr saw that Gizur was right long before the Huns had finished assembling. They vastly outnumbered his own force.

But it was the gloom of dusk by now. As Angantyr watched his foes, he saw a small group of heralds ride up from their ranks.

'My lord king, Angantyr,' the chief herald said, his cold eyes sweeping across the smaller force of Goths that stood on either side, 'my master King Humli of the Goths wishes for a parley. He suggests we wait until dawn tomorrow ere the battle begins.'

'Indeed,' said Angantyr calmly, 'it would be foolish to fight at dusk. Tell your king that I accept his terms. We shall begin the battle tomorrow.'

As the heralds rode back across the heath to report to their king, Angantyr turned to Gizur and Ormar. 'This gives our folk longer to assemble. Those who did not join us at Arheimar can join our lines at Dunheid tonight or tomorrow.'

Gizur looked doubtful. Ormar scratched his bald head.

'There are many of them, and we are few in comparison,' he said.

Angantyr stroked the pommel of his sword. 'But we have Tyrffing,' he said. 'Now let us retire to our tents and await what the morrow brings.'

Dawn over Dunheid glittered off the upraised lances, the gilded armour and shields of the Huns as they saddled their horses and drew up their lines. The Goths were quick to copy them, and within half an hour, the two hosts faced each other again across the wide stretch of heather and rock. The cliffs above were black with carrion birds, and ravens seemed to dance for joy in the air above the two hosts, cawing and calling to their fellows as they flew.

A chorus of horns boomed from the ranks of the Huns. Another pealed from the Goths. Angantyr watched as his cavalry charged forward to meet the Hun lancers riding proudly forwards. The hooves thudded across the heather; the riders crouched over their lances, each man's face grim and remorseless. The riders gathered speed, thundering across the wide heath as the ravens called in the blue skies above. Closer and closer they came, and on both sides the lances dipped, thrusting towards the foe.

They met – and both crashed into each other's lines, bringing riders tumbling from the saddle. Close up, lances were no longer practicable, and they drew swords, Gothic longswords clashing against Hunnish scimitars, as horses whinnied and stamped the earth. Then the Huns were drawing back as their horse archers rode forward.

The horse archers began to ride round and round the exposed Gothic lancers, loosing arrows from their horn-bows in swarms that hissed through the air. Gothic lancers twisted and fell, riddled with arrows. Angantyr turned to his hornblower and said:

'Sound the retreat. And send the archers forward.'

As the lancers rode back towards the main lines, contingents of archers stepped forward. At a sign from their captain, they filled the air with their arrows. The horse archers veered away from the Gothic lines, dividing to open the way for another cavalry charge. But a second wave of Gothic horse came charging in to meet them.

So the battle went on all day, with men dying like flies as each side clashed, wearing each other down as they fought, but neither side gaining on the other. The Goths had nowhere to go except into the hills behind them; the Huns were committed to seizing the lands Hlod claimed. Neither side would yield as much as an inch.

As dusk fell, the survivors from both sides withdrew to their tents, bringing back their wounded to be tended by physicians and their dead to be buried in mass-graves, leaving the Hun dead on the battlefield where ravens strutted and gorged themselves. Angantyr joined Gizur and Ormar at the fire.

'We have slain many Huns,' Gizur said approvingly. 'Yet they are many and we are few.'

'I still hope that we shall be reinforced,' said Ormar. 'Many men out there could still join us; if they do not wish see Gothland ravaged by the Huns.'

Angantyr stroked the pommel of his sword. 'We shall see a great slaughter ere this matter is decided,' he said grimly. He did not believe reinforcements would come; if his folk were willing to stand behind him, he thought they would have joined him by now.

But he was wrong. As he stumbled from his tent the next morning, he found that several war bands of Goths from the western reaches of his kingdom had joined them during the night. Now the ranks were beginning to swell, at least to return to the numbers the young king had known when they had first come to Dunheid. That day the fighting was bitter.

The Goths and the Huns met in the middle of the valley again, and the fighting began in earnest, the clash and clang of arms and the roar of men echoing from the cliffs where the ravens had gathered in ever-increasing numbers. The fight went on throughout the day, exhausted men struggling in a daze of bloodlust, in a morass of mud and blood. The Huns were becoming more and more desperate as throughout the day Goths had come down from the hills to join the ranks of their fellow countrymen. As Angantyr fought in the forefront, he saw that they knew the Goths would show them no mercy should they break.

The Goths shouted war-cries, the names of gods, and the names of the heroes of old. As they struggled, they knew they were fighting for their freedom and for their homeland. Angantyr heard greybeards and youth bellowing encouragement to each other, united by their hatred of the invaders. Blood pooled in the valley bottom and the heath became a shambles of dead and dying, horses and men united in death. The ravens circled impatiently, awaiting the feast that would be theirs at the close of the day, whoever won.

Angantyr and his Goths poured across the ghastly battlefield, crashing into the Hunnish shield wall. For a moment, nothing happened but the usual push and shove and the clash of swords and axes above the line of shields. But then the king realised something new was happening.

‘Look!’ shouted Gizur from his side. ‘The Huns are beginning to break!’

At last, Angantyr thought. At last, his folk were beginning to grasp at victory. Some of the Huns still stood fast, but many were turning to ride back towards their tents, while King Humli and Prince Hlod shouted and berated them. With Tyrfing blazing like a torch, Angantyr charged forward, with his men pelting after him. His sword swung back and forth, cutting down everyone in his path, men and horses. He reached the shield wall that surrounded Hlod and Humli, and he and his men flung themselves at it.

Tyrfing slashed through shields and swords as if they were silk, and he hacked his way through the Huns in a shower of gore. He was covered in blood, some of it his own but much of it his foes’ when the shield wall broke and scattered, leaving Hlod and Humli facing him. Angantyr strode forward.

Hlod came towards him, and slashed at him with his sword. Angantyr brought Tyrfing up to parry, and his brother’s blade smashed asunder. Angantyr cut down into Hlod’s mail-clad breast and the prince collapsed into the heather.

Angantyr turned to see Gizur standing over the fallen corpse of Humli. Ahead of them, the Huns were fleeing, in an utter rout now their king and prince had both fallen.

‘Pursue them!’ Angantyr croaked. He was a ghastly sight in his blood stained mail. ‘Slaughter them!’

The Goths pursued the Huns throughout the day, forcing them from the Dylgja Dales and down into the plains where they fell in such numbers that their bodies clogged the river and the lands around were flooded. The valley was a morass of horses and corpses, awash with blood.

Once he was sure the Huns had been broken, Angantyr sheathed Tyrfing and went to search among the fallen. At last, he found Hlod again, near Humli’s corpse and the fallen horsehair standard. The prince was groaning slightly, though blood pooled the ground all around him. Angantyr helped him into a sitting position and put a water skin to his lips. But the prince’s eyes were growing dim.

‘Brother,’ Angantyr said. His voice was thick with emotion. ‘I offered you riches and wealth, everything you could ever have wanted. Now this war brings you little reward; you’ve won neither gold nor victory.’

Hlod looked back at him, struggling to speak, but no words came from the red-rimmed hole of his mouth. He slumped back.

‘We are cursed,’ Angantyr said bleakly, looking down at the sword he still wore at his side. ‘I have become your killer. This shall always be remembered. Ill is the doom of the Norns.’

THE END

BY THY SIDE I STAND by Obsidian Mercurio Tesla

By thy side I stand, resolute and blood soaked
Our souls facing a world that cares not
And hides all goodness behind the stinking smoke of battle.
I will face each foe with the strength of thy friendship
Forged through the hellfire of adversity,
Dark and cold is my heart, but the spark within
Gives me life and resolve.

By thy side I stand, battered and torn,
Our souls drained by a world that hates
And drives its pain through us like rusty barbed blades.
I will face each foe with thee ‘til I fall by thy side
Forged through the hellfire of adversity,
Dark and cold is my promise to thee, the spark
Now dimmed, but still deep within.

By thy side I die, a promise fulfilled
In a former time in a world undeserving
And ignorant of our true pledge, words that bound two souls
I will face each agony in your place
Forged through the hellfire of adversity,
Dark and cold is our grave, two tiny flames
Now merged, two souls as one.

WHAT SURREALISM MEANS TO ME (A SIX GUN SALUTE TO THE DA DA MOVEMENT) by Obsidian Mercurio Tesla (heavily under the influence)

A thousand hungry penguins marching over a purple sand-dune...a custard sky filled with animated dreams and steampunk pie.

"How now, my little turtle?"

He walks like rice, but burns like saki under a relentless red sun.

"Year Zero approaches! Time for the cull to begin!"

The penguins slide down, one, two, three till the dune is featureless once more.

A golliwog god presides over a throne of plenty, but he raises his flippers skyward.

"Teapots! Teapots I say!... bring me my teapot!"

No one answers.

Four nuns walk past, following a rosebud. Petals adorn the sand beneath their bare feet.

"God is dead!" they chant..."Forgive us, we know not what we do!"

The golliwog god puts its head in its hands and weeps.

.....how many cans are there in a can-can? The penguins clap...one, two, three.....there is the noise of applause behind the sand-dune, canned laughter.

A clown throws a bucket of blood over a king.

"War is a bitch, isn't it?"

The clown takes off his red nose and behind it there is....nothing. A hollow ceramic face and floppy shoes.

A fat lady dressed as a Viking walks in from the left, issues a war-cry then leaves empty handed towards the right.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained...but are we being graded?"

The penguins look right at you, their cold dead eyes devoid of meaning. As one they sing in chorus..."The shit never ends when the fat lady stops singing!...forgive her, she knows not what she does...she's blind!"

The clown shakes his head wearily then adds, "Sense and sensibility, with a dash of paprika."

Fin

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest

CHAPTER XLV.

THE OPEN GRAVES.—THE DEAD BODIES.—A SCENE OF TERROR.

We have said Waggles spoilt everything, and so he did, for before Mr. Leigh could utter a word more, or advance two steps towards the rioters, Waggles charged them staff in hand, and there soon ensued a riot of a most formidable description.

A kind of desperation seemed to have seized the beadle, and certainly, by his sudden and unexpected attack, he achieved wonders. When, however, a dozen hands got hold of the staff, and it was wrenched from him, and he was knocked down, and half-a-dozen people rolled over him, Waggles was not near the man he had been, and he would have been very well content to have lain quiet where he was; this, however, he was not permitted to do, for two or three, who had felt what a weighty instrument of warfare the parochial staff

was, lifted him bodily from the ground, and canted him over the wall, without much regard to whether he fell on a hard or a soft place on the other side.

This feat accomplished, no further attention was paid to Mr. Leigh, who, finding that his exhortations were quite unheeded, retired into the church with an appearance of deep affliction about him, and locked himself in the vestry.

The crowd now had entire possession—without even the sort of control that an exhortation assumed over them—of the burying-ground, and soon in a dense mass were these desperate and excited people collected round the well-known spot where lay the mortal remains of Miles, the butcher.

"Silence!" cried a loud voice, and every one obeyed the mandate, looking towards the speaker, who was a tall, gaunt-looking man, attired in a suit of faded black, and who now pressed forward to the front of the throng.

"Oh!" cried one, "it's Fletcher, the ranter. What does he do here?"

"Hear him! hear him!" cried others; "he won't stop us."

"Yes, hear him," cried the tall man, waving his arms about like the sails of a windmill. "Yes, hear him. Sons of darkness, you're all vampyres, and are continually sucking the life-blood from each other. No wonder that the evil one has power over you all. You're as men who walk in the darkness when the sunlight invites you, and you listen to the words of humanity when those of a diviner origin are offered to your acceptance. But there shall be miracles in the land, and even in this place, set apart with a pretended piety that is in itself most damnable, you shall find an evidence of the true light; and the proof that those who will follow me the true path to glory shall be found here within this grave. Dig up Miles, the butcher!"

"Hear, hear, hear, hurra!" said every body. "Mr. Fletcher's not such a fool, after all. He means well."

"Yes, you sinners," said the ranter, "and if you find Miles, the butcher, decaying—even as men are expected to decay whose mortal tabernacles are placed within the bowels of the earth—you shall gather from that a great omen, and a sign that if you follow me you seek the Lord; but if you find him looking fresh and healthy, as if the warm blood was still within his veins, you shall take that likewise as a signification that what I say to you shall be as the Gospel, and that by coming to the chapel of the Little Boozlehum, ye shall achieve a great salvation."

"Very good," said a brawny fellow, advancing with a spade in his hand; "you get out of the way, and I'll soon have him up. Here goes, like blue blazes!"

The first shovelful of earth he took up, he cast over his head into the air, so that it fell in a shower among the mob, which of course raised a shout of indignation; and, as he

continued so to dispose of the superfluous earth, a general row seemed likely to ensue. Mr. Fletcher opened his mouth to make a remark, and, as that feature of his face was rather a capacious one, a descending lump of mould, of a clayey consistency, fell into it, and got so wedged among his teeth, that in the process of extracting it he nearly brought some of those essential portions of his anatomy with it.

This was a state of things that could not last long, and he who had been so liberal with his spadesful of mould was speedily disarmed, and yet he was a popular favourite, and had done the thing so good-humouredly, that nobody touched him. Six or eight others, who had brought spades and pickaxes, now pushed forward to the work, and in an incredibly short space of time the grave of Miles, the butcher, seemed to be very nearly excavated.

Work of any kind or nature whatever, is speedily executed when done with a wish to get through it; and never, perhaps, within the memory of man, was a grave opened in that churchyard with such a wonderful celerity. The excitement of the crowd grew intense—every available spot from which a view of the grave could be got, was occupied; for the last few minutes scarcely a remark had been uttered, and when, at last, the spade of one of those who were digging struck upon something that sounded like wood, you might have heard a pin drop, and each one there present drew his breath more shortly than before.

"There he is," said the man, whose spade struck upon the coffin.

Those few words broke the spell, and there was a general murmur, while every individual present seemed to shift his position in his anxiety to obtain a better view of what was about to ensue.

The coffin now having been once found, there seemed to be an increased impetus given to the work; the earth was thrown out with a rapidity that seemed almost the quick result of the working of some machine; and those closest to the grave's brink crouched down, and, intent as they were upon the progress of events, heeded not the damp earth that fell upon them, nor the frail brittle and humid remains of humanity that occasionally rolled to their feet.

It was, indeed, a scene of intense excitement—a scene which only wanted a few prominent features in its foreground of a more intellectual and higher cast than composed the mob, to make it a fit theme for a painter of the highest talent.

And now the last few shovelfuls of earth that hid the top of the coffin were cast from the grave, and that narrow house which contained the mortal remains of him who was so well known, while in life, to almost every one then present, was brought to the gaze of eyes which never had seemed likely to have looked upon him again.

The cry was now for ropes, with which to raise the cumbrous mass; but these were not to be had, no one thought of providing himself with such appliances, so that by main strength, only, could the coffin be raised to the brink.

The difficulty of doing this was immense, for there was nothing tangible to stand upon; and even when the mould from the sides was sufficiently cleared away, that the handles of the coffin could be laid hold of, they came away immediately in the grasp of those who did so.

But the more trouble that presented itself to the accomplishment of the designs of the mob, the more intent that body seemed upon carrying out to the full extent their original designs.

Finding it quite impossible by bodily strength to raise the coffin of the butcher from the position in which it had got imbedded by excessive rains, a boy was hastily despatched to the village for ropes, and never did boy run with such speed before, for all his own curiosity was excited in the issue of an adventure, that to his young imagination was appallingly interesting.

As impatient as mobs usually are, they had not time, in this case, for the exercise of that quality of mind before the boy came back with the necessary means of exerting quite a different species of power against the butcher's coffin.

Strong ropes were slid under the inert mass, and twenty hands at once plied the task of raising that receptacle of the dead from what had been presumed to be its last resting-place. The ropes strained and creaked, and many thought that they would burst asunder sooner than raise the heavy coffin of the defunct butcher.

It is singular what reasons people find for backing their opinion.

"You may depend he's a vampyre," said one, "or it wouldn't be so difficult to get him out of the grave."

"Oh, there can be no mistake about that," said one; "when did a natural Christian's coffin stick in the mud in that way?"

"Ah, to be sure," said another; "I knew no good would come of his goings on; he never was a decent sort of man like his neighbours, and many queer things have been said of him that I have no doubt are true enough, if we did but know the rights of them."

"Ah, but," said a young lad, thrusting his head between the two who were talking, "if he is a vampyre, how does he get out of his coffin of a night with all that weight of mould a top of him?"

One of the men considered for a moment, and then finding no rational answer occur to him, he gave the boy a box on the ear, saying,—

"I should like to know what business that is of yours? Boys, now-a-days, ain't like the boys in my time; they think nothing now of putting their spokes in grown-up people's wheels, just as if their opinions were of any consequence."

Now, by a vigorous effort, those who were tugging at the ropes succeeded in moving the coffin a little, and that first step was all the difficulty, for it was loosened from the adhesive soil in which it lay, and now came up with considerable facility.

There was a half shout of satisfaction at this result, while some of the congregation turned pale, and trembled at the prospect of the sight which was about to present itself; the coffin was dragged from the grave's brink fairly among the long rank grass that flourished in the churchyard, and then they all looked at it for a time, and the men who had been most earnest in raising it wiped the perspiration from their brows, and seemed to shrink from the task of opening that receptacle of the dead now that it was fairly in their power so to do.

Each man looked anxiously in his neighbour's face, and several audibly wondered why somebody else didn't open the coffin.

"There's no harm in it," said one; "if he's a vampyre, we ought to know it; and, if he ain't, we can't do any hurt to a dead man."

"Oughtn't we to have the service for the dead?" said one.

"Yes," said the impertinent boy who had before received the knock on the head, "I think we ought to have that read backwards."

This ingenious idea was recompensed by a great many kicks and cuffs, which ought to have been sufficient to have warned him of the great danger of being a little before his age in wit.

"Where's the use of shirking the job?" cried he who had been so active in shoveling the mud upon the multitude; "why, you cowardly sneaking set of humbugs, you're half afraid, now."

"Afraid—afraid!" cried everybody: "who's afraid."

"Ah, who's afraid?" said a little man, advancing, and assuming an heroic attitude; "I always notice, if anybody's afraid, it's some big fellow, with more bones than brains."

At this moment, the man to whom this reproach was more particularly levelled, raised a horrible shout of terror, and cried out, in frantic accents,—

"He's a-coming—he's a-coming!"

The little man fell at once into the grave, while the mob, with one accord, turned tail, and fled in all directions, leaving him alone with the coffin. Such a fighting, and kicking, and scrambling ensued to get over the wall of the grave-yard, that this great fellow, who had caused all the mischief, burst into such peals of laughter that the majority of the people became aware that it was a joke, and came creeping back, looking as sheepish as possible.

Some got up very faint sorts of laugh, and said "very good," and swore they saw what big Dick meant from the first, and only ran to make the others run.

"Very good," said Dick, "I'm glad you enjoyed it, that's all. My eye, what a scampering there was among you. Where's my little friend, who was so infernally cunning about bones and brains?"

With some difficulty the little man was extricated from the grave, and then, oh, for the consistency of a mob! they all laughed at him; those very people who, heedless of all the amenities of existence, had been trampling upon each other, and roaring with terror, actually had the impudence to laugh at him, and call him a cowardly little rascal, and say it served him right.

But such is popularity!

"Well, if nobody won't open the coffin," said big Dick, "I will, so here goes. I knowed the old fellow when he was alive, and many a time he's d——d me and I've d——d him, so I ain't a-going to be afraid of him now he's dead. We was very intimate, you see, 'cos we was the two heaviest men in the parish; there's a reason for everything."

"Ah, Dick's the fellow to do it," cried a number of persons; "there's nobody like Dick for opening a coffin; he's the man as don't care for nothing."

"Ah, you snivelling curs," said Dick, "I hate you. If it warn't for my own satisfaction, and all for to prove that my old friend, the butcher, as weighed seventeen stone, and stood six feet two and-a-half on his own sole, I'd see you all jolly well—"

"D——d first," said the boy; "open the lid, Dick, let's have a look."

"Ah, you're a rum un," said Dick, "arter my own heart. I sometimes thinks as you must be a nevy, or some sort of relation of mine. Howsomdever, here goes. Who'd a thought that I should ever had a look at old fat and thunder again?—that's what I used to call him; and then he used to request me to go down below, where I needn't turn round to light my blessed pipe."

"Hell—we know," said the boy; "why don't you open the lid, Dick?"

"I'm a going," said Dick; "kim up."

He introduced the corner of a shovel between the lid and the coffin, and giving it a sudden wrench, he loosened it all down one side.

A shudder pervaded the multitude, and, popularly speaking, you might have heard a pin drop in that crowded churchyard at that eventful moment.

Dick then proceeded to the other side, and executed the same manoeuvre.

"Now for it," he said; "we shall see him in a moment, and we'll think we seed him still."

"What a lark!" said the boy.

"You hold yer jaw, will yer? Who axed you for a remark, blow yer? What do you mean by squatting down there, like a cock-sparrow, with a pain in his tail, hanging yer head, too, right over the coffin? Did you never hear of what they call a fluvifium coming from the dead, yer ignorant beast, as is enough to send nobody to blazes in a minute? Get out of the way of the cold meat, will yer?"

"A what, do you say, Dick?"

"Request information from the extreme point of my elbow."

Dick threw down the spade, and laying hold of the coffin-lid with both hands, he lifted it off, and flung it on one side.

There was a visible movement and an exclamation among the multitude. Some were pushed down, in the eager desire of those behind to obtain a sight of the ghastly remains of the butcher; those at a distance were frantic, and the excitement was momentarily increasing.

They might all have spared themselves the trouble, for the coffin was empty—here was no dead butcher, nor any evidence of one ever having been there, not even the grave-clothes; the only thing at all in the receptacle of the dead was a brick.

Dick's astonishment was so intense that his eyes and mouth kept opening together to such an extent, that it seemed doubtful when they would reach their extreme point of elongation. He then took up the brick and looked at it curiously, and turned it over and over, examined the ends and the sides with a critical eye, and at length he said,—

"Well, I'm blowed, here's a transmogrification; he's consolidated himself into a blessed brick—my eye, here's a curiosity."

"But you don't mean to say that's the butcher, Dick?" said the boy.

Dick reached over, and gave him a tap on the head with the brick.

"There!" he said, "that's what I call ocular demonstration. Do you believe it now, you blessed infidel? What's more natural? He was an out-and-out brick while he was alive; and he's turned to a brick now he's dead."

"Give it to me, Dick," said the boy; "I should like to have that brick, just for the fun of the thing."

"I'll see you turned into a pantile first. I sha'n't part with this here, it looks so blessed sensible; it's a gaining on me every minute as a most remarkable likeness, d——d if it ain't."

By this time the bewilderment of the mob had subsided; now that there was no dead butcher to look upon, they fancied themselves most grievously injured; and, somehow or other, Dick, notwithstanding all his exertions in their service, was looked upon in the light of a showman, who had promised some startling exhibition and then had disappointed his auditors.

The first intimation he had of popular vengeance was a stone thrown at him, but Dick's eye happened to be upon the fellow who threw it, and collaring him in a moment, he dealt him a cuff on the side of the head, which confused his faculties for a week.

"Hark ye," he then cried, with a loud voice, "don't interfere with me; you know it won't go down. There's something wrong here; and, as one of yourselves, I'm as much interested in finding out what it is as any of you can possibly be. There seems to be some truth in this vampyre business; our old friend, the butcher, you see, is not in his grave; where is he then?"

The mob looked at each other, and none attempted to answer the question.

"Why, of course, he's a vampyre," said Dick, "and you may all of you expect to see him, in turn, come into your bed-room windows with a burst, and lay hold of you like a million and a half of leeches rolled into one."

There was a general expression of horror, and then Dick continued,—

"You'd better all of you go home; I shall have no hand in pulling up any more of the coffins—this is a dose for me. Of course you can do what you like."

"Pull them all up!" cried a voice; "pull them all up! Let's see how many vampyres there are in the churchyard."

"Well, it's no business of mine," said Dick; "but I wouldn't, if I was you."

"You may depend," said one, "that Dick knows something about it, or he wouldn't take it so easy."

"Ah! down with him," said the man who had received the box on the ears; "he's perhaps a vampyre himself."

The mob made a demonstration towards him, but Dick stood his ground, and they paused again.

"Now, you're a cowardly set," he said; "cause you're disappointed, you want to come upon me. Now, I'll just show what a little thing will frighten you all again, and I warn beforehand it will, so you sha'n't say you didn't know it, and were taken by surprise."

The mob looked at him, wondering what he was going to do.

"Once! twice! thrice!" he said, and then he flung the brick up into the air an immense height, and shouted "heads," in a loud tone.

A general dispersion of the crowd ensued, and the brick fell in the centre of a very large circle indeed.

"There you are again," said Dick; "why, what a nice act you are!"

"What fun!" said the boy. "It's a famous coffin, this, Dick," and he laid himself down in the butcher's last resting-place. "I never was in a coffin before—it's snug enough."

"Ah, you're a rum 'un," said Dick; "you're such a inquiring genius, you is; you'll get your head into some hole one day, and not be able to get it out again, and then I shall see you a kicking. Hush! lay still—don't say anything."

"Good again," said the boy; "what shall I do?"

"Give a sort of a howl and a squeak, when they've all come back again."

"Won't I!" said the boy; "pop on the lid."

"There you are," said Dick; "d——d if I don't adopt you, and bring you up to the science of nothing."

"Now, listen to me, good people all," added Dick; "I have really got something to say to you."

At this intimation the people slowly gathered again round the grave.

"Listen," said Dick, solemnly; "it strikes me there's some tremendous do going on."

"Yes, there is," said several who were foremost.

"It won't be long before you'll all of you be most d—nably astonished; but let me beg of all you not to accuse me of having anything to do with it, provided I tell you all I know."

"No, Dick; we won't—we won't—we won't."

"Good; then, listen. I don't know anything, but I'll tell you what I think, and that's as good; I don't think that this brick is the butcher; but I think, that when you least expect it—hush! come a little closer."

"Yes, yes; we are closer."

"Well, then, I say, when you all least expect it, and when you ain't dreaming of such a thing, you'll hear something of my fat friend as is dead and gone, that will astonish you all."

Dick paused, and he gave the coffin a slight kick, as intimation to the boy that he might as well be doing his part in the drama, upon which that ingenious young gentleman set up such a howl, that even Dick jumped, so unearthly did it sound within the confines of that receptacle of the dead.

But if the effect upon him was great, what must it have been upon those whom it took completely unawares? For a moment or two they seemed completely paralysed, and then they frightened the boy, for the shout of terror that rose from so many throats at once was positively alarming.

This jest of Dick's was final, for, before three minutes had elapsed, the churchyard was clear of all human occupants save himself and the boy, who had played his part so well in the coffin.

"Get out," said Dick, "it's all right—we've done 'em at last; and now you may depend upon it they won't be in a hurry to come here again. You keep your own counsel, or else somebody will serve you out for this. I don't think you're altogether averse to a bit of fun, and if you keep yourself quiet, you'll have the satisfaction of hearing what's said about this affair in every pot-house in the village, and no mistake."

BRIGANDS OF THE MOON by Ray Cummings

XXIX

Anita's words echoed in my memory: "We must do our best to be convincing." It was not her ability that I doubted, as much as my own. She had played the part of George Prince cleverly, unmasked only by an evil chance.

I steeled myself to face the searching glances of the brigands as they shoved around us. This was a desperate game into which we had plunged. For all our acting, how easy it would be for some small chance thing abruptly to undo us! I realized it, and now, as I gazed into the peering faces of these men from Mars, I cursed myself for the witless rashness which had brought Anita into this!

The brigands—some ten or fifteen of them here on deck—stood in a ring around us. They were all big men, nearly of a seven-foot average, dressed in leather jerkins and short leather breeches, with bare knees and flaring leather boots. Piratical swaggering fellows, knife-blades mingled with small hand projectors fastened to their belts. Gray, heavy faces, some with scraggly, unshaven beards. They plucked at us, jabbering in Martian.

One of them seemed the leader. I said sharply, "Are you the commander here? You speak the Earth English?"

"Yes," he said readily. "I am commander here." He spoke English with the same freedom and accent as Miko. "Is this George Prince's sister?"

"Yes. Her name is Anita Prince. Tell your men to take their hands off her."

He waved his men away. They all seemed more interested in Anita than in me. He added:

"I am Set Potan." He addressed Anita. "George Prince's sister? You are called Anita? I have heard of you. I knew your brother—indeed, you look very much like him."

He swept his plumed hat to the grid with a swaggering gesture of homage. A courtierlike fellow this, debonair as a Venus cavalier!

He accepted us. I realized that Anita's presence was extremely valuable in making us convincing. Yet there was about this Potan—as with Miko—a disturbing suggestion of irony. I could not make him out. I decided that we had fooled him. Then I remarked the steely glitter of his eyes as he turned to me.

"You were an officer of the Planetara?"

The insignia of my rank was visible on my white jacket collar which showed beneath the Erentz suit now that my helmet was off.

"Yes. I was supposed to be. But a year ago I embarked upon this adventure with Miko."

He was leading us to his cabin. "The Planetara wrecked? Miko dead?"

"And Hahn and Coniston. George Prince too. We are the only survivors."

While we divested ourselves of the Erentz suits, at his command, I told him briefly of the Planetara's fall. All had been killed on board, save Anita and me. We had escaped,

awaited his coming. The treasure was here; we had located the Grantline camp, and were ready to lead him to it.

Did he believe me? He listened quietly. He seemed not shocked at the death of his comrades. Nor yet pleased: merely imperturbable.

I added with a sly, sidelong glance, "There were too many of us on the Planetara. The purser had joined us and many of the crew. And there was Miko's sister, the Setta Moa—too many. The treasure divides better among less."

An amused smile played on his thin gray lips. But he nodded. The fear which had leaped at me was allayed by his next words.

"True enough, Haljan. He was a domineering fellow, Miko. A third of it all was for him alone. But now...."

The third would go to this sub-leader, Potan! The implication was obvious.

I said, "Before we go any further, I can trust you for my share?"

"Of course."

I figured that my very boldness in bargaining so prematurely would convince him. I insisted, "Miss Prince will have her brother's share?"

Clever Anita! She put in swiftly, "Oh, I give no information until you promise! We know the location of the Grantline camp, its weapons, its defences, the amount and location of the treasure. I warn you, if you do not play us fair...."

He laughed heartily. He seemed to like us. He spread his huge legs as he lounged in his settle, and drank of the bowl which one of his men set before him.

"Little tigress! Fear me not—I play fair!" He pushed two of the bowls across the table. "Drink, Haljan. All is well with us and I am glad to know it. Miss Prince, drink my health as your leader."

I waved it away from Anita. "We need all our wits; your strong Martian drinks are dangerous. Look here, I'll tell you just how the situation stands—"

I plunged into a glib account of our supposed wanderings to find the Grantline camp: its location off the Mare Imbrium—hidden in a cavern there. Potan, with the drink, and under the gaze of Anita's eyes, was in high good humor. He laughed when I told him that we had dared to invade the Grantline camp, had smashed its exit ports, had even gotten up to have a look where the treasure was piled.

"Well done, Haljan. You're a fellow to my liking!" But his gaze was on Anita. "You dress like a man or a charming boy."

She still wore the dark clothes of her brother. She said, "I am used to action. Man's garb pleases me. You shall treat me like a man and give me my share of gold leaf."

He had already demanded the reason for the signal from the Mare Imbrium. Miko's signal! It had not come again, though any moment I feared it. I told him that Grantline doubtless had repaired his damaged ports and sallied out to assail me in reprisal. And, seeing the brigand ship landing on Archimedes, had tried to lure him into a trap.

I wondered if my explanation was convincing: it did not sound so. But he was flushed now with drink, and Anita added:

"Grantline knows the territory near his camp very well. But he is equipped only for short range fighting."

I took it up. "It's like this, Potan: if he could get you to land unsuspectingly near his cavern—"

I pictured how Grantline might have figured on a sudden surprise attack upon the ship. It was his only chance to catch it unprepared.

We were all three in friendly, intimate mood now. Potan said, "We'll land down there right enough! But I need a few hours for my assembling."

"He will not dare advance," I said.

Anita put in, smiling, "He knows by now that we have unmasked his lure. Haljan and I, joining you—that silenced him. His light went out very promptly, didn't it?"

She flashed me a side gaze. Were we acting convincingly? But if Miko started up his signals again, they might so quickly betray us! Anita's thoughts were upon that, for she added:

"Grantline will not dare show his light! If he does, Set Potan, we can blast him from here with a ray. Can't we?"

"Yes," Potan agreed. "If he comes within ten miles, I have one powerful enough. We are assembling it now."

"And we have thirty men?" Anita persisted. "When we sail down to attack him, it should not be difficult to kill all the Grantline party."

"By heaven, Haljan, this girl of yours is small, but very bloodthirsty!"

"And I'm glad Miko is dead," Anita added.

I explained, "That accursed Miko murdered her brother."

Acting! And never once did we dare relax. If only Miko's signals would hold off and give us time!

We may have talked for half an hour. We were in a small steel-lined cubby, located in the forward deck of the ship. The dome was over it. I could see from where I sat at the table that there was a forward observatory tower under the dome quite near here. The ship was laid out in rather similar fashion to the Planetara, though considerably smaller.

Potan had dismissed his men from the cubby so as to be alone with us. Out on the deck I could see them dragging apparatus about, bringing the mechanisms of giant projectors up from below and beginning to assemble them. Occasionally some of the men would come to our cubby windows to peer in curiously.

My mind was roaming as I talked. For all my manner of casualness, I knew that haste was necessary. Whatever Anita and I were to do must be quickly done.

But to win this fellow's utter confidence first was necessary, so that we might have the freedom of the ship, might move about unnoticed, unwatched.

I was horribly tense inside. Through the dome windows across the deck from the cubby, the rocks of the Lunar landscape were visible. I could see the brink of this ledge upon which the ship lay, the descending crags down the precipitous wall of Archimedes to the Earthlit plains far below. Miko, Moa, and a few of the Planetara's crew were down there somewhere.

Anita and I had a fairly definite plan. We were now in Potan's confidence; this interview at an end, I felt that our status among the brigands would be established. We would be free to move about the ship, join in its activities. It ought to be possible to locate the signal room, get friendly with the operator there.

Perhaps we could find a secret opportunity to flash a signal to Earth. This ship, I was confident, would have the power for a long range signal, if not of too sustained a length. It would be a desperate thing to attempt, but our whole procedure was desperate! Anita could lure the duty man from the signal room, I might send a single flash or two that would reach the Earth. Just a distress signal, signed "Grantline." If I could do that and not get caught!

Anita was engaging Potan in talking of his plans. The brigand leader was boasting of them: of his well equipped ship, the daring of his men. And questioning her about the size of the treasure. My thoughts were free to roam.

While we were making friends with this brigand, the longest range electronic projector was being assembled. Miko then could flash his signal and be damned to him! I would be on the deck with that projector. Its operator and I would turn it upon Miko—one flash of it and he and his little band would be wiped out.

But there was our escape to be thought of. We could not remain very long with these brigands. We could tell them that the Grantline camp was on the Mare Imbrium. It would delay them for a time, but our lie would soon be discovered. We must escape from them, get away and back to Grantline. With Miko dead, a distress signal to Earth, and Potan in ignorance of Grantline's location, the treasure would be safe until help arrived from Earth.

"By the infernal, little Anita, you look like a dove, but you're a tigress! A comrade after my own heart—bloodthirsty as a fire-worshipper!"

Her laugh rang out to mingle with his. "Oh no, Set Potan! I am treasure-thirsty."

"We'll get the treasure. Never fear, little Anita."

"With you to lead us, I'm sure we will."

A man entered the cubby. Potan looked frowningly around. "What is it, Argle?"

The fellow answered in Martian, leered at Anita and withdrew.

Potan stood up. I noticed that he was unsteady with the drink.

"They want me with the work at the projectors."

"Go ahead," I said.

He nodded. We were comrades now. "Amuse yourself, Haljan. Or come out on deck if you wish. I will tell my men you are one of us."

"And tell them to keep their hands off Miss Prince."

He stared at me. "I had not thought of that: a woman among so many men!"

His own gaze at Anita was as offensive as any of his men could have given. He said, "Have no fear, little tigress."

Anita laughed. "I'm afraid of nothing."

But when he had lurched from the cabin, she touched me. Smiled with her mannish swagger, for fear we were still observed, and murmured:

"Oh Gregg, I am afraid!"

We stayed in the cubby a few moments, whispering and planning.

"You think the signal room is in the tower, Gregg? This tower outside our window here?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Shall we go out and see?"

"Yes. Keep near me always."

"Oh Gregg, I will!"

We deposited our Erentz suits carefully in a corner of the cubby. We might need them so suddenly! Then we swaggered out to join the brigands working on the deck.