

# DARK TREASURES

SPECULATIVE FICTION ON THE EDGE





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BY JAMES S. DORR

*James S. Dorr's new book, DARKER LOVES: TALES OF MYSTERY AND REGRET, is scheduled for publication in 2005 by Dark Regions Press as a companion to his current collection, STRANGE MISTRESSES: TALES OF WONDER AND ROMANCE (Dark Regions, 2001), while other work has appeared in such venues as ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, NEW MYSTERY, ABORIGINAL SF, TOMORROW, FANTASTIC, MARSDUST FUTURE ORBITS, GOTHIC.NET, CHI-ZINE, TERMINAL FRIGHT, ENIGMATIC TALES (UK), FAERIES (France), and numerous anthologies. Dorr is an active member of SFWA and HWA, an Anthony (mystery) and Darrell (fiction set in the US Mid-South) finalist, winner of Best of the Web 1998, a Pushcart Prize nominee, keeper of a hyperactive gray and black cat named Wednesday (after Wednesday Addams of the original THE ADDAMS FAMILY—and whose favorite toy is a plastic fake spider!), and has had work listed in THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR eleven of the past thirteen years.*

Even his friends didn't know he was going to night school. They did know that he didn't use drugs, but, at the same time, that he no longer palled around with them nights the way he used to. They called him Cold Eddie. They thought he probably didn't care.

He did care, though, when he heard his real name repeated in flat, uninflected tones, as if in a dream.

“Edward Duchin, knife wound in the abdomen.”

He opened his eyes, saw the hospital emergency room, felt a prick in his shoulder and went back to sleep.

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When he woke again, he was in bed in a dimly lit room. Knife wound, he thought. He reached for his pocket, realized he no longer had his jacket. He realized he didn't feel any pain.

He figured from that that he had to be dreaming. He didn't feel pain, but he did feel a warmth he shouldn't have felt. He heard more voices calling his name.

"Ice man Duchin!"—that was a nickname his enemies used.

He saw himself, as if in a movie, a short, wiry figure walking past the alley across from where he lived. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of garbage, then stopped for a moment, his stiff leather jacket open in front, and turned at the sound.

Two men wearing hats that shaded their faces came out of the alley.

"Duchin. You wanna snort?"

"Fuck off, you guys. I. . . ."

"Then don't nose around when we're doing a deal. You understand, Duchin?"

He saw the flash of steel, reached to his pocket where he kept his own four-inch blade, but never made it. He felt the steel, heard the voice fading, its tones too muffled for recognition. He felt heat again, heard a different kind of voice now. This one was clearer.

"Duchin? Yeah. He's going to pull through. Lousy street punk, no use to anyone, but he'll be okay. This little girl, though. . . ."

A second voice broke in. "April Sanders?"

"Never hurt anyone in her life, but, if we can't get her fever down, she'll be lucky to live till morning."

He watched, again as if in a movie, and saw two doctors huddled over a bed across from his. He felt as if he *was* the little girl, burning with heat. He remembered his kid sister, when she was little, down with pneumonia. She had come close to dying too, and Eddie, who wasn't afraid of knives or much of anything else on the streets when he had a fair chance, had known fear then. He had felt so helpless.

"Bother you, Duchin?"

This was a new voice. He turned and saw the gambler behind him.

"My friends call me Eddie."

"Sure—Cold Eddie." The gambler was wearing a pinch-back suit coat, wide in the shoulders and trimmed in gold, and a snakeskin tie. He

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stood on the sidewalk, behind a table. “You want to play some three-card, Eddie?”

“Three-card's a sucker game. You know that, mister.”

The gambler ignored him.

Eddie watched in spite of himself as the gambler shuffled. He tried to look down—saw that he had somehow gotten his own jacket back. But he cut the deck when it was passed to him, and watched as three cards spat out onto the table. The gambler lifted the one on the left and revealed a red queen.

“Just watch for the lady. You got that, Eddie?”

He watched as the gambler shifted the cards into new positions, back and forward, one, then another coming to rest in the left hand position. Without meaning to, he pointed to the one in the middle when they stopped. The gambler reached to it and lifted the red queen.

“See that, Eddie? You would have won.”

The gambler started to move the cards in patterns again, faster and faster. As soon as he stopped, Eddie saw, as if in a dream, his own black-cuffed hand point to the card on the left hand side. The gambler lifted it, turned it over. Again the red queen.

“A second win, Eddie. Just watch for the lady, just like you're doing. Now this time let's bet something.”

“I don't bet, mister. Not on sucker games.” He tried to turn away from the gambler, back to the dimly lit hospital room, but his feet refused to move from the pavement. He stared at the table and saw that the gambler was smiling now.

“Sure you do, Eddie. You want something from me. You want that little girl to pull through. But I want you, Eddie. A life for a life—double or nothing.”

Eddie shook his head, jammed his hands in his jacket pockets, but couldn't help staring, fascinated, as the cards started to move again. Three-card was a sucker game. He knew that as well as the gambler.

“It's simple, Eddie. Just be sure to keep those eyes of yours out for a lady. . . .”

He jerked his right hand out of his pocket, his knife in his fist, and let the four-inch switchblade snap open. He stabbed at the table, skewering the card that was moving fastest.

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“The red queen, Eddie. That's what your card is. . . .”

Eddie shook his head. “Not quite, mister. You just said a lady.”

Eddie pulled his knife out of the table, bringing the queen of spades up with it. He peeled off the card, then held the knife out in front of his body. He started to back away from the gambler.

And felt himself falling.

And picked himself up from where he lay at the base of a huge tree.

He looked around him and saw that he stood at the edge of a clearing, surrounded by forest. He felt hot again and reached to his chest to unzip his jacket. Then he realized his jacket was different, made of a softer, browner leather that came to his knees, and fastened together with buttons and fringes. He reached to his pocket. His knife wasn't there.

A hand touched his wrist.

“It's on your belt, Eddie.”

He twisted and saw the gambler again, but dressed like a farmer in dark-colored homespun, and holding a long, bent, single-edged blade. The gambler looked older.

“Your hands clammy, mister.”

“You don't know why?” The gambler's voice dropped until it was as cold as the hand that had brushed Eddie's skin. “You cheated me in that game of three-card and I don't cheat easy. That's why we're going to play again—a game you might not take to quite so well these days. A knife fight, Eddie. The Bowie knife you'll find on your belt against my scythe blade.”

Eddie reached down, felt a hilt in his palm, and pulled the knife free. It was bigger—much bigger—than what he was used to, but comfortably balanced. He hefted it, touched its blade's point with his finger. He crouched and waited.

The gambler moved fast, but Eddie was faster. He threw the knife, sideways, as hard as he could. When the gambler dodged, he ducked under the scythe blade. He knocked the older man down to the ground with a butt to the stomach, then fell on top of him, both fists swinging.

And kept on falling.

And stood by himself in a winter-white field.



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Again he looked around, saw that the snow was still coming down. He still felt hot. He waited, knowing the gambler would be there, wondering what kind of contest would be next.

*A game this time, Eddie, where not even you will be able to cheat—* the words seemed to form by themselves in his head.

“What do you mean, cheat? There aren't any rules in a knife fight, mister.” He whirled and stared, could still see nothing but falling whiteness, until he looked down and saw the wolf crouched in the snow at his feet.

*Aren't any rules in a dog fight either.* The words came again, just as if they were his own thoughts. *You can't cheat Death in the long run, Eddie. Either you beat me fair and square this time or else neither you nor the little girl will live until morning. Now, what kind of dog do you want to be?*

“Not a talking dog like you, mister.” He thought about dog fights, nevertheless, and the kinds of dogs that were supposed to tough. But this was a fight against a *wolf*. And the gambler claimed it was going to be fair.

*Hurry up, Eddie, or else I'll choose for you.*

He thought about dogs and about a headline he had recently seen in the paper. Something about dogs that killed other dogs. And even killed people.

And might even beat Death fair and square.

*What'll it be, Eddie?*

He didn't have to answer in words. As soon as the thought came into his head, he felt the cold bite through short stubby fur, fighting the heat that was still in his body. He crouched, splay-legged, a growl in his throat, and looked up at the gambler-turned-wolf through the red-rimmed eyes of an angry pit bull.

He growled louder and snapped at the wolf. He was almost surprised when the larger animal backed away, out of his reach. He followed, cautiously, dodging a sudden snap back at his foreleg, and started to circle the wolf like a prize fighter feeling out a dangerous opponent.

Then it was the wolf's turn. This time Eddie's dodge wasn't as fast. He felt sharp teeth tear through his left ear as he crouched to the snow,

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letting the wolf's weight and speed carry it all the way over his body. He twisted, intending to strike himself, but saw that the wolf had already turned and was charging again. This time he rolled, barely avoiding a snap at his side, not yet entirely accepting the fact that an animal so much larger than him could still move so quickly.

The wolf snapped again—again at his forelegs. Eddie back-pedaled and almost tripped over his own hind feet. He tried to think back to the last time he and his friends had gone to a prize fight, tried to think what a prize fighter would do. And then it occurred to him.

Neither he nor the wolf were prize fighters.

*You're getting smart, Eddie.* The “voice” sprang into his head again. Distracted, he let his body shy back, as if by instinct, barely avoiding another snap of the wolf's larger jaws.

*I told you I'm Death—Death in wolf's form. You can't beat Death, Eddie.*

*Maybe I can't, mister,* Eddie thought back. *Maybe not all by myself, anyway.* His body sprang sideways, again just avoiding another attack, and Eddie let it do what it wanted, not fighting its motion.

No, he thought, not caring whether the gambler heard what he was thinking or not, this isn't a prize fight. It isn't even much as a dog fight. He flinched, then relaxed as he felt the wolf's teeth open a streak of red on his back. I'm trapped in the body of a dog and, if I'm going to have any chance at all, I've got to let the dog part take charge.

He did his best to make his human self just hang in and enjoy the ride, letting his body act with a dog's instinct. He stopped minding small cuts, did not even cringe when the wolf's teeth opened another deep gash down the length of his side. He crouched when the dog crouched, rolled when his dog's body wanted to roll. He kept his own thoughts out of the fight, noting only with detached interest that the wolf, standing taller than he did, seemed to be aiming its attacks high.

He ducked again—let the dog's body duck—but this time he twisted. His shoulder rose up, stopping the wolf as its jaws passed over his torn left ear. This time the dog's own teeth sank into flesh as, just for a moment, the larger animal's throat was exposed.

The wolf's momentum knocked both of them over, but the pit bull's shorter, more powerful jaws locked. Eddie just held on as the wolf

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struggled, smashing the lighter dog repeatedly into the ground. He just let the pit bull do what pit bulls do best, worrying the wolf's throat, not minding the bruises as the wolf shook him harder and harder.

And felt his body getting hotter, then suddenly colder. He felt as if he had been caught in a whirlwind, felt himself spinning. Felt more than saw his own human hands grip a skeletal throat. Felt other hands—clammy hands—bend back his fingers.

Refused to let go.

Heard, at first as if from a distance, two voices speaking.

And opened his eyes to a dim, gray light.

He was in his hospital bed again. Two doctors—he thought, from the sounds of their voices, that they were the ones he had heard just before he had met the gambler—were standing over the little girl's bed across from his.

"The fever broke, doctor," the older sounding of the two said. Both voices were clearer. "The little Sanders girl. Must have been less than a half hour ago."

He still felt cold. Not a clammy cold, but more the kind of refreshing coolness he sometimes felt when he went outdoors at night in the springtime. He tried to look closer, like he had been able to before, but this time his view was confined to what he could see from his own bed. The way it should have been in the first place.

But he didn't need to look at the scene the way he might look at a movie this time. It was almost as if he had seen it before and already knew what the next lines would be.

"You think she's going to be okay, then?"

"Should be, yes. I'm glad we checked back. I'll call the night nurse and tell her the good news."

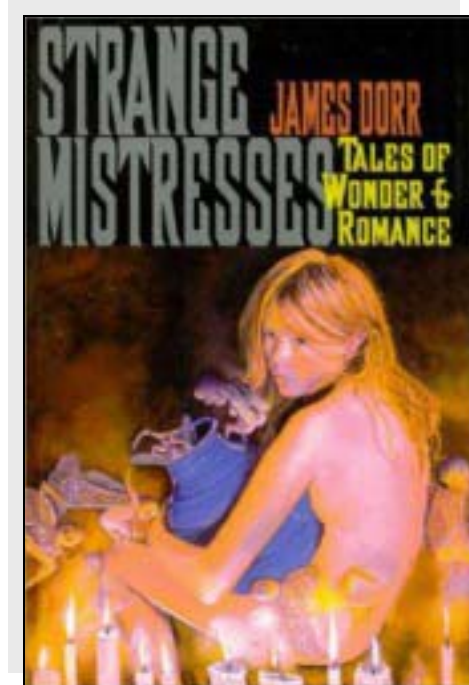
"What about the other one, though? Edward what's-his-name. Seemed pretty quiet when we opened the door."

Eddie closed his eyes. He knew what was coming.

"You mean the street punk? Don't worry about him. He's the lucky kind, know what I mean? Cold as ice, inside and outside the kind who doesn't give a damn."

"Yeah, I guess I do. Why is it, doctor? I can't think of a single reason why he'd deserve it, but his is the kind that always survives."

THE END



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WHERE THE DEAD  
WAIT FOR THE  
RAVENS

BY CHRISTOPHER HIVNER

*Christopher Hivner lives in a small town in south central Pennsylvania while he waits for the mothership to return for him. He has recently had work published in DECOMPOSITIONS and THE SWAMP and will have a story in the DEAD WINTER anthology.*

**T**he rain continued to fall lightly on Hrolf Halfdanson as he pulled the fur cape tighter around his body. The campfire leapt in large, bold flames, but failed to keep him warm. He would have rather been home in Denmark under a white snow sky than here in Ireland enduring the interminable rain.

Hrolf's thoughts soon turned to tomorrow and what the gods had in store for him and his fellow Vikings. The army of King Brannon was encamped a mile to the south and at daybreak would be marching north to meet the men of Danish king Hakon the Giant.

From one of the tents, Hrolf's friend Ubbi emerged and walked toward the fire.

"I can't sleep," Ubbi growled. "When will the heaven's close up?"

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“I think there’s a hole in the sky over these islands,” Hrolf offered with a laugh.

“Like back home, except there it’s snow,” Ubbi chuckled and clapped Hrolf on the back. “I hope all goes well tomorrow and we can go home soon.” Ubbi’s mood turned serious.

“It will, my friend. Some of the Irish have accepted us, but there will always be others trying to drive us out. King Brannon is just the latest making a grab for glory.” Hrolf stood, stretching his back. He walked a half circle around the campfire, trying to keep his circulation alive. Raising his head, he stared hard into the trees surrounding him, looking and listening for any movement.

“The people of Vikingalo have made a good life for themselves,” Ubbi said casually as if he were really thinking of something else.

“They have done well settling here, and we must help protect them now when they need it,” Hrolf replied. “These are our people, from our towns. I couldn’t live here myself but there’s no room for us at home anymore. We’ve grown too big,” Hrolf laughed as he beat his fist into his massive chest. Ubbi joined him, smiling, but they stopped abruptly.

Hearing footsteps, Hrolf turned toward the sound, his right hand immediately grasping his sword. He had his weapon halfway unsheathed when he recognized the approaching figure as Thorvil the Swift. Trying to catch his breath, Thorvil stopped in front of the fire and leaned into it, relishing the heat on his cold, rain-soaked body. Hrolf grabbed his drinking horn and filled it with mead, handing it to Thorvil as he poured. The exhausted viking gorged himself on the liquid.

“Takke, Hrolf. I’ve been dying for something to drink besides this dirty Irish rain.”

“You weren’t due back ‘til morning. What are you doing here?”

“Brannon has been busy. He’s got men from Glendalough and Castledermot doing duty in his army, and they’ve moved closer. The camp is now less than a half mile away.” Thorvil handed the horn back to Hrolf before finishing. “Also, I got close enough to hear a few talking. They’re going to attack while its still dark. I’ve got to get to King Hakon.” With his last words still hanging in the air, Thorvil the Swift was on his way to the king’s hut.

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Tap, tap, tap. The sound was slowly mounting in volume. The vikings were massed at the edge of the forest, bedecked in full battle armor. Chain mail coats rattled in the stale morning air as the men tapped their swords on the edges of their shields, building to a fever-mad frenzy.

A partition formed in the middle of the group as King Hakon walked calmly to the front of his army. Hakon stood a full head taller than any of his men and had in fact never looked another man directly in the eyes. When he reached the front, he turned, screaming “Til slag, more slag! To battle, to battle!”

Hrolf Halfdanson stood only a few feet away from Hakon. He watched as his king thrust his sword into the air, turned and started the charge through the trees toward the Irishmen. Running on long, powerful legs, Hrolf was right behind Hakon, shield raised, sword stabbing at the darkness that surrounded him. His eyes fluttered in their sockets as his rage flooded his brain. The vicinal English countryside echoed the howls and bellows of the vikings as they descended upon King Brannon.

As the trees thinned out, Hrolf could see the Irish campfires still burning. Scattered about the area, soldiers stood, weapons in hand but not raised to fight. The vikings swept down on them like falcons from the sky. Hrolf split the skull of the first man he encountered. Another stood just inches away, but never raised his axe to defend himself as Hrolf cut him down with a backslash through the midsection.

Hrolf suddenly stopped. All around him he watched his brothers hacking the Irish to pieces, just as he had dreamed a few hours ago while he slept. But there was something wrong. King Dermot’s men all stood ready to fight, mail and helmets donned, swords and axes clenched firmly in their hands. But not one ever moved or raised a weapon. Looking around frantically, Hrolf found one of the enemy still standing. He rushed the man, sword aimed for the heart. The man never moved, never pointed his sword anywhere except down into the ground. Hrolf stopped abruptly before skewering him.

The man’s eyes stared into the lightening morning, but not at Hrolf. It was as if he didn’t know the viking was there. Keeping his sword only

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inches away from the Irishman, Hrolf circled him. The man's skin was a ghostly-white. Dark shadows seeped out from the eye sockets sinking the eyes deep into his head. It was as if he were already dead.

Carefully, Hrolf reached down and took the sword from the man's hand, throwing it to the ground several feet away. He looked around him as the battle died. The Irish's bloodied bodies covered the ground in a blanket of rotting flesh. They were being stripped of any valuable weapons or coin.

Hrolf searched out King Hakon and found him wandering among the dead, a strange look on his face. Then he caught Hrolf's gaze and saw the one remaining Irishman still standing. Hakon strode over, looking quizzically from his trusted guard to the Irish soldier.

"There's something strange in this place," Hrolf finally said in a hushed growl.

"Ja," Hakon breathed. "It was like fighting an army of the dead. Has this one said anything?" He looked at Hrolf.

"No. He's not moved or spoken." Hrolf watched his king reach out and stroke the skin of the Irishman.

"Cold," Hakon replied to Hrolf's unasked question. "What in Loki's name has happened here?" Hakon swept his massive arm around in a circle. "Gather up the men. Let's get back to camp and take the prisoner along."

Hrolf immediately began yelling for the men to grab the last of their plunder and start back through the forest. When he was satisfied they were complying, he threw the Irishman over his shoulder and started back himself.

The sun was partially risen in the eastern sky, but while it was no longer raining, it was still overcast. The resulting sky was a dark gray background with an other-worldly pall in the foreground. Hrolf was looking up through the breaks in the tree tops when he saw the flying shape. But then it was gone. He stopped. Twisting his head from side to side, he searched the sky. Snapping tree branches from behind him at the battle site made Hrolf turn around.

The black misshapen mass burst into the clearing with a feral shriek that resonated through the forest. Hrolf felt his brother vikings surround him as they all watched the dark shape break apart. By the time it had



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descended to ground level, they could see it was actually dozens of large birds, black wings swept back sharply like the point of a spear.

The birds, taking one body apiece, plunged themselves into the Irishman's chests, disappearing into the gray, dead flesh. Then in an instant bursting back out again, a white glow around them.

"Odin's oye, what are they?" one of the vikings shouted. Unconsciously some of the men backed away, hands grasping their weapons firmly.

"Back to camp, now!" Hakon the Giant shouted vehemently. He was grabbing men, snapping them out of their terror-induced trances and pushing them back toward camp. Hrolf took a few tentative steps backward, eyes still transfixed on the strange birds that could pass through human flesh. Then he realized they were coming right at him. With speed he had never seen from one of his prized falcons, one of the birds flew at his head, glancing away at the last second. Hrolf realized that Hakon stood beside him and had swung his sword at the creature to drive it away.

"Did you see its face?" Hrolf looked into the eyes of his king. Hakon nodded slowly, an inchoate realization forming in his head as he did. Both men's stupor was broken by another unearthly shriek. They looked in unison to see the entire flock, one by one, turn and fly straight at them. Hrolf dropped the prisoner's body and unsheathed his sword. Standing with their backs to one another, Hrolf and Hakon waited for these strange beasts to attack.

They were on them en masse in a heartbeat. Hrolf swung his sword wildly as they circled above his head. He could feel Hakon's mountainous body pushing against his. One of the birds stopped in mid-air at eye level in front of Hrolf. He was momentarily frozen by the raw shock he felt looking into a human face as it hovered with wings fluttering wildly.

Hrolf swung his sword straight up in an awkward motion, and the bird quickly danced sideways. Then he noticed the bird's eyes were focused on the Irish prisoner's body lying at his feet. He took a quick peek and saw that all the creatures were concentrating at getting to the body.

"They want the prisoner," Hrolf shouted while continuing to fend off the creatures.

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“Then let them have it!” With one mighty swipe, Hakon cleared a path through the black cloud of birds, and he and Hrolf ran away from the dead Irishman. Looking back a moment later they saw one of the birds emerging from the man’s body, then join the others as they melded into a shapeless black mass and rose into the sky.

Hakon took Hrolf by the arm. “Get a few men and search the villages for a native who can tell us what that was.” Hakon had spoken without taking his eyes off the treetops as if he expected the birds to come back. Still without looking at him, Hakon pushed Hrolf on his way.

Hrolf Halfdanson walked into the king’s hut to see an old woman standing in the yellow light of a candle watching the huge viking in front of her pace back and forth. In the hut with them were two other men, guarding the doorway. Finally he glanced at the old woman and then to his king.

“This woman’s name is Catherine. She has lived her whole life in a nearby village. You saw the creatures most clearly, Hrolf. I want you to describe them to her.”

Hrolf nodded his understanding and turned tentatively to the small, frightened woman. “After the battle this morning, a beast, black as night, descended from the sky. When it got close to the ground, it turned out to be birds flying tight in a pack. They resembled ravens, but . . .” Hrolf hesitated, wondering if he sounded crazy. Then he noticed the woman no longer appeared nervous. She had moved slightly closer to him and hung on his words like a viking clings to his sword.

“These birds entered the dead bodies, but not from clawing or biting their way through the flesh. They just passed through the skin and came back out again.” Now Catherine began to shiver. She pulled her ragged cape tight around her neck and averted her eyes to the floor of the hut.

“Please,” she rasped. “I don’t need to hear anymore.”

“But there is more,” Hakon said firmly. “Their faces . . .”

“Were human,” Catherine finished while raising her gaze to Hakon the Giant. “I know.”

“What were they? Will they come for us also?” Hrolf asked, an edginess tainting his voice.

“They won’t come unless you’re already dead. The creatures you saw are known as the Sluagh. Evil spirits that fly as a flock of birds.”

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“What is their purpose?” Hakon asked. “Why did they enter the Irish soldier’s bodies?”

“They are the souls of the dead, trying to take other souls with them back to Hell.”

“Something else strange happened this morning. The Irish men we attacked didn’t fight back. They were prepared, weapons in hand, but no one defended themselves. It was as if they were dead already. Was the sluagh responsible for this as well?”

“The sluagh doesn’t kill. Like a buzzard it waits for death to come on its own and then tries to steal the soul on its way to heaven.”

Hrolf looked to his king and shook his head. Hakon motioned to the other men, and they led the old woman outside. Hrolf watched Hakon pace through the tight confines of the tent and took a step back when his king lashed out violently at a wooden bench, turning it into kindling.

“I hate sorcery. I hate things that are real but are not real!” Hakon’s long arms waved about his head. He turned and looked at Hrolf. “What do we do, Hrolf Halfdanson? There is something waiting for us among these trees. Before the soulstealers come it will take our blood, and I don’t know how to fight it!”

“We do what vikings always do. We’ll wrap our hands around our swords and fight. Let the All-Father take care of his children.”

Hrolf left his king and stepped out into the evening. The old woman, walking very slowly, had just cleared the perimeter of the camp and stepped behind some trees. Hrolf was puzzled about why she would leave the path. The sentry hadn’t seen her as he was looking away toward the huts.

Running to his right, Hrolf reached a vantage point where he could still partially see the old woman. Standing with her back against a tree, Catherine’s body shimmered like candlelight in the wind as she shifted to the body of a lithe, young woman. Her body was covered only by a sheer white drape of cloth. Pulling her now straight, long, blonde hair, she flipped some of it over the front of her shoulders.

Too confused to move, Hrolf stood open-mouthed and watched. Creating a warm wind with a breath, the fairy glided back toward the viking camp. She slid up behind the sentry and wrapped an arm around his neck caressing his rough, bearded chin. The viking whirled around to

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meet the enchanting face of the fairy. His hand, which had only moments before been grasping his axe handle, now lay on the fairy's hip. He moved up her waist to the cup of her breast. She kept their eyes locked and spread her mouth over top of his as he pulled her tighter to his body. She planted her hands on the back of the viking's head and held him still as she sucked the breath from his lungs.

The viking's arms thrashed wildly as he tried to pull away, but she was too strong. His life rushed from his chest into her mouth. Finally with a flick of her tongue she separated from him and floated away to find another, leaving the sentry dead, but still standing.

Catherine sailed across the camp to a tent and went inside. Breaking free from his paralysis, Hrolf ran to the sentry. The man had the same dead look in his eyes that the Irishmen had had that morning. He sprinted for King Hakon's quarters, and along the way saw the fairy leave one hut and enter another.

"She's a demon," Hrolf shouted as he burst in on Hakon. The king turned quickly.

"What's happening?"

"The old woman, it's her. She's bewitching the men, stealing their breath."

The two men, swords in hand, rushed into the center of the camp. Catherine, crackling joyously, was twirling high in the air.

"Come, my darling pets. Come for another feast." Her arms were outstretched as she looked skyward. A few vikings who had been sleeping heard the commotion. They were barely out of their huts before Catherine swooped down to take them.

Hrolf charged the fairy. Sword raised high overhead, he ran at her back. When he was within a few feet, he brought the weapon down in a semi-circle to his right and swiped at her legs. Catherine hopped straight up at the last second avoiding the blade. On her way back down, she sailed past Hrolf's face, laughing.

"You can do better, my sweet. You must do better." Hrolf stared directly into her eyes, hoping to keep her attention as Hakon sneaked up from behind her, but it was as if she had another set of eyes hiding behind her lustrous mane of hair. In one divine motion she flattened her body out in a supine position at the precise moment Hakon's sword

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would have cut her in two. Then she dipped sharply, coiled her body until it was upright, and planted her lips over Hakon's.

Not wanting to injure his king, Hrolf sheathed his sword and grabbed the fairy around the neck with his right arm. Hakon the Giant, however, was no ordinary man. Grasping Catherine at the waist, he lifted her away from himself and tossed her aside like a sack of grain.

Hrolf kept his grip on her neck, rolling with her on the ground. Just when he thought he had the advantage, she reduced herself to the size of a child and slipped free. He watched angrily as she floated skyward, a shrill, gloating laugh filling the air.

"It is time for gluttony, my children. Gorge yourselves." Catherine's voice had changed to a guttural rumble. A clap of thunder rolled across the heavens as it emerged from behind the low-slung moon.

The sluagh, moving with a grace that belied its misshapen bulk, sped toward the dead vikings. Catherine still hovered a hundred feet off the ground, her arms wide in greeting. When the sluagh reached her, they broke away from the pack, forming a long, black slipstream on either side of their benefactor.

Hrolf and Hakon drew their swords and ran to protect their brothers. Hrolf stepped in front of the sentry who had been killed first. A human visage, snarling and screaming, flew at him. He deflected it easily, but another immediately attacked from the other side. They were everywhere, coming down like rain. Hrolf's sword arm grew weary. Using his free hand, he punched at the creatures, catching one square in the face. He momentarily recoiled from the familiar feel of his knuckles hitting human flesh.

Another thunder clap shook the ground followed by a bolt of lightning that tore a hole in the night sky. A ragged circle of light illuminated the camp with the battle between the sluagh and the last two vikings still alive. Catherine, who had been delightedly watching from a perch in a nearby tree, turned her head in surprise.

Hrolf knew at once what was happening.

"Odin," he said softly as he peered into the light. A few yards away, Hakon was more forceful.

"ODIN!" he screamed in a raw voice.

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Bursting through the light with such force that the trees genuflected toward the ground, three Valkyries on horseback rode toward the battleground. Simultaneously Hrolf and Hakon called out their names, raising their swords in tribute.

“Spear Bearer, Axe Time, Wrecker of Plans!”

Axe Time flew at a stunned Catherine and clipped the fairy with the flat of a sword, catapulting her into the air. Her scream trailed off as she disappeared into the clouds.

The sluagh swarmed around the camp in agitation. Spear Bearer swooped through, plucking them out of mid-air on the end of her enormous spear. With the bird-spirits confused, Hrolf and Hakon were finally able to slice them apart with their swords.

The demons massed to each other for support. Biting and clawing, they drove Spear Bearer away. They turned to flee, but Wrecker of Plans appeared and cut her sword through the enclave of bodies, cleaving a dozen of them in half. The remaining members of the sluagh scattered, their screeches echoing through the forest as they disappeared.

The Valkyries rose into the sky, turning to look at Hrolf and Hakon. They stood side by side, swords held in bloody, muddy hands. Exhaustion hung from their bodies like a cloak of iron. The warrior’s eyes asked a question, and by closing theirs, the Valkyries answered. Then they disappeared into the light. Another thunder clap roared. In a few minutes it was dark and silent.

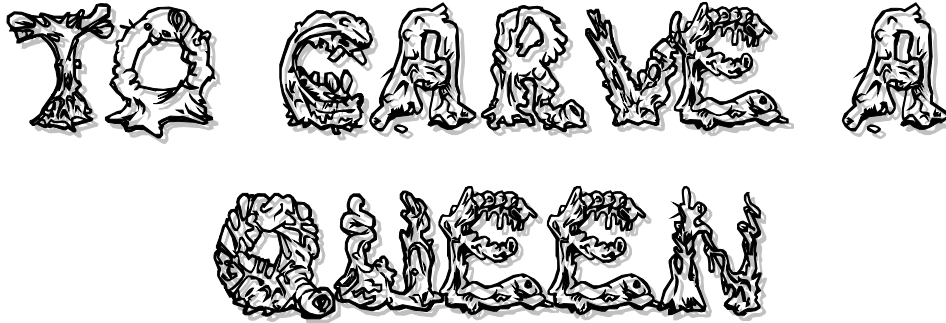
Hrolf’s muddled gaze fell on his dead viking brothers. Their bodies littered the camp. Young, strong men whom the gods had abandoned. The Valkyries had saved them from being taken to an Irish hell by the sluagh, but they could not be saved from going to a viking one. They had not died in battle, so they could not be admitted into Valhalla.

Hrolf knew that he would make it to the Hall of the Slain. He would not let it be otherwise. As he walked around the camp, he looked deep into the faces of each friend with whom he would not spend eternity, and a tear for each pooled in his eyes. If he were not the man he was, those tears would have spilled onto the ground and mixed with the blood of his brethren. Instead, he closed his eyes and held them close as his most cherished memories.

THE END

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**BY ELAINE ISAAK**

*Elaine Isaak was born in the same year that J. R. R. Tolkien died, and finds signs and portents everywhere. She grew up longing to be a creature creator for film and instead became a mascot designer and founder of Curious Characters, a line of original soft sculptures. She lives in the sort of house that inspires horror novels (both haunting and home improvement), surrounded by masks and demons from around the world. Her first novel, THE SINGER'S CROWN, is due out from Eos books in Fall 2005. Visit <http://www.Elainesaak.com> to find out why you do not want to be her hero.*

**W**hen the rapping sounded for a second time, Angelus the Stone-mage opened his door to find a royal page—a boy of perhaps ten years—standing on the granite stoop. Angelus raised his eyes to scan over the boy's head toward the queen's waiting carriage, and a phalanx of guards chosen more for their breadth of shoulder than their regal appearance. They were a squat party of men, as if their muscles had been left too full, to be carved down and detailed by another hand. Angelus' own powerful muscles tightened a little; no royalty had sought him for forty years, and this queen never had.

“Your house is all stones!” the page remarked, pulling the Stone-mage's eyes back toward him. “Just like mine, only smaller.”

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The boy's green eyes sparkled and his cheeks dimpled as he spread his arms to indicate the slate walk, granite steps, and fieldstone cottage all laid by Angelus's own careful hands.

Looking down on the page's coal-dark hair, Angelus's heart leapt—his son! Then he frowned, causing the weathered creases of his brow to furrow like upthrust mountains. Not his son. His son would be . . . at least fifty? sixty? No, it was further back than that. A fleeting ironic smile passed his lips. If his son had lived, he would be dead by now. If his son had lived, he would himself never have become a Mage; he would not be immortal.

"Ah," the boy who was not his son began, recapturing his attention. "The queen requests an audience with Angle—"he shook his head quickly, so that the little cap of his office flew off and was caught upon a stone lantern's peak—"with Angelus the Stone-mage." He grinned again, pleased to get it right.

Again, the fleeting smile. "I am he," Angelus replied, but a sound arrested his pleasure, and he saw that the queen was already approaching. He no longer bowed to royalty; after two hundred years of their coming and going, they held no power over him.

Queen Moriya put out one hand and thrust the page aside stiffly, careful not to bend her arm and crease the cloth-of-gold of her tight sleeve. "Stone-mage." She looked him up and down, taking in the dusty leather apron which covered his worn-out woollens. She glanced at his rather ordinary workman's hands, then studied his face. They all examined him so, looking for a sign that he was not fifty, but two hundred and fifty, not a workman, but a Mage who wrought the sternest stuff of all.

Angelus stood silent under her close attention. If she sought his eyes, she would find there the evidence, for he ignored the pinched and fading beauty of her ephemeral flesh and bone, saw through the ostentatious gown seeing only the rubies and diamonds of her ring and crown: the permanent symbols of her brief power. Last time he had seen them, her grandfather, beset by both enemy and ally, had stood before him, beseeching him to carve a Peace of the Plains. By the time the Peace was done, that king lay dead on a battlefield. The spellture he had begged for stood forever, assuring his heirs, even to this woman,



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peace from the war, which had killed him. “What do you want?” he asked at last.

Queen Moriya’s lips shrank to a crimson stain, and she brushed past him into the studio, the little page swept along in her wake. Angelus eyed the strapping guards a moment longer, then turned and followed.

She stalked the perimeter of his outer room, examining the spelltures one by one. The tall windows of thin alabaster sheets lent a warm glow to her figure, and to the marble carvings placed on crude wood pedestals about the room. Marble dust drifted in the air, causing the page to cough, and settling on the queen’s finery as she stooped to stroke her ring finger along the stone rampart of a miniature castle—a spellture to assure the reign of the ruling family. She made a careful circuit of the room, ignoring until last the huge figure that dominated its center.

The pageboy had already stopped there, his head thrown back, mouth wide as his eyes carved out again the lines of the man. The queen again swept him aside to take pride of place before the work. “The likeness is quite good,” she remarked, with a twisted little smile.

The piece was his Masterwork, a monumental image of himself, with hammer and chisel in hand, carving free from stone his own face. The legs and torso stood complete and strong, as were the rippling muscles of his carven shoulders. Only the head seemed incomplete—a joining of the man with the stone—a perfect profile emerging from marble beneath the careful hammerstrokes of his marble hands. The right hand, clasping its square-headed hammer, hovered, arrested in its descent. In the sculpture, as in life, he was a man of fifty, strong, solemn, scarred along his arms and back from the years he had been an apprentice. In every detail, it captured Angelus. It both captured and freed him, for its completion had transformed him from sculptor into Mage. If and when it crumbled, so too would he.

“These should be in the castle,” the queen said, sweeping her arm out to encompass all his works, all the spelltures that set in stone peace, bounty, health for her people.

Angelus had the sort of patience which allowed him to spend days upon the turn of a lock of hair he was carving for a village mother as a charm of safety. He could watch for hours the flight of birds, but he

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could not abide human dalliance. “What do you want, your majesty?” he asked again.

She faced him full and replied, “My son is an imbecile.”

Startled, he let out a little snort. “I do not carve for vanity, your majesty.”

“You do not understand,” she snapped. “My son will be king after me, and he is an imbecile. It cannot be allowed to happen.”

“So pack him off to the country, your majesty, and have another. What has this to do with me?”

“I have been a good queen, have I not?” she inquired, tilting her head almost coyly.

Angelus let one shoulder rise and fall.

“Felipe,” she called sharply, and the page turned from his reverie by the Masterwork. “I am a good queen, am I not?”

“Yes, Mamma,” he replied with a tiny bow.

Queen Moriya returned her gaze to the Stone-mage, a smile showing her teeth like a vein of quartz. “My son,” she said simply, “the imbecile.”

Angelus glanced quickly at the child, who regarded him with wide, awestruck eyes. They were none of them his concern, but her casual cruelty irritated the Mage. “Perhaps you are a good queen, but a poor mother to treat your child so.”

“Oh,” she said, putting a hand to her lips. “I forgot you were a parent once.” She raised one shoulder, and dropped it in arrogant imitation. “I could find a brighter boy who resembles him, and simply kill Felipe, that would work as well.”

Angelus found the child’s eyes still upon him. One of Felipe’s hands rested on the bare toes of the Masterwork, stroking them gently. He could almost feel the warm touch on his own body, so closely was his spirit bound to this stone.

“But there is an alternative, Master Angelus.” A hint of deference entered her voice with the use of his title. “I am a good queen, Master. With your help, I could remain so. Forever.”

He snapped his eyes back to her, his strong hands clenching into fists. “Never, Your Majesty. I will not work for vanity, certainly not for such a vanity as that.”

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“You live forever, why should I not? I who am a wise queen, and protector of my people?”

“Vanity,” he snarled.

“You were guilty of it once! Angelus the Sculptor, who would carve the greatest figure known to man, who let a tower of marble crush his only child, Master Angelus. Do not speak to me of vanity!”

Angelus froze, the gut-wrenching pain flowing through him—true, all true! And every day he lived, every stone he carved was atonement for that truth. In his mind, he saw the enormous stone he had cut from the quarry, the stone that would be his greatest work, saw that stone tremble and fall. Still, it lay where it had fallen, with three of his workmen crushed beneath. Three men, and his son.

Something of his boy’s wide-eyed wonder stood before him now, embodied in Prince Felipe, another child who would die for his parent’s vanity. But what she asked was wrong. The stones about him echoed the violation of the mere request.

Queen Moriya stepped to the door and beckoned with a flip of her hand. The burly guards trotted up, carrying ropes and wooden poles.

Angelus’s shaggy eyebrows rose. “Your Majesty—”

“Take it,” she said to her men, her imperious finger thrust toward the Masterwork. Immediately they set upon the spellture, binding it with their ropes while one man stood aloof, hands behind his back.

“Your Majesty!” Angelus shouted, “What are you doing?”

“This—”she lightly tapped the arm of the stone figure—“is from the quarry on the royal lands. It belongs to me. And I want it with me.”

“How dare you.” his hands balled into great fists, the veins writhing beneath his skin.

She stood back, raising a hand to stop the motion of the guards, and frowned. “Now that I consider, perhaps I don’t like this one.” She twitched one finger at the remaining man.

The guard came up, drawing his hands from behind his back. In them he held a sledge of steel. With a grunt, he heaved it upward.

Angelus sprang to defend his Masterwork, his life—stumbling over Felipe and cursing. “No!”

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“No, Master Angelus?” A single finger paused the terrible hammer’s swing. “Then perhaps you would like to re-consider my offer. Carve me eternity, Angelus, and we will both live forever.”

His mouth went dry. If his Masterwork were destroyed, all his other works would start to crumble—the Peace of the Plains, the Bounty of the Fields, every little ward of safety he had made for a sailor’s wife. Then, too, his magic, and his life, were sworn to his son’s honor. In the sudden stillness, a whimpering reached his ears, and he saw the page, the prince, really, trembling beside him, shielding his head from the hammer’s fall as if the blow were to be his.

“You are indeed a mighty queen, Your Majesty,” the Stone-mage sighed.

“As I shall be forever,” she said, swirling back toward the door, her skirts sending eddies of dust into the air and clouding her departure.

Her soldiers hauled Angelus’s Masterwork up onto a sledge and bore it toward the city. Angelus himself trailed after, guiding his own wagon laden with tools. She gave him the Great Hall of the Sea Palace for his studio, wrinkling her nose in revulsion at the scent of the brine.

“You shall want the windows shut, I expect.” She held a kerchief pressed to her face as he gazed from the tall windows down the cliffs to the sea.

But the salt that stung his eyes reminded him of his own father, working the salt mines, teaching him to wield a hammer. It reminded him, too, as it ground away the cliffs, that there were levels and planes even of eternity—the spellture he would carve could only assure that time would not kill her; it would not be proof against the hatred of her own kind. Even as he thought it, he knew that Felipe’s life would be forfeit; simple he might be, but dangerous to her ambitions. Angelus sighed and turned back to the Hall. “It will take a year, at least, for the sort of likeness you need.”

“Very well.”

“And I may be gone some time, quarrying the stone.”

“I can send some men with you.”

He shook his head. “I will take my own men, those familiar with the work, Your Majesty.”

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“In your absence, I will admire your Masterwork. If you are gone too long, I may cease to admire it.”

“Understood.”

“This palace is my son’s home—not mine, thankfully—if he is a bother, I’ll have him sent away.”

Angelus nodded vaguely and turned back to the sea, waiting for her to go. One part of his mind turned the image of the queen about, considering how large a block he would need, how many men to haul it back here, how long it would take to turn the queen impervious to the passage of time. Watching the sea, remembering his father, he suddenly smiled. He would carve a work such as this land had never seen.

“You’re happy now?” Felipe asked suddenly, hovering in the darkness.

“I am going to carve your mother, Felipe, do you know what that means?” He knelt down to look into the child’s face.

“She wants to be a queen forever, and you are going to help her.”

“Would she be a good queen forever, Felipe?”

The boy hesitated, then shook his head, once, quickly.

“I don’t think so either. Are you an imbecile?”

“What’s an imbecile?”

Angelus smiled grimly. “Your mother doesn’t watch you, does she?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I need you to run to the village, where I came from. Find a man called Shoseppe the Mason; do you have it?”

“Shoseppe the Mason, yes, sir.”

“Tell him to sweep my studio, and to dump the sweepings into the sea.”

“I can sweep,” the boy replied brightly.

His son’s echo returned to him, and Angelus touched the boy’s tender cheek with his callused thumb. “I’m sure you can, but you may need his help to carry the bags back here, especially without telling your mother. Run to it, Felipe.”

“Yes, sir!” He grinned and scampered across the hall.

Two days later, Angelus and Shoseppe set out to find the perfect stuff, the stone that would become Queen Moriya’s dream. Felipe sadly

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watched them go, then moped about the Hall for three weeks, awaiting their return. At last they came, walking slowly beside a covered wagon. Four huge horses strained at the traces before it, and it was all they could do to haul it up the slope.

The queen appeared, crossing the bridge from the city in her open carriage to view the wagon's progress. Below her, a broad finger of the ocean lapped and mingled with the river. She followed the ponderous wagon up to the Sea Palace and watched them unload the great block and roll it on logs through the open doors into the hall. Nodding her satisfaction, even as her eyes stung from the salt air, Queen Moriya saw it unveiled. Never had she seen marble of such pure colors, nor with such a crystalline shimmer. She stood proudly beside it, and reached out a hand, but Angelus caught her arm.

"Your Majesty, from this point forward none but I should touch the stone until it is done. To do so would taint its power."

Felipe leaned close to it, saying, "But it's—"

"Stay away," the queen snapped, jerking him to one side, "it's not carved yet. But it will be magnificent. You have done well, Master."

Angelus only inclined his head. "I will need you to sit for me, in your own palace if you like."

"Of course. Every morning, until it is done."

Thus began a progression of days so much the same. Every morning, Angelus crossed the bridge and followed the road up to the queen's Hill Palace. He modeled her throne, her figure and her face in clay, moving incessantly around her to be sure the likeness would be perfect. By afternoon, he rested, sometimes letting Felipe draw him in to some childish pursuit. By degrees, he came to know the boy's spirit with the same exacting detail that he knew the mother's features.

When the sun set over the ocean, Angelus sat with the statue that would be, staring into the block to seek her figure within it. He pressed his hands to it and felt himself slowing, absorbing the shapes of the crystals and fissures within it. Every inch of it he caressed until he knew the stone as intimately as the woman it would become. As he did, he whispered to it all he knew of her, and all his gratitude for the work it would allow.

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After a full month had passed, he raised his hammer, and struck the first blow, sending a white shard to break upon the floor. He fell into his rhythm easily, despite the long time since he had carved any spell greater than an alabaster marriage vow. Ching, ching! the hammer beat upon the chisel, ringing out his magic. Angelus the man vanished into the work as all his thoughts, all his being focused on the queen. As chips and flakes spread upon the floor about him, he imbued the block with her likeness, shaping the throne and, slowly, the figure upon it. From dawn to dusk he was transfixed by the labor, sweat sheening his brow and forearms.

Felipe sat by the windows, or circled all about him, watching with quiet intensity. Until Angelus came down from his ladder or scaffold, the boy did not eat. Then, the two of them would fall upon their food together. Every night, Angelus carried the tools he had used that day to the windows and cast them into the sea.

“You go through a lot of tools,” the queen remarked, arriving one day to inspect his progress.

“Would you rather I spend my time repairing faulty tools, or carving upon your spell, Your Majesty?” His glance flickered from her to the statue and back.

“Do what you must,” she said, but with a suspicious gleam in her eye. “Your Masterwork looks quite grand in my hall.” She rubbed a bit of dust between her fingers, eyebrows pinched together above the perfumed cloth she wore. “I returned to your studio. It’s awfully clean. And you have tools there much finer than what you are using, I think.”

He gave his one-shouldered shrug, trying to still his heart. “You must trust me to carve you perfect. Would I deceive the one who holds my Masterwork?”

“No,” she said, mouth twisting to a little smile, “I don’t believe you would.”

The month became four, then six, then eight. He began to use rasps and files, teasing out her features from the gleaming whiteness. He wore a cloth over his nose and mouth, but still coughed from the swirling dust, and his eyes stung. Felipe surprised him by staying even now, watching his every stroke of the file, fascinated. If Angelus had wanted an apprentice—but, no, this boy was royal, and Angelus himself was not

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ready to pass on his skills, and allow himself to die. Two hundred years, and it did not seem enough penance. Would it ever be enough?

“Can you teach me?” Felipe whispered one night as they sat at supper.

Angelus laughed, surprising himself. It felt good to laugh again. “Grow up, Felipe,” he said gently, “find a wife, have a child or more, then ask me again. If you still want it then, I will teach you.”

“How long until I grow up?”

“Not long, perhaps seven years,” Angelus said, then smiled at the boy’s frown. Seven years was much too long—if he lived so long, if the queen allowed it. When he thought of it now, his heart ached, just a little, as it had not done for centuries. So much work—he would not fail this boy. When he thought of his son, it was Felipe’s face that came to his eye.

Day by day, the spellture took on the shape of the queen. Angelus again modeled her in clay, noting the subtle changes of age and anger, translating these observations into the minute detail of the carved face and pale form. At last one night, long after he should have eaten and Felipe was dozing on a cushion, Angelus straightened his stiff back. He walked slowly around the statue, peering at it from every angle, and finally stepped away, convinced that the work contained the queen’s mortality.

Still he had two little tasks to perform. Sitting by Felipe’s slumbering form, he pulled a disk of soapstone from his apron and applied his tiny file, shaping a wheel, with delicate spokes and hub, and a narrow rim. Making quick work of the soft stone, he slipped it on a string and looped it over his head. As he rose again, Felipe stirred, and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sleep.”

“No harm done. But you will want to see me finish.”

“Yes, sir!”

He handed the boy his slender file. Felipe eagerly huddled beside him as Angelus crouched at the base of the figure.

With a delicate point and light hammer, Angelus stuck out the letters of his name. When he formed the final curve, the last stroke of the hammer rang and resonated within the spellture. The humming rose



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about them, turning into a mighty roar that rattled the glass of the windows and sent the dust on the floor vibrating into fantastic shapes. As it rippled, Angelus felt the tremor of power within him, and rose his body humming with the stone until, all around him, the tracks of the vibration spelled his name—AngelusAngelusAngelusAngelus.

Tension flowed from his arms and shoulders, releasing him from the magic, separating him from the work, from Queen Moriya's Dream. It was done. Queen Moriya was freed from the bonds of time.

A warmth in his hand brought his gaze to the floor, and he found Felipe clutching him, his mouth a little "o". Angelus sank down beside him and gathered the boy in his arms. "My son, my son," he murmured into Felipe's hair, and a tear carved its salty trail in the dust upon his cheek.

A bright, clear dawn touched the sky next morning. Shoseppe brought his wagon and strongest horses and they two loaded the spellture upon it with the help of a system of ropes and pulleys. The soldiers, warned by the queen not to ruin her spell, stood to both sides. All down the valley, on both sides of the bridge, citizens waited for their first glimpse of the mysterious work.

Carved in perfect detail, the queen sat upon the throne of her family. The whiteness of it blazed in the sun, its purity so intense even Angelus had to look away. So he found himself watching the crowd, his heart sinking with every face he saw. These people, his neighbors for years, hardened their expressions. As they passed slowly down the first hill, women took the stone pendants from their necks and threw them into the dirt. Angelus their protector had betrayed them, he had carved this woman into immortality. He wanted to call out to them, tell them to keep their charms and symbols, but he held his breath. It was not true. He had done the only thing he could, and they would understand. They must.

Felipe glowered at them at first, then adopted the Stone-mage's attitude as best he could. Occasionally, he brought out the little file he had been given the night before, trying to rub off the encroaching rust.

It took an age for them to reach the bridge. On the other side, Queen Moriya had brought down her throne and set it on a dais of ancient stones to watch her double paraded by. The crown flickered

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rubies upon her head, and a thin smile grew into a fierce grin as the wagon approached. She rose, resplendent in shimmering white silk, doing her best to match the carved image.

Angelus, walking beside the wagon, looked ahead to the queen. Her eyes burned with pride as she looked upon her future, her gleaming, unchanging future. He reached down to find Felipe's hand. His other hand slipped beneath his leather apron to rest upon the wheel he had carved. As Queen Moriya laughed her victory, he pressed his thumb against the pendant and snapped it in two. Behind him, there was a terrible crunch and he swept Felipe before him past the wagon.

The rear wheel of the wagon had shattered. The vehicle lurched as Shoseppe struggled to master his startled horses.

Ever so slowly, the spelltute tilted backward. With a terrible groan of wood, it slid ponderously back, sunlight flashing from the features of the carven queen.

Queen Moriya howled her displeasure, frantically waving for the guards, but they were powerless to stop it as the gleaming thing cracked through the rail to land in the shallow river below with a tremendous splash. Townsfolk and guards hurried over to peer down at it, many hiding little smiles behind their hands. The sculpted queen lay face up, staring at the blazing sun, with water swirling over her sightless eyes.

Queen Moriya's howl became a shriek of rage, then pain as her body went rigid.

Felipe whirled, but Angelus held him tight. "No, don't look," he urged.

The crown trembled and fell from her head as tremors shook the queen. She clawed at her face, wailing when her hands came away slick with blood. Her clothes billowed around her as her skin slithered and vanished.

Angelus forced himself to watch what he had wrought, to hear her agony though it shot fire through his skull.

Her flesh drained away, and the horrible scream died as her ruined throat could no longer contain it. She collapsed at last, ripples of fabric concealing the end.

Angelus looked slowly over the rail, to the remains of the gleaming statue below.

# DARK TREASURES

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The water continued its work, smoothing away all trace of the queen, even the pale folds of her gown.

“Is she gone?” Felipe whispered.

“She’s gone,” Angelus told him.

The boy nodded to himself. He held up his other hand, still clenched about the file. “It’s bloody,” he said.

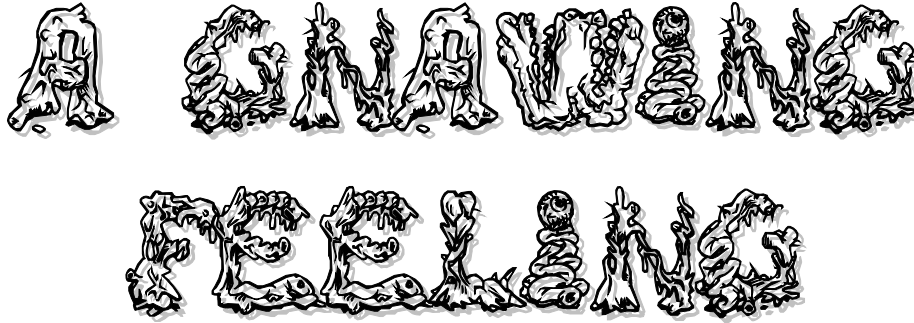
“No, just rust.” Angelus the Stone-mage took the file and tossed it.

It tumbled, end over end, glinting red, until it splashed into the river. Babbling over its stones, the patient river swept the last of the salt queen out to sea.

THE END

# DARK TREASURES

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**BY NANCY JACKSON**

*Nancy Jackson is an author with works in NEVERMORE MAGAZINE, NEW CAMP HORROR, NAKED SNAKE ONLINE, CORPSE MAGAZINE and various anthologies including THWN PRESENTS NEW VOICES IN HORROR, LABOR POOLS, STRANGE NEWS, BROKEN MIRRORS, DARK SINS AND DESIRES UNVEILED, and CYBER PULP'S HALLOWEEN ANTHOLOGY.*

**P**ulling up to the café in Briar, Joann gave a deep sigh of relief. Hours of driving had taken its toll and she needed a break. Gently she nudged David awake.

“Honey, I could really use some coffee and I don’t know, a sandwich maybe,” she said softly.

Rubbing his eyes, David sat up and straightened his shirt.

“Great idea, let’s get some grub,” he agreed.

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“It’s so nice you wake up cheerful, don’t ever lose that trait,” she said, giving him a light punch in the arm. “Shall I lock the car?” she asked.

David looked around, they were in a small town with nothing more than a gas station, store, and a café, it seemed harmless to him.

“I wouldn’t bother, we’ll sit where we can see the car and anyhow, since I accidentally bent the key, I’m afraid one of these times we won’t get back in,” he replied.

# DARK TREASURES

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Once they entered, Joann made a mental note to write her friend Lynn to let her know she had actually been to a place reminiscent of the classic reruns on cable late at night. Looking at the bar she gazed over the stereotypical waitresses with their white aprons, big hair, black eyeliner, and a gruff look. She hoped the cook wasn't named Mel or something.

"I am going to use the powder room, why don't you get us a seat," she whispered. David nodded and proceeded to get a booth where he could see the car.

Immediately a middle-aged brunette approached, pad of paper in tow.

"What can I get you?" she asked with annoyance in her tone.

"To start I'd like two coffees with cream and sugar please," he replied and scanned her nameplate. He chuckled as he read the name, Flo. He figured Joann would get a big kick out of that one.

"My wife will be along in a minute but I think we are going to get some sandwiches. Do you have a menu?"

The waitress looked at him a moment like he was a completely crazy. David sat up a little straighter in the booth.

"Did I say something funny?" he asked.

"What we have is on the chalkboard, menus cost money around here mister. You must be from some big city or something," she implied.

"As a matter of fact yes, we are from Portland thank you. Anyhow, if you could give me a few minutes, I will look the chalkboard over and let you know," he said.

Flo walked away, disappearing into the kitchen.

His mood gave way when Joann returned.

"The bathrooms are gross," she whispered. "I really wanted to freshen up but the water hardly comes out of the faucet. I don't know why Lindsay suggested we stop through this town, it's quite a dump."

David nodded in agreement. He was going to point out the name of their waitress but decided to wait and see her face. While they weren't snobby by nature, they had both grown up with well-to-do families and were more accustomed to a nice steakhouse rather than a small town diner. Joann had a big fear of dirty toilets, rodents, and anything that resembled tacky. He liked that about her. One thing he knew, they

# DARK TREASURES

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would have a nice looking home with classy décor and not a bit of plaid, polka dots, paisley, or polyester.

“The sandwiches are listed on the chalkboard,” mocked David. “We have a choice of ham or ham with cheese served on a bun with pickles. I guess variety isn’t big here.”

“Oh well, I am so hungry I could eat dirt at this point. I guess ham and cheese,” she decided.

Flo walked up and placed their coffee down. Joann looked up to thank her and her eyes stopped at the nametag. A huge smile spread across her face and David knew what she was thinking.

“Thank you, Flo, we are going to have ham and cheese. I don’t suppose you have an onion roll or Kaiser bun?” she asked innocently.

Judging by the dumbfounded look on Flo’s face she guessed not.

“Okay, yeah, two ham and cheese and two big pieces of your best pie,” she added, trying to stifle her laughter.

Flo nodded and walked away.

“Jesus David, this is a freaking trip! Can we say Twilight Zone? I believe she thought I was talking foreign or something. You already noticed her name didn’t you, uh huh, wanted to see my reaction,” she laughed.

They had been having such a great time traveling on the road together. Her friend Lindsay was getting married and they were expected in a few days. She did the day driving while he took over at night, she didn’t trust her vision in the dark. Placing her hand on his, she leaned over to talk more quietly.

“I think we ought to skip finding a place to sleep and just drive as long as we can, maybe get out of this hillbilly nightmare and back to the real world,” she said.

Just then Flo came up and glared at Joann. Immediately she flung the dishes down.

“Oh, could we get these heated up?” Joann asked before the waitress left.

“Well, we are just a needy bunch, aren’t we?” Flo sneered. “How about you go in the kitchen and do it yourself?”

David eyed her with disbelief.

# DARK TREASURES

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“I’m sorry, we thought part of your job was making sure we enjoyed our meal, guess I was wrong. These will be fine as they are. If we could just get a refill on the coffee, we won’t be bothering you for anything else,” he retorted.

“Sure thing,” Flo replied.

Joann stared at him.

“Check your sandwich, make sure she didn’t spit it in or something,” she joked softly.

David laughed. She always knew how to lighten a tense moment.

They inspected their sandwiches and ate everything up quickly. The sooner they left, the better off they’d be. Flo returned once to refill the coffee and again to leave the bill. Each time she refused to say a word to them.

“Well, I won’t be leaving her much of a tip,” Joann commented, pulling out some money from her purse.

“I wouldn’t leave her a thing,” suggested David.

“Oh honey, you have to leave something, it’s only right,” Joann reminded him.

With the money laid on the table, she got up to put on her jacket. David didn’t share her opinion but he didn’t want to cause a scene or anything. Without a look towards Flo they shouted their thanks and went outside.

“While we’re here I think we should get some candy bars and pop. You know how we get the munchies and all, right about the time all the stores are closed,” Joann pointed out.

“Great idea, I think I am craving root beer and Three Musketeers. How about you,” he asked.

“Perfect, I’ll grab the pop and meet you at the cashier,” she said. With their junk food and drinks they went to the car and got back on the road.

Half an hour later they passed a sign that said a gas station was near.

“I have got to go David, the coffee has finally set in,” Joann said, fidgeting at the wheel. “I’ll need to stop at the next station.”

David reclined in his seat and watched the cornfields speed by.

# DARK TREASURES

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“Here we go,” she said as she drove to the side of the station. “Why don’t you fill the tank while I am gone,” she suggested.

David walked to the back of the car, and noticed he’d stepped in gum. Scraping the sole of his shoe along the ground, he ran right into the back door that was open. He rubbed his gut where the door handle had got him and angrily slammed it shut. The least she could have done was let him know she left the door open, he thought. As he began filling up the car, he heard muffled voices followed by a scream. He knew it was Joann. Quickly he dragged the hose back to the pump and took off running around the building. Two men dragged her towards an old pickup.

“What are you doing, let my wife go,” he shouted. “I will kill the both of you if you don’t let her go this instant!”

The two men ignored him. Another man stepped out of the pickup while another car pulled up, this time with a woman. Joann continued screaming, trying to kick the men, anything to get them to loosen their grip. David willed his body to keep moving, refusing to give in to the paralyzing fear that tried to consume him.

“Just hang on Joann, I won’t let anything happen to you,” he hollered, hoping he sounded reassuring.

He recognized the woman in the car as Flo. She drove straight towards David, attempting to hit him. He dove out of the way just in time and rolled into the wall of the building. Quickly he picked himself up. Those few seconds lost him the extra time he needed and he watched with horror as the men shoved Joann into the truck and sped away with the car right behind them. David raced back to his car and tore out onto the street. At least he had the faster car here and expected to catch right up to them. The red light began blinking that the gas was low. He ran his hand through his hair and straightened himself. Knowing if he floored it he would waste gas, he begged the car to hold on. All he could think about was Joann and the terrible things those dirty men could do to her. It made him sick to his stomach to think about it. Everything in him wanted to show these trailer trash freaks he meant business.

He drove a few miles and felt unsure whether he could catch up to them or not. Just then he caught a glimpse of Flo’s car making a left turn. He came up to the turn but didn’t like how it looked. It went off the



# DARK TREASURES

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road and into a giant field of cornstalks. Turning, he felt the panic again, afraid he would become lost.

David was sweating profusely but didn't want to turn on the air conditioner with the gas gauge so low. Looking at the dial he realized that moment had come. As the car sputtered, he cursed and pounded the steering wheel with his fists.

"Come on baby, please don't fail me here," he pleaded.

With one more jerk, the car came to a complete stop. He fumbled around in the glove compartment for anything sharp, but all he found was a letter opener. It was a fine time for him to remember he put his pocketknife in Joann's purse "for safe keeping" and now he felt like an absolute idiot. It was hard to open the door with the stalks but he finally managed and began running, getting whipped in the face with stems and tall grass.

His pulse quickened and he felt a cramp working its way up his side. Gritting his teeth he ran through the pain. All his instincts told him to panic. He flashed back to the time he was trying to earn a badge for the Trail Blazers and had become lost in the woods. Those thoughts never left and he had never been so scared, until now. Just thinking of Joann helped fuel the last of his energy and focus.

Using his last bit of strength, he sprinted hard. The sun was going down and soon it would be dark. He couldn't get lost out here. When he came to a clearing, what he saw almost took his breath away.

"Just in time to watch," Flo said, watching him pant like a dog.

"Get her down you animals, I swear I'll kill you," David demanded.

"I don't think you are in the position to give orders around here," replied Flo confidently.

His sweet Joann was propped up on a wooden pole, a pole intended for a scarecrow. Two ropes hung from the pole and were attached to wooden planks on the ground. Her face, neck, and legs had numerous cuts and she was covered with blood.

"Baby, hang on," he shouted. David looked at Flo and the two men with eyes blazing. "What the hell is going on here?"

One of the men walked a little closer towards him.

"You seem to think you are better than us. You strut around with a fancy car, nice clothes, and flaunt your extended education. Well we are

# DARK TREASURES

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hard working folks who barely make ends meet. All we've got are the clothes on our back and still you mock us," he sneered.

David watched as the other man walked to the truck and pulled out a large crate of some kind.

"Just let her go, she didn't do anything to you," he begged.

David reached in his pocket for the letter opener and lunged for the man. Flo cocked her rifle and aimed it right at him. David froze. The man kicked the utensil from his hand and laughed.

"You won't be much good to your wife if you are dead," remarked Flo, lowering the rifle.

David looked up at Joann. Her pretty face was smeared with black mascara, tears, and streaks of blood. Inside he wanted to die.

"Why don't you think real hard about your actions today," suggested Flo.

"What should you have done differently?"

David could barely think clearly now, let alone go back an hour. His eyes followed to the man with the box, except it wasn't a box it was a cage filled with something, he peered harder, and then gasped. The cage was filled with large rats.

"Now what do you think you're doing with those?" he asked, his body trembling.

The man just smiled at him. Setting down the cage he walked over to Joann.

"She sure is a pretty thing, isn't she?" he smirked.

Taking a knife he made a deep long slice into her arm. Blood oozed freely onto the knife, which he held like a tray, filling the blade until it was completely covered. Carefully he coated one side of the rope with her blood.

"Well David," prompted Flo, tapping her foot.

Her smile sent chills through him.

The man placed a rat on the rope and it started to chew. Joann began thrashing and screaming. Panic led to hysteria as one of her greatest fears lay before her eyes, making its way to her body. Nausea infested David's body. He couldn't allow those diseased rodents near his beautiful Joann.

# DARK TREASURES

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“I’m sorry, I apologize if I acted rude in anyway. Call it tired or poor manners, but I am sorry. Now please untie her,” he begged.

Flo shook her head.

“Tsk, tsk, wonder boy, try again,” she replied.

David reviewed in his mind over and over, unable to concentrate. The man placed another rat on the rope, while the first one was just about at her fingertips. Sweat drenched his body and his collar felt as if it were strangling the very air out of him. He took a step forward but Flo raised the rifle again.

“For an educated thing, you sure are dumb. It’s best you figure things out or she dies, simple as that,” she reminded him.

Joann screamed louder as the other man dragged the knife along her chest, soaking her blouse with blood instantly. He too placed rats on the ropes. One of the rats scampered up to her shoulder. Her blood curdling screams were like daggers in his heart.

“I don’t know what I did wrong, I take back everything!” he screamed.

“The food was fantastic the coffee was out of this world and the service was impeccable,” he blurted. Flo laughed like a madwoman.

“If my service was impeccable, then how come I didn’t get a nice reward?” she asked, eyes wide and twinkling.

David was confused. Joann screamed as the rat bit into her neck, and he sank to his knees.

“Okay, I can see you are as stupid as you look, so I’ll help you out here. You didn’t leave a tip. I worked and slaved for you and you couldn’t leave a few stinking quarters for my time you ungrateful slime,” she spat.

“Honey, I left a tip, I left her a big tip, tell her, I swear I did,” Joann shouted. “This is all a mistake, I left a tip!”

Flo looked over at the woman, watching the rats gnaw away at the rope and into her flesh.

“I’m afraid not honey, there was exact change for the bill, nothing more,” Flo said steadily.

David’s eyes welled with tears.

“I am so sorry Joann, I didn’t think she deserved a tip, I pocketed the money,” he said, burying his head in his hands.

Joann stared at him with hatred.

# DARK TREASURES

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“It was only a few dollars, look at me, this is all because of you,” she cried.

Flo and the men just laughed at him.

“I guess your wife ain’t worth more than a couple bucks. Sorry David, you don’t screw around with honest hard working trash like us,” she explained.

“Wait,” he interrupted. “I’ll give you all the money I have. Joann has lots of money in her purse.”

“Afraid we can’t let you do that, seeing how it’s the principle of the thing. Looks like your luck ran out,” Flo jeered.

“How could you do this David,” Joann choked.

She let out one final scream as the rat gnawed away at her throat followed by the others. Blood spurted out and she stared at him, with wide hollow eyes. The look of death spread over her face.

David vomited all over the ground, disgusted with his stupidity and selfishness. He tried to pick himself up and run to her but Flo shot him in the knees.

“You see, all the hard work you are putting forth and you don’t get nothing for it,” she retorted. “Been there, done that.”

Flo and the men got in their vehicles and drove off, leaving him there.

He dragged his body along the ground, trying to reach Joann. Pain seared through his legs. He tried to lift himself up but he lacked the strength and his knees gave out. David lay still as a pool of blood formed around him. The disgusting sound of the rats gnawing away at Joann’s body sapped him of any care to live. He watched as four large rats crawled out from the cage on the ground, smelling his blood, looking for a feast. David panicked and dragged himself away while the hungry rats followed his crimson trail.

THE END

# DARK TREASURES

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THE MONUMENTS MEN

AND US

BY ANGELINE HAWKES-CRAIG

*Angeline Hawkes-Craig's stories appear in several anthologies, some of which are: FEMMES DE LA BRUME [Double Dragon Pub], THE BLACKEST DEATH [Black Death Books], FANTASTICAL VISIONS and CLOAKED IN SHADOWS: DARK TALES OF ELVES [Fantasist Enterprises], THE UNKNOWN [Branch & Vine Pub], and A LITTLE TASTE OF HORROR [collection, CyberPulp]. In 2003, Scars Publications released her book, MOMENTO MORI: A Collection of Short Fiction. Double Dragon Publishing recently published the e-book. Her Historical Fantasy novel, THE SWAN ROAD, [Scars] was published in 2002, and was recently reviewed favorably in RENAISSANCE MAGAZINE. She is a member of the Horror Writer's Association. Hawkes-Craig received a B.A. in Composite English from East Texas State University in 1991. Visit her web site at: <http://www.angelinehawkes-craig.com>.*

**W**hen he was a little boy he was afraid of monsters. Creeping monsters. Sharp and pointy teeth monsters. Monsters of the day and monsters of the night. His mother told him, "Davis, monsters are not real!" And, at night, she'd flip off his flashlight when she had caught him with it, hiding terrified and sweaty under the blankets, "Davis! Monsters are not real! Now go to sleep!"

# DARK TREASURES

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But then, he grew up. And, as he became a man he began to realize monsters were real - real and around him every day. From the pedophile priest to the wife-beating bastard down the street—yep, monsters were real and in abundance. He wanted to tell her, “Hey, mom, you were wrong!” But another monster called Cancer had snagged her away four years ago and he had never got the chance.

By all accounts, he was a pretty phobic kind of guy. He drove his wife nuts. No trains, no planes, no public transportation. He wasn't very fond of theaters or malls or any other crowded public place. He couldn't put his finger on it really—what it was he was so afraid of. There hadn't been any one isolated traumatic experience in his life to have triggered the phobias. His parents were pretty normal people and hadn't rubbed off any jitters onto him concerning any particular fears. It was just how he was.

He had always had the unnerving feeling that someone was watching him—lurking about—waiting, anticipating when he'd be alone and vulnerable. He had always had that kid-under-the-blanket dread to his life—the one where you lie under the blanket for as long as you can although you're dripping with sweat and the air is growing warmer and it's getting harder to breathe—but you force yourself to stay under there because you're safe and you know that the minute you plunge out into that refreshing cool air that your lungs will thank you for it, but that something will be out there waiting to devour you. Then you fall asleep, morning comes, and you forget about it: until the next night anyway.

That's how he always felt—the only thing between him and the monster was a suffocating blanket.

His wife told him he was bordering on insanity, he had problems, he needed to see a shrink. His kids told him to cool out—chill out—not to have a freak.

He tried. God knows he did.

But, the monsters continued to plague him.

Newspapers, radios, TV—all of the news broadcasts sent shivers up his spine. Thieves, rapists, murderers—they were all around him. Everyday he was plagued by tales of man's inhumanity to man. How could they help him? Something like two million people were locked away and incarcerated in the U.S. alone—and there were more waiting

# DARK TREASURES

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for their reserved rooms in the big house every day—how could they help him? He wasn't the problem. He was the result of the problem. Anxiety, depression, phobia—there were all sorts of clinical labels they could slap on his forehead and stamp in his file but the facts remained the same, that monsters were real—monsters were out there—and everyday was one big cat and mouse game between him and the monster slinking around in the shadows.

Oh, there were other monsters too. Sea creatures, ghosts, restless malevolent spirits, voodoo zombies, and aliens. They were out there. Some people claimed those monsters didn't exist either, but Davis knew better. There were far too many people out there—sane and normal people who flew in planes and liked shopping malls and ballgames and such—who believed in their existence. Too many people believed. It was the doubting Thomas' out there that mocked and laughed and said it couldn't be so. The scholarly folk who felt too far above the simplicity of good versus evil—too far beyond believing in the mortal versus the spiritual realms. Those are the people who attempted to debunk the reality of monsters.

Those were the people who said, "Monsters are not real!"

Davis knew better.

He also know the monsters knew who knew they existed. They weren't stupid. Why try to tease and torment someone who doesn't believe in your existence—what would that accomplish? No, the monsters sought out those who could see them, hear them, feel them. They left the doubters and mockers alone—maybe that is why they continued to doubt and mock. Ignorance is bliss, or so the saying goes.

Davis knew better.

He had seen the monsters and felt their presence since a child—it never went away. Sure, his mind tried to re-categorize them, tried to rationalize them, tried to re-formulate and re-conceptualize how he defined "monster", but it was all part of his "adult" brain trying to gloss over the fact that he had never lost his childhood fear or belief of monsters.

They were still out there.

They still hummed and breathed heavily for those who could hear them. They still darted around corners in the dark house and stepped on

# DARK TREASURES

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creaking beams in the attic and clanked on the water pipes and rattled the rooftop when no storm was about. Monsters were there.

Davis had done his parental duty and told his frightened children that monsters weren't real. He told them that they were just tired, that's all. Go to sleep. Trust me. But, he felt like a liar. He lied to his own children. Of course, he had no way of knowing until they were all grown if what they were hiding from under their blankets at night were figments of too many violent computer games or if they really saw the monsters like he did. Until that time, he had to do what every sane parent did and tell his kids, "Monsters are not real, now go to sleep!"

But he felt like a bastard for lying to his kids and he felt like he wasn't protecting them from whatever was sitting in the corner under the big purple dinosaur and beside the action figure adventure cave. His wife thought he was off his rocker.

Lately, the old feeling had grown stronger. He found himself checking over his shoulder more and in the backseat of his car, and in the closets, and behind the closed shower curtain—all a lot more frequently than he had done for years. His wife caught him a few times and threatened to call her friend Julie, the nutjob on the Prozac, and get her shrink's phone number—but she didn't make the call.

If she made the call she would have to admit her husband believed in monsters and that might lead other people to conclude that he was crazy, a nutjob, a monster.

So, she put up with him and bought him a lot of self-help books that she not so subtly left on his nightstand by the bed.

If she would've put them under his pillow, he might have actually read them, but she didn't. She put them on the table—an arm's length from the bed—where everyone knows monsters are waiting to snap off your exposed arm in the dark of the middle of the night with their great big, sharp teeth.

He thrashed and kicked about at night, not able to get to sleep until sheer exhaustion claimed him. He stayed under the blankets until his wife would say he was creeping her out and yank back the covers making him face the darkness unprotected.

Blankets protected you from bedroom monsters. Just like closed closet doors and nightlights. Everyone knew that.



# DARK TREASURES

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He left the bathroom light on.

His wife turned it off.

He left a flashlight on. His wife said he was wasting expensive batteries and clicked it off.

Night after night.

“Davis, I am really getting worried about you. This is NOT normal!” she said and started to cry.

It wasn't his fault. He wished she could see. Or hear. Or feel them. She said she had been the kind of kid who never felt afraid of monsters. Never had her dad look under the bed. Never asked her mom to close her open closet door. And a nightlight? The only reason there was a nightlight on in her room at night was so she could make it to the bathroom without breaking her neck on a toy left on the floor in the middle of the room—and the nightlight in the bathroom? That was because her brothers had the bad habit of peeing in the dark and hitting everything except their intended target. Her mom had installed the orange glowing green glitter mushroom nightlight, not her.

She didn't understand.

The monsters had given up on her before she even had the chance to remember the fear.

He caught her slipping a sleeping pill in his bedtime snack, after that he was careful to prepare his own snack at night. He couldn't fall prey to a lurking monster simply because he had grown careless and lazy and let someone send him off to sleep vulnerable and unprotected—fresh meat for the waiting predator near his bed.

Night after night.

In the dark.

“Go to sleep, Davis.”

“I'm warning you Davis, I'm going to go sleep in the other room if you don't go to sleep!”

“Monsters are not real, for Pete's sake! You are a grown man!”

Night after night.

But, Davis could feel them moving in closer, creeping about, rustling under the bed, raspy breathing near his pillow. He was careful not to leave his arms or legs outside of the blanket, not to hang them over the

# DARK TREASURES

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sides. Something was down there waiting for a chance to jump—to attack.

One night he had awakened to find his leg thrown over the edge and it terrified him so badly he thought he might hyperventilate. His wife cried again that night. He took a cold shower and she sat outside the stall begging him to get help.

He was more careful after that.

His wife read a self-help book that was full of all sorts of nifty suggestions. One night after he had finally surrendered to slumber, she crept out of bed and around to his side. She slowly uncovered his right leg and oh, so gently nudged it over the side of the bed so it dangled there in the cool darkness of the room. She slipped back into bed confident that when morning broke she could point out his exposed leg and prove to him—make him admit to her and more importantly to himself—that monsters did not exist. See! Your leg is perfectly fine!

She fell asleep with a smug smile on her face anxiously awaiting a hopeful morning and possibly a new beginning for Davis.

A bone-chilling scream penetrated the night air. She flipped on the lamp by the bed—Davis knocked his clean off the night table.

“God! God!” Davis screeched, his face ashen, terror making his features rigid.

She reached out to touch him, to calm him, to reassure him—one more time—

When suddenly she saw what he saw—

And finally understood what he had always known.

They both stared down at his naked, exposed leg, now back on the bed—

Davis still screaming—

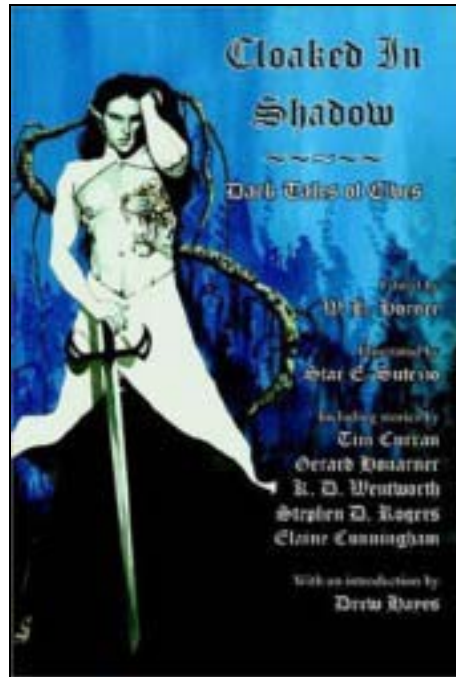
Her mouth agape in sheer horror—

His bloody, spurting and mangled foot—back safely on the bed—minus his big toe.

THE END

# DARK TREASURES

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# DARK TREASURES

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## THE GAINSTREE NOBLE

BY MELANIE BILLINGS

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The doll was watching him, he was sure of it. Every time he moved about the room, he felt its beady eyes upon him. Finally, he got up from his chair, opened up the box it had arrived in, stuffed the hideous doll back inside, closed the flaps and, satisfied, went back to his newspaper.

Ellen hadn't even wanted to touch it when it first arrived. She had opened the large cardboard box addressed to her with much curiosity and excitement, which soon faded as she pulled back the packing paper from the doll nestled inside.

"Oh my God! It's so ugly! What child in their right mind would have such a thing?"

She shuddered and thrust the box away from her. Joe laughed at her.

"Maybe Aunt Edna didn't like you as much as you thought she did."

"I don't even know why she would will anything to me. I hardly knew her. The last time I saw her was years ago. I must have been all of eight years old. According to the letter from her lawyer, it is a genuine antique doll, over one hundred years old. How did something so hideous survive

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a hundred years? I would have thought it would have been destroyed or “lost” long before now. How could any sane child play with that?”

His wife gestured toward the doll, which lay in its box surrounded by packing peanuts and paper, its arms crossed across its chest. It looked as if it were in a coffin. It was hideous. Small, beady eyes that seem to glare out from the tiny face, a mouth that was apparently smiling but looked more as if it were snarling, wild strands of dirty blonde hair that hung from a partially bald china head. Little delicate hands with tiny curled fingers that Joe thought looked more like claws than anything.

Joe found himself shuddering involuntarily. Ellen pulled the doll out of its box, holding it with her fingertips as if it were about to bite her. She dropped it onto the kitchen table and left it there.

“Ugh. I don’t even want to touch it. I don’t want it. Maybe we could sell it to an antique dealer or something. People collect dolls—maybe somebody somewhere would actually want that thing.” She wiped her hands across her knees, as if trying to wipe the taint of the doll from her fingers.

“I can go in the morning. I bet that big antique store over on Main would be interested.”

Ellen left the doll lying on the kitchen table beside the box and went to the grocery store. Joe found himself alone in the house with it. Alone, except for Muffin, Ellen’s big tabby cat. The cat even seemed to be giving the kitchen table a wide berth, as if he didn’t want to get too close. Joe knew exactly how the cat felt. At first, he tried to ignore it, calling himself silly, but it seemed to be glaring at him from across the room and he couldn’t stand it anymore.

After he put the doll back into the box, he went out and worked in the yard for a while. When he came back inside for a drink of water, he found the doll beside the box, just as it had been before. He went closer for a better look. It appeared to be lying in the same spot it had been in before. Ellen hadn’t come home and there was no one else in the house.

Shaking his head and swallowing his revulsion, he picked up the doll and once again laid it inside the box and closed the flaps. This time, he taped them down with scotch tape. He then went back out into the yard for a few minutes. When he came back in, the doll was lying beside the box once again, the tape neatly slit along the cracks between the flaps.

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“What the hell?” Joe backed away from the kitchen table, a cold sweat starting to break out along the back of his neck. Ellen’s voice behind him made him jump and cry out in surprise. She laughed.

“What’s wrong with you? Help me get the groceries in, will you?”

Joe did not move.

“Joe?” Ellen walked around in front of him and waved her hand in front of his eyes. “Jo-oooo. What’s wrong with you?”

He raised a shaking hand and pointed at the doll. “THAT’S what’s wrong. I put it in the box and it got out. Twice.”

Ellen looked at the doll. “What do you mean, it got out? By itself?”

Joe nodded. “Twice. The second time I put tape on the box. It cut it open.”

Ellen stared at him and then burst into laughter. She patted him on the cheek. “Good one, honey. You had me there for a minute.”

She walked past him and back out the door. Joe whirled around and put his hand out to stop her.

“No, I am serious. I am dead serious. It got out of that fucking box. All by itself. I swear.”

Ellen gave him another long look. “I think you’ve been out in the sun too long. We’ll put it in the box and put it out in the garage and take it to the antique store first thing in the morning.”

Joe shook his head. “Now. I am taking it now.”

He went back over to the table and stuffed the doll back into the box and headed for the door, only pausing to get his keys off the counter.

“I’ll be back soon as I can. I don’t want this thing in the house.”

“How do you know the store is still open? It’s 6:00! At least call them first before driving all the way over there. Joe!”

But Joe was already in his car and backing down the driveway, the doll safely tucked away in its box in the back seat.

Ellen was right, the antique store was closed. It wouldn’t reopen until 9 the next morning. Joe had no idea what to do with the doll. He was sure of one thing, he was not taking it back home with him under any circumstances. He stood on the sidewalk, looking around for a moment and found what he was looking for—a big trashcan a few feet away. Joe made a beeline for it.

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Just before he reached it, he felt an hand on his arm. He turned to see a tiny little man peering up at him. The man looked like a miniature Santa Claus with kindly blue eyes behind wire rimmed glasses, a full white beard, and a multitude of tiny little wrinkles surrounding his eyes and smiling mouth. He couldn't have been more than five feet tall.

"Pardon me for asking, but does that box contain something that you were trying to sell at the antique store? Because if it does, I may be of some assistance, IF it is something you need to get rid of immediately of course."

"Actually, it does and it IS something I would like to get rid of immediately. Are you an antique dealer?"

The little man smiled. "One could say that, yes. I have lots of antiques. My store has been in business for many many years. My father owned it before me, and his father before him, and his father before him. It's a family business, you see. What is it that you are trying to sell?"

"Well, its a doll, but its an ugly one. I wasn't hoping to get much for it. I just wanted to get rid of it. See, my wife got it today from her aunt whom she hasn't . . ."

The little man interrupted him. "I don't mean to be rude, but I am a very busy man. May I see the doll?"

Joe shrugged. "Sure, but I am warning you, it's not attractive."

He opened the box right there on the sidewalk, and pulled the doll out amid a flurry of packing peanuts. The little man reached out, quick as lightning, and grabbed it from him.

"Ohhh . . ." he purred. "She's beautiful. One of the best examples of her kind I have ever seen." He stroked the doll's matted hair almost tenderly. "How much do you want for her?"

"Umm . . . I hadn't really given it that much thought. How much are you willing to pay?"

"Oh, she's a real beauty. Priceless. I could give you \$500 for her."

Joe gasped so loudly, that a couple passing by heard him and gave him a strange look and speeded up. "\$500? You will give me \$500 for *that?*"

The little man frowned suddenly. "Of course, if that is not acceptable, perhaps you would like to look elsewhere for a buyer?"

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Joe shook his head furiously. “No, no. Uhh, five hundred is fine. Just fine.”

The smile returned to the man’s face. “Good. Good. Now, if you would be so kind as to accompany me back to my store? It’s just around the corner there.”

Joe nodded and followed the little man down the street. They turned off of Main Street onto a narrow side alley. They walked on and on and the buildings become increasingly shabby, alot of them boarded up, their tenants long gone. Finally, the little man stopped in front of a large, three story building that was, for the most part, completely boarded up. The only windows that weren’t boarded up were two on the ground floor. One of the dingy windows had a small sign in the corner that read “The Can’t Keep Store”. The little man opened up the door and went inside, holding the door open for Joe. Joe hesitated for a moment and then ducked inside.

The store was tiny, which seemed to fit the little man who was equally as small. It was also very dim and dusty, and Joe sneezed several times at the dust their feet kicked up. There didn’t appear to be any lights on. Joe could see shelves and shelves crowded close together and leaning dangerously under the weight of alot of stuff. Stuff was the best way he could think to describe it. The store’s collection defied description. There seemed to be no order whatsoever. On the shelf nearest him, Joe could see a basketball, a golf club, a rifle, a hair dryer, and what looked like an oxygen tank all crammed together. In front of him was a wheelchair, one of the older ones, with a wicker seat and wooden wheels. Beside that, on the floor was a saddle and bridle. Leaning against the wheelchair on the other side was what looked like a full set of armor, complete with chainmail and a huge sword.

Joe’s mouth dropped open. “Whoa!! I bet that armour is worth a fortune! How old is it?” He ran an appreciative finger across the shoulder of the suit.

The little man looked up from his counter, and motioned distractedly. “Yes, yes, that’s one of my oldest pieces. Genuine 16th century European armour. It costs more than you probably make in a year, my dear boy. Come here, I have some papers for you to sign.”



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Joe stepped carefully around piles of things and leaned against the glass counter. The little man tapped his knuckles with his pen.

“Please don’t lean. There are priceless antiques in there. My personal collection.”

Joe glanced down through the glass countertop. Arranged on red velvet were several small objects. A small Derringer pistol, a ring with a hinged cap, an assortment of knives and small daggers, and strangely, a small length of gold cord.

“What’s that?” Joe asked, pointing to the small piece of cord. “Don’t tell me THAT’S a priceless antique!”

The little man chuckled. “Maybe not to you, but to a collector of such things, like myself, it is. That cord, that very cord was used to strangle King Anurob of Egypt some 3,000 years ago.”

“King Who? I’ve never heard of him. How do you know that’s the real thing anyway, it could be anything—it could be a tie to hold back someone’s draperies or something.”

“I assure you, its the real deal. I check my sources very carefully.” He slid a sheaf of papers over to Joe. “Here is where I need you to sign.”

Joe glanced through the pile of papers, which were all covered in small, fine print. The type was so small, in fact, that he had to squint to read. He read the first line, “I, buyer’s name, do hearby give up one, possesion here, in exchange for monetary comepeensation and temporary peace of mind . . .’ Good grief! Why do you have to have such fine print for this? And what is this about peace of mind?”

“Oh, merely a formality. I do business the old fashioned way, and I must admit that the contract you hold in your hands is the same contract my great grandfather used over 100 years ago. We are a little behind the times around here. As for the temporary peace of mind, that’s what I am giving you, isn’t it? Won’t you rest easier knowing this doll is out of your house? And of course it’s temporary, but isn’t all peace of mind fleeting and temporary when you get right down to it?” He smiled and held the pen out. Joe reached for it, but the little man hesitated.

“Oh goodness me, I almost forgot to ask. Is this object, this doll, something that you can’t keep? Not something that you just want to get

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rid of, but something that you genuinely cannot keep in your possession any longer? It must be so, or else the sale is null and void.”

“What do you mean, ‘can’t keep’? What’s the difference between that and just not wanting?”

“It’s really quite simple. Can’t keep is something that you may still want but simply cannot keep. It may be an object that holds bad memories. A lot of things in here are just that. Things that people held onto after their loved ones had passed, like that wheelchair for instance. One of my first acquisitions. I bought it from a woman who was devastated over her husband’s death. The man had been in an accident and confined to that wheelchair for 20 years. She couldn’t bear to keep it, yet at the same time couldn’t bear to part with it and not know where it would end up. The reason my business is so successful is that we can give people the assurance that their beloved possessions will be well-taken care of and will find good homes. We deal in memories, you might say.”

“Uh, I hate to tell you this, but this doll holds no memories for me. I just simply don’t want . . . I CAN’T KEEP it in my house any longer. I don’t think that’s what you mean.”

“I see, that situation IS different, but still falls under the Can’t Keep clause, as you can see here under section 14, part a, b and c.” He pointed rapidly to several different spots on the page, but Joe couldn’t even begin to keep up.

The little man handed Joe the pen. “In other words, it is still something you can’t keep. Right? Because you are afraid of it, if I may be so bold?”

Joe’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

The little man smiled his biggest smile yet, revealing two rows of glimmering white teeth. “Does it matter how I know? I have been in business for a long, long time. After awhile, it becomes instinct. Of course, if you don’t agree that the doll is something that you can’t keep, then our agreement will be null and void.” He reached for the papers.

Joe clapped his hand down across the page. “No, you’re right. Can’t keep that thing in the house. I just can’t. Where do I sign?”

The little man pointed to the bottom of the page. “Sign here. Then initial here, here and . . . here. That’s it!”

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Joe signed quickly and pushed the papers back across the counter. The little man pulled off the bottom sheet and handed it to Joe. "That's your copy. It's a done deal! Here's your \$500." He slid a stack of twenties over to Joe.

"Thank you for your patronage. Come back anytime, we are open twenty-four hours a day. And remember that we pay well. Even if you think its junk, you might be surprised what you get for it. One man's junk is another man's treasure!"

The man gave him a broad smile and Joe could do nothing but smile stupidly back, as he shoved the money into your pocket.

When Joe arrived home, he found Ellen sitting at the kitchen table, crying.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked, alarmed.

"Oh, Joe. Muffin . . . he . . . he . . ." she blubbered. He couldn't understand her.

Her cat. Something had happened to her cat.

"He . . . He got hit. . . . car . . . didn't stop . . ." She laid her head on Joe's shoulder.

"Oh no. I'm so sorry honey." He hugged her to him tightly. She murmured something into his shoulder. "What did you say?"

She raised her head. "I said, would you bury him? He's out in the garage."

He hugged her again. "Sure. I'll do it right now."

He didn't tell her about the \$500. It wasn't the right time.

He dug a hole down at the corner of the yard, under the oak tree and went into the garage to wrap the cat's mangled body in a garbage bag. As he was doing that, Ellen stepped out of the backdoor with something in her hand.

"These too. Bury these with him. I can't stand to look at them." She thrust something in his direction, her head turned and her eyes closed so she didn't have to see Muffin's shrouded body. She was holding Muffin's water and food dishes. Joe took them from her.

"Are you sure, honey? Are you sure you don't want to keep them?" She shook her head, tears spilling out from under her closed lids. "No. I can't keep them in the house anymore."

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She turned and went back into the house, closing the door softly behind her.

*Can't keep. She said she can't keep them in the house.* Joe hesitated for a moment, standing over the cat's body, and then slid the dishes onto the shelf over the washing machine, behind the box of detergent.



The Can't Keep store wasn't too hard to find again the next morning. Joe walked in and found the little man behind the counter, looking much as he did the day before. He looked up at the sound of the door and smiled.

"Oh, hello Joe! I thought you might be back and so soon! Have another doll for me?"

"Uh, no, not another doll. This."

Joe placed a small plastic bag on the counter. The little man opened it and pulled out Muffin's dishes. He held them to his chest for a moment, his eyes closed and a small smile on his face.

"These are extraordinary! Beautiful! I will give you a thousand for them."

Joe's mouth dropped open. "A thousand dollars? For two five dollar cat dishes? Are you crazy?"

The man looked up at him, his eyes flashing. "No, Joe, I am not crazy. If you don't like my offer, then you can go elsewhere."

Joe took a step back, shocked. Something shifted in the old man's face and he no longer looked remotely like Santa Claus.

The man smiled again, and with obvious effort, composed his face. "I must apologize. I am having a bad day. It's just that these really are one-of-a-kind. So . . . so *fresh*. The emotion is still strong. Again, I extend my offer of a thousand. Do you accept?"

"Of course I do! Thousand dollars for cat dishes." Joe shook his head in disbelief.

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“Good! Just let me get your payment.” The little man reached down and brought out yet another pile of money and without counting, slid it across the counter to Joe.

“How do you know how much is there? You didn’t even count it! Never mind, I don’t think I want to know.”

The little man smiled at Joe, once again looking for all the world like a Santa Claus look-alike. Joe turned to leave.

“I’ll be seeing you soon! Remember Joe, we have a contract! And, give my best to your wife.”

Joe stopped in his tracks. “Now wait a minute, this is just too weird. What’s going on? How did you know I was married?”

The little man gestured toward’s Joe’s hand. “Your wedding ring, dear boy.”

Joe glanced down, feeling sheepish. “Oh.”

It wasn’t until he left the store that Joe realized the man had called him Joe. He had never given the man his nickname.

A few days later, Ellen met Joe at the door when he came home from work.

“You won’t believe this. The strangest thing happened today. I called Mom and asked her why she hadn’t called me when Aunt Edna died. She didn’t call me because Aunt Edna is apparently still alive and well in St. Louis! She isn’t dead, Joe. So how did I get that doll?”

Joe stared at her. “Are you SURE?”

“Of course I’m sure! My mother wouldn’t lie, Joe.”

“It must have been some sort of strange mix-up at that lawyer’s office then. Weird.”

“What happened to that doll, anyway? You never told me.”

“Oh, the doll. I sold to the antique store for a hundred dollars.”

“A hundred? Someone gave you a hundred dollars for that ugly thing? Unbelievable.”

Joe said nothing more about it. He didn’t know how to tell Ellen that he had gotten over a thousand for an ugly old doll and two cat dishes. How could he? He decided to wait and tell her when the time was right.



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Months rolled by and Joe had nearly forgotten about the Can't Keep store and the strange little man. The only reminder was an old sock with \$1400 rolled up inside it in the back of his underwear drawer. He still couldn't bring himself to tell Ellen.

The phone rang one afternoon when Joe was home alone. He answered and there was a strange high-pitched static on the other end. He yelled hello a couple of more times and was about to hang up when the line went still. Not dead, just still. A voice, clear and strong, came through the line.

"Joe? How are you, my dear boy!"

Joe nearly dropped the phone. It was him.

"What do you want?"

"Why I want nothing more than was stated in our contract. You still owe me three more. Your six months is nearly up."

"Six months? What the hell are you talking about? Three more what?"

"Three more Can't keeps of course! Your contract stipulates that you are obligated to give me three more. Read it and you will see. Shall I expect you in a few days?"

"You're crazy! Leave me alone and don't call here again."

Joe slammed the phone down. It immediately rang again. It was him again.

"Joe, don't make this hard on yourself. I will be blunt. If you do not deliver the goods within 3 days I will be forced to begin collection procedures, and I assure you that can be most unpleasant. Have a good day, and as always, give my best to your dear wife."

The phone clicked in Joe's hand and it was only then that he became aware of the loud beeping coming from the phone. It was the beep of a phone left off the hook too long, as if he had been talking to dead air.

Contract. Where was that damn contract? It had been almost six months ago, what had he done with it? He ran upstairs and into the bedroom. He shuffled through the pile of receipts and loose change on his dresser where he emptied his pockets out every night. He found it at the bottom of the pile, a folded piece of yellow paper. He pulled it out and unfolded it, struggling to read the tiny print.

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*“I, do hereby blah, blah, blah . . . in exchange for monetary compensation and temporary peace of mind . . . blah blah blah . . . I also agree to procure 4 more Can’t Keep items over a period of six months or less. If I do not do so, then I will be in direct violation of this contract and will, as a result, be in agreement to allow any and all collection procedures that are deemed necessary be carried out against me, up to and including voodoo curses and the summoning of demons from the 5th and 6th pits of Hell. By signing this agreement, I also agree and understand that the first Can’t Keep object exchanged is for promotional value only, and does not count as one of my four agreed upon objects and does fulfill any of my contractual obligations. By signing this contract, I also understand that my eternal soul may be put at risk during any and all collection procedures if I do not meet my contractual obligations, however, I cannot offer my immortal soul as a fulfillment of my contractual obligations, as an immortal soul does not qualify as a “Can’t Keep” object . . .”*

Joe ripped the paper into tiny pieces and flushed it down the toilet.

Two days later, Ellen met him at the door again, a look of anger flushing her face. She did not even say hello.

“What the hell is this?” She asked, holding up the sock containing the money. “Where the hell did you get this?”

“Oh no. I was hoping you wouldn’t find that. Let me explain . . . a few months ago I met this man . . .”

“Forget it! Don’t explain. If you have to hide this much money from me, then the reasons why can’t be good ones, Joe.”

She flung the money at him, and ran towards the stairs, sobbing. Joe was right behind her, trying to stop her.

“Wait, Ellen, wait. Please let me explain . . . Ellen . . .”

He reached out for her and she knocked his hand away. She started up the stairs and Joe was right behind her.

“Honey, please stop. Listen to me!”

She reached the top of the stairs and Joe planted himself in front of her before she could go further. “Honey, listen to me . . . there is a good explanation. I just couldn’t tell you at the time, because I didn’t think you would believe me. I was waiting . . .”

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Ellen looked at him, her face red and tear-stained. "Waiting for what? A good excuse?"

She turned away from him and her foot slipped on the top step. She plunged backwards down the entire flight of stairs, as Joe watched helplessly, his hand outstretched to her.



The old man looked up at the sound of the door and smiled widely.

"Oh Joe! I've been expecting you! Can't wait to see the goodies you have brought me this time!"

Without a word, Joe stepped forward and dumped a large garbage bag onto the counter. The contents spilled out across the glass . . . a crumpled wedding dress, a well-worn toothbrush, and a coffee cup with lipstick stains still along the edge.

"Splendid! Just splendid! What a lovely collection! I can give you at least ten thousand for the lot. What do you say?"

He looked up at Joe who looked back at him with swollen red eyes. Joe looked as if he hadn't slept for days.

"My, my Joe. You must be keeping some late hours these days!"

Joe leaned across the counter and grabbed the little man's shirt collar in one quick motion. He thought he saw a look of fear pass across the old man's face, but only for a brief moment and then it was gone.

"I have to know. Did you send that doll? Did you send us that goddamn doll?"

"Of course! That was a one-time only promotional deal. We sent out about 25,000 of them, it was a very limited offer. We have branched out, you see, we have offices in nearly every city in the US . . ."

"Did you kill my wife?"

"Oh no, dear boy. YOU did that! You made her fall down the stairs, not I! I simply helped her find the money. What can I say, business is business. I simply hate collecting. It is such a nasty business. Now let me get you that money . . ."

Joe let go of him, turned and walked toward the door.



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“Joe! You forgot your payment! Of course, if you would like to work out a deal I have several options we could discuss. We are running an unadvertised special this week on Reanimation of a Loved One. You could have your wife back for a very low price . . . one that I am sure you could afford . . . you could have your wife back today, Joe. Today. She could be waiting for you when you get back home.”

Joe stopped walking, and stood with his head down, listening.

“All you have to do is sign on the dotted line. Your immortal soul in exchange for your wife returned safe and sound, well, almost sound anyway. And, if you sign now I will even throw in an extra fifty years of life for you and your wife . . . Joe? Joe, where are you going?”

Joe walked out the door. The old man smiled to himself and called after him.

“The offer will only stand for the next two weeks. After that, I cannot guarantee her condition . . . I will see soon, Joe! You’ll be back! Call again! And remember, we’re open twenty-four hours here at The Can’t Keep!”

THE END

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**BY A.A. ROBERTS**

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**O**ld man time is a bitter son of a bitch and a thief to boot. He steals your health, cripples your friends and takes your loved ones. In the end he takes away what little strength you have left and hands you over to that other old bastard called death. I've never been one for graceful exits. I'm not going out without a fight . . .

It's amazing the inappropriate times the voyage that's been your life comes crashing down on you. Here I am in the house that death built, ready to stroll into the devil's playground and all I can think about is how I got here. Any warrior who's worth a damn will tell you survival depends on fractions of seconds. I'm kneeling here among the corpses wasting minutes. I guess I deserve a breather.

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They call us shadow-walkers, that is the few people that know we even exist. We're way high up on the denial list. If we're caught or killed they deny we exist. Who am I kidding? There's no getting caught, only horribly killed.

There's probably no one in the world better trained than I am for this kind of work, but as I watch the lights play behind the door in front of me I wonder if I'll make it out alive. I know who's behind that door. I've met him before and there is no truer expression of evil.



**M**y life, my life, how did I get here? In '79 I was fighting world-class martial artists and I was making a name for myself. I managed to hook up with three of the greatest masters of the time and they afforded me a well-rounded career in both armed and non-armed combat. I was a bad-assed head banger full of piss and vinegar and ready to take on the world. Then Angelique ripped through my life.

I know it's clichéd. I know it's probably trite. I know it's been said a thousand times before, but it's always a woman isn't it? I was fighting in Rome at the '83 world invitationals. I was at the top of my form and no one could stand up to my eclectic mix of martial arts and preternatural speed. I was a tornado of pain and when I sucked you in you were going down. Ahhh . . . the good old days.

After my successful conclusion to the championship and another gold belt, Glen Bouchard, my manager and dear friend left me in Rome. He had another client to attend to and recommended I take a well-deserved rest. It was one of those brief interludes in my life where everything seemed to go right. I was relaxed, healthy and at peace with the world.

I was dining at an outdoor café near the coliseum, sipping on my third glass of Chianti and getting quietly tossed when Angelique walked by. Calling it a walk was like calling the Mona Lisa a drawing. Angelique didn't just move through the world she drew it into her as she strolled by. You could not help but be captivated by the sheer poetry of her motion.

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It was like watching one of the great cats take down its prey except in the end there was no death only an ensnared heart . . . mine.

Angelique Bellamora was a study in perfection. The grace that was manifested in every move she made was executed by a body of voluptuous perfection. She had curves that inspired anyone with a drop of testosterone to trace those delicate lines in their mind's eye. You could not help but loop down the graceful arc of her neck and fall into the delicate crevasse of her bosom to finally lose yourself in the gentle rolling sea of her hips.

She turned her head toward me as she walked by and tranquilized me with her smile. Perfect raven black hair spilled over her shoulders and framed the face of an Angel. Her parents named her well. Full, ruby-red lips held just the hint of a seductive pout. Smooth dark skin with a touch of olive was centered with a perfectly formed and petite nose. The dark wells of her eyes, which hinted at some long forgotten Asian ancestry, rested on perfectly sculpted cheeks set high with regal bearing. In her presence I knew what it meant to be a mere mortal.

She entered the café where I dined, strolled through the interior of the restaurant (causing one waiter to drop a tray of glasses) and exited to the outdoor area where I sat. I watched transfixed by her movement and then she sat down in front of me!

I suppose a more sophisticated individual would have come up with some pithy compliment and a look to match. I did my best not to dribble. She relaxed back into the chair opposite me and motioned to an empty glass sitting next to the bottle of Chianti.

“Your glass looked so lonely, Signor, I felt I must bring it company,” she said in lightly accented English. Even her voice was perfect with a provocative rhythm that hinted of music and seduction.

I filled her lonely glass and attempted to keep my voice from quavering, “I assure you, Signora, that it is not only the glass that is in need of company.”

A smile was her reply and I was barely able to hand her the glass under the radiance of her presence. She took the wine with a perfectly sculpted hand. She sipped from the glass never letting her gaze drift from me. I knew she was studying me, working me out in some fashion and I felt like a puppy dog in the hands of his mistress.

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“I saw you fight at the championship yesterday. You are American, yes?”

If I ever had a doubt about my career path before, in that moment, her observation blew away all apprehension. “Yes I am. This is my first trip to your country. I haven't had much of a chance to soak in its beauty . . . until now.”

Another smile for the favor of a compliment and I became happily numb.

“You are too kind, Signor. There are much fairer sights in my beautiful country.”

“I find that very hard to believe. Please call me Adam.”

She took another sip of wine and studied me again. “I am Angelique Bellamora. I am a student of the arts at the university.”

“Angelique? Seraphim or cherubim? Oh, Seraphim most assuredly.”

At first an expression of shock painted her ravishing face, which I found a little odd. This passed almost immediately and then she laughed at my little joke. It was like wind chimes on a warm summer's eve, “You tease me, Adam. I'm surprised you know of such things.”

“Not all fighters are uneducated men. I've had a liberal arts education where I dabbled in learning non-traditional subjects.”

“The study of Angels?”

I smiled and replied knowingly, “Among other things. Why did you look so surprised when I mentioned the angels?”

“My family has been enamored of this topic for decades, thus my name. My parents villa is decorated with many icons and artifacts related to Angels,” she said with a smile and then quickly switched topics back to me, “So you are one of those poet warriors that the Japanese produced, Si?”

I chuckled and replied, “Now it is you who it being too kind.”

“Maybe just observant. So have you had a chance to tour our beautiful country?”

“Unfortunately not. So far, I've been confined to Rome and it's... shall we say, more combative places?”

She yielded yet another glowing smile and offered, “Then you must let me be your guide. I will show you more than you would see on any commercial tour.”

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It occurred to me that I must have done something *really* nice in a previous life. Of course, I accepted and for the next two weeks I knew I had found heaven. The days were spent strolling through the beauty of Rome and the Italian countryside while the nights were spent exploring each other. I had discovered bliss.

Like all human beings she had her peculiarities. She was obsessed with the concept of fate, and she often drew me into philosophical discussions on the nature of good and evil. Of course, her native intelligence and curiosity only deepened my feelings for her. I wanted nothing more than to spend my entire life with this woman. She had grabbed the very core of my being and would not let go . . . nor did I want her to.

Near the end of my two weeks I was ready to call Glen and tell him I needed at least another month. I'd been fighting for him for two years and money was not an issue. I knew he wouldn't mind. We were at the end of the season and I had always done all right by him.

I knew something was wrong when Angelique didn't show up at my hotel that last morning. We had spent most of our nights and thus the mornings together. However, there were a couple of days where she had to return to her own tiny apartment to see to her things and grab a change of clothes.

The polizia found her in an alley near the Coliseum not too far from my hotel. At first I was a suspect, but the concierge had seen her leave by herself and several witnesses saw her enter the alley alone. They wouldn't let me identify her since I wasn't family, and I imagine also because I was a foreigner. I almost bashed some heads in over that one, but in the end I acquiesced. I was so devastated there wasn't much fight left in me at that point anyway.

From the peak of elation to the depths of despair . . . all in two weeks. I dropped into an emotional well and didn't come out for a year. Glen tried to pull me out, but he was a businessman first and had to cut his losses. I went home to the states, and bummed around for a while living in cheap motels and picking up day jobs. I never really had a taste for drugs or alcohol, and it was a good thing. I'm sure if I had such an addictive personality I would have ended up dead in an ally somewhere.

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They say time heals all wounds. That's bullshit. Like I said before, old man time is a son-of-a-bitch, and he scarred me real good. I ended up going back to school, and I got a degree in computer science. I found that academics and physical exercise were great distractions. My pursuits kept me from dwelling on what I had lost.

It was around that time when I made my first kill. I had no intention of getting involved in any vigilante crap, but fate decided otherwise. My studies were being conducted at NYU, and sometimes I took to walking the streets late at night to clear my head. I was fighting another bout of depression, lost in my memories of Angelique. My reverie was broken by the sound of a woman's distraught, muffled cry. I looked up just in time to see a pair of legs being dragged into an alley.

I sprinted for the alleyway, and rounded the corner to find blackness. Garbage lined the base of the buildings, and here and there feral eyes peered out of the gloom. I heard a muffled squeak and sprinted to the source.

The would be rapists spun, and turned with a fist full of steel. Six inches of razor sharp edge, and a pinpoint sliced the air in warning. "Back off Jack off!"

"Senior please! Help me!"

She looked to be in her mid-twenties, and of Puerto Rican descent. She was attractive, and at the moment totally vulnerable. I would have helped her no matter what, but when she said Senior the image of Angelique's prone body popped into my mind. I never saw her like that, but I have one hell of an imagination.

I didn't bother responding to the punk's venom chatter. I flashed out a front kick, and the knife spun away into the night air. The look on his face was priceless. He probably had thirty pounds on me, but he was slow as well as dimwitted. I tore him up with several blows to the face and throat. I kicked him in the groin and then the back of the knee. He went down on his knees in front of me. I grabbed him by the back of his head, and by the chin and twisted. It was one of the most beautiful sounds I ever heard. With a crack he fell to the pavement, and joined the rest of the trash. I felt much better.

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I helped the trembling woman up. She couldn't really see me in the dark, but I knew my rage and violence had frightened her. She squeaked out a terrified, "Gracias", and ran off into the night.

I imagine that night was like a junkie's first taste. I got nothing but positive reinforcement for my actions. My depression left me, the damsel in distress was saved, the adrenaline rush fired me up and I was sure that the world was little cleaner place. Adam Willman walked into that alley. Someone else walked out.

I took to strolling the streets at night with an eye for trouble. I didn't jump on every opportunity that presented itself. I *really* didn't want to get caught. Most of the time it was stick-ups, and sexual predators, but every now and then I had the opportunity to take out a celebrity. The police were baffled when the Crossword Killer suddenly stopped massacring his victims. Or when the Sunday Slayer simply disappeared back into the hell from whence he came. I knew where the bodies were, and I had made them pay in memory of their victims.

My last brand name psycho was the Black Light Killer. He rocked my world on two different levels. He taught me a new name for evil, and he brought me into the world of the Shadow-walkers.

The Black Light Killer got his name because he scrawled runes and bizarre symbols on his victims in florescent ink. These satanic writings were only visible under an UV light. The authorities found this all very strange, but figured it was just more nonsense from a twisted mind. I discovered his modus operandi was far more sinister then they possible could have imagined.

The newspapers never really caught on to me. I tried not to keep any sort of rhythm to my pursuits, and I was fastidious to the point of being anal in terms of not leaving any evidence. I'm pretty sure the police knew I was out there, but they were so overwhelmed with the day-to-day stuff that going after someone who was making their job a little easier must have seemed like a waste of time. That suited me just fine.

Back in '93 I did have one fan in a reporter by the name of Harry Stevens. There was a spate of rapes being perpetrated by three different individuals, and I made the mistake of taking them all out in one night. He figured out real quick only one person could have done this, and nick named me the Dark Guardian. I was the daily subject of his



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column there for a while which caused me no end of headaches. I had to spend a lot more time being elusive. Fortunately he worked at one of the tabloids so no one took him too seriously.

I got no small amount of amusement from his descriptions of my exploits. Being a tabloid reporter he had to dress me up with strange mystic powers. He claimed I had a stare that caused my victim's blood to freeze right before I took them down. I have no powers. It's a phrase that I repeat to my self over and over again. I bleed. I break. I can die.

Lack of humility is a surefire way to end up dead. I am the last hope of the hopeless. If I die their one last chance is gone. It's necessary for me to remember that, and to remember who I am. I have no powers is my mantra. . . . but boy can I kick ass.

The horror that was the Black Light Killer revealed to me that there are creatures of power out there. Hell, I'm a technologist. My day job entailed working with computers, networks and software. I didn't believe in any of that new-age crap or mysticism or healing vortexes or any of the magical menageries propounded by self-described prophets. Nope, I was cypberkind true to the core... until that night on a hill in Connecticut, under a full moon.

Why do they always kidnap, mutilate, desecrate and/or torture women? You never hear about Mr. Universe being taken hostage by some crazed lunatic. It's always some poor helpless girl. I suppose that's kind of a why ask why question.

The police were getting nowhere with BLK, but then the cops didn't have the benefit of my collegiate background. As I had hinted to Angelique all those years ago I had minored in a course of study that delved into the bizarre. In my youth I was intrigued by ancient cults, black magic, sorcery and the history behind man, myth and religion. I didn't believe in any of it, but I found the subject fascinating. It was that background that allowed me to decipher BLK's leavings. I managed to get to one of his victims long before the police saw her. That was tough. The look on her face reinforced my desire to make this son-of-a-bitch pay . . . slowly. I lit her up with the black light and photographed the florescent scrawls on her naked corpse.

It didn't take me long to figure out that these were passages from the Necronomicon. Now I knew I was in for a fun time. The Necronomicon,

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also known as the book of the dead, first showed up in modern literature as a plot device in the writings of H. P. Lovecraft. He wrote that it was penned by the mad Arab Abdul and scribed in human blood on human skin. I knew for a fact that this was true.

Of course academia all had a good laugh about such fancy and wrote this evil tome off as a mere fiction. Too bad none of them did any research into the literature that came out of the dark ages. The Necronomicon was real, and its contents never should have been written. It was a collection of every black spell, curse, incantation, conjuration and prayer of death ever spoken. Races that had consumed themselves by opening the very pits of hell had their methods documented in this book.

Of course the book had been lost in the annals of time. Most sane men hoped that some enterprising soul had burned it to ashes and thrown those in a volcano. However, bits of its evil had been scrawled down in notes here and there and were referenced in other, but less potent grimoires. It was my study of one of these in my youth that enabled me to identify the origins of what was penned on the poor lass's flesh.

What I found entirely troublesome was the fact that these were completed passages. This led me to the ultimate, however improbable conclusion, that BLK had managed to get his hands on the original gore formed manuscript. Ducky . . .

It occurred to me that only a precious few knew that the Necronomicon really existed. It also occurred to me that in order to track down and obtain this tome someone would have to have a lot of capital. Armed with this information I started at the occult shops, and worked my way up through the antique dealer's food chain.

I finally landed at an antiques shop in New Orleans. The owner of that store was the last one to possess the book, and he had sold it to a Wall Street broker by the name of Alexander Jennings. Fancy that. The latest financial Wunderkind was a project of black magic and profound evil. Profound evil's to be expected on Wall Street, but Black Magic is usually laughed off as "superstitious" nonsense.

I was also shocked to discover that Jean-Luc, the antiques dealer, had scanned the entire Necronomicon onto his computer, and was

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offering an electronic copy on E-bay for 19.95. For the price of a Ginsu and a core-a-matic you too could own a copy of the most evil musings ever to be put down on human skin. Like I said . . . ducky . . .

I cross-referenced the photos I had taken of the dead girl's body with passages from the electronic copy of the Necronomicon, and figured out what BLK was up to. He was invoking the spirit of none other than Cuthulu in order to obtain raw dark power . . . what crap. This kid obviously had seen too many horror films, and now I had to clean up the mess. Thanks to Hollywood I was going to have to PG-13 all over this punk's ass.

Fortunately the mad Arab's scribbles were a road map to Alexander's plans and although I didn't have a location for his next party I certainly had a date. It had to be under a full moon. It always has to be under a full moon because that's when the crazies come out. On the first night of the next full lunar event I waited for him outside of his multimillion-dollar apartment, and subsequently followed him to upstate Connecticut.

He may have been one gangbuster of a necromancer, but he wasn't too sharp in the security department. I had no problem following him into the State Park he had chosen for his nocturnal activity. I parked back on the road outside of the park so as to remain out of his sight. I caught up with him in the parking lot just as he was unloading his victim. He'd wrapped her in plastic tarps and cocooned the whole thing shut with duct tape . . . one thousand and two uses . . .

With his victim over one shoulder, and the Necronomicon under one arm he headed up a path and into the woods. I should have taken him out in the lot, but I guess I let my curiosity get the better of me. He was big. This wasn't any string bean geek sporting horn-rimmed glasses. Alexander had spent more than a few hours in the gym, and I'm guessing he had forty pounds of raw muscle on me. This was not going to be a cakewalk.

I followed him through the woods that finally opened up into a clearing on a small hill. At the top of the hill was a massive rock slab which was just the right height to serve as an altar. Some primal instinct in the core of my being told me that this rock had served blood duty before. He gently laid the young lady down on the granite slab, and placed the Necronomicon near her head. He lovingly brushed her hair

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back from her forehead and whispered something in her ear. I was too far away to hear what he said, but I heard her whimper pathetically in reply.

He drew a long, curved, ornate kriss knife from under his jacket. He held it up to the moonlight to inspect its razor edge, and the lass whimpered again. He sliced open her plastic shroud and tossed it to the side along with yards of duct tape. His victim was manacled underneath all that plastic so she was not going anywhere. He flipped open his cookbook of evil to somewhere in the middle and ran a finger down one of those epidermal formed pages . . . yuk.

He raised his blade to the full moon, and began to chant in a tongue I did not want to hear. As I looked up the hill to see him form in silhouette against the immense full moon I was struck with the raw beauty of the tableau set before me. That being said it was time to take the son-of-a-bitch down.

Keep in mind that up until this point I had been a diehard fan of logic and science. Everything else was bullshit. Imagine my surprise, after having crept halfway up the hill, when the moon suddenly turned blood red. The air began to move not with a wind, but like it was being displaced by some unseen, dark volume. A black mist began to ooze out of the base of the altar and Alexander's eyes began to burn crimson.

I froze like a little girl. For the first time in my life I knew absolute terror, the kind that freezes your blood and turns your brain to lead. Cold sweat poured out from under my scalp, and my bladder started screaming for release. I was witness to the impossible, and it was about to roll over me and that little girl like a freight train straight out of hell.

His blade dipped, and with a flurry of slashes the young lady was disrobed and naked to the stars. In the distance I heard the scream of something that wasn't quite human. It wasn't animal either, but whatever it was it was really big and getting closer.

Alexander reached down, and ripped the girl's adhesive gag off. She screamed in pain, and then screamed in terror. Broker boy laughed, and joined her in mocking tribute. That was a mistake. His mean spirited parody knocked me out of my fear-induced trance.

I was never one much for guns. When you want to stay unnoticed silence is golden. However, I did have a nice short length katana with a

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leather bound hilt that I brought along for just such occasions. I unsheathed my bad boy and quietly made my way up the hill. I wasn't going to fool around with Alexander Evil. I was going to get behind him, and take his pretty head off.

As I flanked him the roar of the unseen beast grew louder as did the little girl's screams. Whatever it was was coming on like a jetliner. Its roars were everywhere and I couldn't figure out what direction it was coming from. I got directly behind Jennings, midway up the hill as he reached the climax of his incantation. He fairly screamed into the night sky in a booming voice that filled the clearing. I slipped on something and fell to my stomach.

I recoiled in horror at the slime that now covered the small hill. I looked up and could see the nasty stuff oozing from the base of the altar along with the black mist. At that moment a black hole, a vortex, opened up in front of the altar, and the death cry of the beast issued forth. Alexander cried like he'd just climaxed, and the little girl froze with absolute terror. There must have been twenty barbed tentacles that spilled out of that hole, and onto the altar. Far back in the void, maybe twenty yards or so, burned two red orbs of mythic proportion. The eyes of the beast were filled with a madness that mirrored that of its acolyte.

The slime-coated appendages were lined with hooked bone claws that flexed in and out of leathery sheaths. They slipped over the little girl, and caressed her terror stricken form like some lost lover. Her eyes were as wide as saucers, and she obviously was barely able to breathe. Alexander laughed, and screamed like a psycho with a new sex toy.

I'd never sparred with a demon before, never mind one of the star players from the pits of hell, but I was going to be damned if I was just going to just sit there, and watch this little girl get molested by some old slime lips. I sprinted up the hill dodging the rivulets of ooze and cocked my blade back for the killing blow.

More tentacles spilled from the void and one snapped to point in my direction. Broker boy was a little slow on the uptake, and I was right behind him when he finally saw me. He tried to bring his blade up to parry my slash, but it was too little too late. My katana flashed in the moonlight with its own razor edge and parted dear Alexander's head from the rest of his muscular and fashionably dressed body.

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The beast from the void screamed in range and launched a troika of tentacles at me. Master Suzuki never taught me the defensive pattern for an octopus attack, but I improvised with lethal execution. It screamed even louder having been parted from some of its many limbs. For my troubles it issued forth more appendages, and more slime.

I dove too late and one of the flesh covered slinky's, the size of a tree limb, raked my chest with its razor claws. I cried out in agony and lashed out at it with my sword as another appendage made for my feet. Now I was pissed. I grabbed old Alexander's slime smeared headed and held it up before the beast.

"You want a sacrifice squishy!!!! HERE!!!!!"

I threw Wunderkind's head into the void, and I heard it splat against something wet and leathery. I impaled my sword through the tentacle on the moist ground and in a fit of adrenaline rage threw the rest of Alex into the hellhole before me. The tentacles snatched the corpse out of the air, and drew it back into the hole. I grabbed the young lady, turned and sprinted down the hill. I made it two steps before I slipped in the slime-coated grass and pitched over into the muck to roll down the incline along with the young lady.

We came to rest at the base of an oak tree. I heard the roar of an explosion. The black hole before the altar exploded up into the night sky in a gush of dark flame, and black energy. In a rush of debris and arcane power the void sealed itself back up, and then was silent . . . tomb silent . . . dead silent. Only our labored breathing was evident.

I was sprawled out on top of the poor young lady. She was very young, probably only sixteen. Underneath the slime and blood was probably a very pretty young girl who was going to need therapy for the rest of her adult life. I smiled, but I don't think she was impressed.

"Very impressive."

I screamed like a little girl, rolled off the little girl and jumped to my feet. Two men dressed in black suits watched my contortions with obvious amusement. One of them held the Necronomicon under an arm. They both wore black leather driving gloves and dark sunglasses. This struck me as very odd seeing as it was after midnight.

On closer inspection I realized that this brunette pair of lean, but muscular young men were identical twins. They kept their hair GQ smart,

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their suits pressed and their black wingtips spotless. Call it intuition, but everything about these two screamed “Feds!”

The one on the right observed, “You have shutdown an apocalyptic event of mythic proportion, successfully beaten back a pseudo-etheric cephalopod of titanic energy and have successfully rescued the intended victim.”

“Bravo,” intoned the one on the left.

I wasn't exactly in the best of spirits so I said rather pointedly, “Who the fuck are you?”

The one on the right smiled, “We're Shadow-walkers. We need you to come with us Mr. Willman.”

With that the one on the left pulled out a tranq-gun and shot me in the chest. That's what I get for being vulgar.



**“WAKE UP!”**

I snapped up to a sitting position in the center of a bare room. It was weird. The command wasn't aural. It seemed to come from the center of my brain. I was getting tired of all these annoying new experiences. In the real world people couldn't really get inside your head. Besides, even if you did have such psychic talent I didn't see the need to shout.

I was on a musty old mattress that had been thrown on a cement floor. A single glaring light bulb dangled from a socket plugged into an orange extension cord over my head. It was a large room with twelve-foot ceilings. It wasn't made for comfort. Despite its large size it was obviously made for containment.

The twins walked out of the shadows directly in front of me sharing a knowing smile.

The one on the right apologized, “Sorry about the tranquilizer, but all that noise Jennings made inspired someone to call the state police.”

The one on the left added, “They were only a couple of miles away when we showed up, and we still needed time for our cleanup team to do its work and to get you out.”

“Where's the girl?”

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"She's being debriefed. Jennings chose his victim well. She was an orphaned child of the street," lefty observed.

"No one ever would have missed her," righty added.

"Who—"I started to ask.

"We are Ed Edison," they said in unison.

This dual, identical reply freaked me out a little. "So you share the exact same name as well as fashion sense? Your parents must have really been into that whole twin thing."

They sneered at my taunt and righty spoke up, "I'm Edwin," he jerked a thumb at his brother, "This is Edgar. We never met our parents."

"The government took us at a young age because of our . . . talents."

"Let me guess, you have that whole psychic twin thing going on between you."

Edwin shot me a knowing grin, "Something like that."

"We're not clones. We have proof," Edgar shot defensively. The little shit was reading my mind which I really found annoying

"We've got proof!" Edwin huffed, "We have belly buttons."

Edgar echoed his brother, "Yes we have belly buttons and that's proof."

"I wasn't aware clones didn't have belly buttons. In fact I wasn't aware that there were clones."

The twins knowingly chuckled at my naiveté and began to slowly circle me.

"What am I doing here?"

Edgar crossed one arm on his chest, propped the other elbow on top of it and stroked his chin. Of course his brother did the same thing. "We've had our eye on you for some time. We got a tip that you were out in the world, and up to deeds of daring do."

"From who? Harry Stevens?"

Edwin smiled knowingly, "She thought you might be of interest to us."

"I don't know what or who you're talking about."

"Come, come, Adam. You've been a busy boy. What was it Mr. Stevens called you?" Edgar asked.

"The Dark Guardian. Oooooohhhhhhh," Edwin said in mock awe.



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“We're actually fans Adam. Your work with the Crossword killer was exemplary. So much evil, and so little time, eh?” I'm not sure which one said that.

“Is there a point to this conversation?”

They studied me in silence a bit longer while they continued to circle. Finally, Edgar spoke up, “Do you have any powers Adam?”

“Say what?”

The twins stopped in front of me and Edgar asked again, “Do you have any powers?”

“I can conjugate French verbs faster than any human alive. I can leap tiny bits of string in a single bound and I'm a master of chopsticks so don't fuck with me.”

With that I was launched across the room, and slammed into the opposite cement wall with the force from some unseen blow. That's what I get for being vulgar.

The twins were holding hands now and I could see a strange blue light leaking out from behind their sunglasses. I was pinned to the top of the wall with what felt like a ten-ton weight on my chest. The twins strolled hand in hand over to me.

“We do have powers Adam. The scientists call it telekinesis. Have you heard of it?” Edwin asked. I would have replied yes had I been able to breathe.

Edwin smiled. “We're pretty good at it as you may have noticed. It's why we've risen to the top of the Shadow-walkers.”

They broke their connection, and I unceremoniously fell to the base of the wall. I looked up at the two, and contemplated kicking their identical asses.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you. We're both trained martial artists too, and although we understand you're very good we're sure the tranquilizer isn't entirely out of your system.” Edgar observed.

“Evidently telepathy is another talent. I don't like you inside my head.”

Edwin smiled. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

“What . . . who are the Shadow-walkers.”

Edgar smiled. “A Federally mandated agency tasked with the mission of mitigating and/or managing all paranormal activity.”

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“Our primary mission is containment. The populace must believe that the paranormal, mystical, supernatural and so on are just fantasy.” Edwin pointed out.

Edgar knelt in front of me. “If the truth were known we'd have a hundred times more Alexander Jennings running about mucking around with things that shouldn't be mucked around with.”

Edwin knelt next to his brother. “Up until tonight you've been dealing with the run of the mill every day sort of evil, that's why we haven't bothered with you.”

“Yes that's outside our jurisdiction. But tonight you really stepped in it didn't you?” Edgar asked rhetorically.

“What do you want with me?”

They both smiled, and said enthusiastically, “Why to join us of course!”

“You did a bang up job tonight, really first class.” Edgar said like a fawning teenager.

“Really Adam! And all without any powers! We were really impressed.” Edwin added just as enthusiastically.

I was intrigued, but given the full dose of humility I had gotten so far that night I also felt like I was way out of my league.

“I don't think I'd last too long in your world. I got lucky tonight.”

Edgar's expression changed to one of admiration and he turned to his brother. “And he's humble too. We have to enlist him.”

“Most definitely,” Edwin replied and they both rose. The pair each offered me a hand and helped me up from the floor.

“We need to show you something, Adam.” Edwin stepped back so that I may pass. Edgar led me out of the room.

We exited past the steel door that barred my interrogation room. We walked by many empty cells. Some of them were sealed with bars, some with steel mesh and some with foot thick glass. All of the rooms were now empty. It was obvious to me that this was a prison of some sort, but it seemed to be vacant.

“That's because of the sole prisoner we keep here,” Edgar replied to my thoughts.

“He kept driving the other inmates mad causing them to commit horrible acts. We felt it best if we keep him isolated.”

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They brought me before a stainless steel vault door that must have been three foot thick. A pair of heavily armed guards in black combat gear stood nervously at attention in front of the door. They wore black plastic helmets that made them look like giant bipedal bugs. I could see electronics worked into the back of their headgear.

“The helmets protect them from the creature behind that door. We've discovered a technology that scrambles psychic assaults. Without it they'd go mad in a matter of minutes,” Edwin pointed out.

Edgar frowned. “Unfortunately, the batteries only last two hours so we're constantly rotating our guards.”

I could feel it. It was on the other side of that massive steel portal, but I could feel it reaching out in attempt to latch onto my soul. It was like an ethereal skeletal claw that slipped unencumbered through the physical world into my mind's eye. It was terror, and hate and the antithesis of life all wrapped up in one spiritual tendril. It coiled itself around my essence, and began to squeeze like some giant anaconda from the depths of hell.

Edwin put his hand on my shoulder. “Ah, ah, ah, we'll have none of that, Morlock.”

The evil was gone with Edwin's touch, and his brother put his hand on my other shoulder. I could feel them protecting me with their own substantial energy.

“I know that name Morlock.”

Edgar motioned to one of the guards, and the soldier turned to tap in a code on a nearby keypad. “He was one of the previous owners of the Necronomicon. You probably came across his name while tracking down Jennings.”

Edwin pulled me back from the path of the vault door as it began to swing open. “He got a little farther than Mr. Jennings did with his incantations. Back in 1983 he managed to transform himself into this. Fortunately we had a little help in pursuing him.”

Edgar turned to me. “By the way, thanks for locating that loathsome piece of literature for us. We've been meaning to do that for a few years now. Always putting out fires you know . . .” I didn't have the heart to tell them you could get it on the Internet for twenty bucks.

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The vault door opened wide to reveal the room's sole inhabitant. The thing on the hill was bad, but this was worse . . . much worse. The guards instinctively brought their submachine guns to bear, but I doubt they could have penetrated the three-foot thick glass wall in front of us. The thing that was Morlock was manacled to a silver chair that was bolted to the floor.

It stared up at the ceiling as though it was screaming to the heavens in defiance. Its body was a corpse. Its pale flesh was sunken into the bones. What little black hair that was left rode the tides of the black energy that streamed out of this foul thing. At first glance it might have appeared to be a mist or smoke issuing for from the cadaver, but further inspection revealed it to be something akin to crackling black electricity. It once wore a suit, but the cloth had mostly burned away to reveal the putrid flesh which clung to the skeletal remains.

We walked into the room or should I say the twins dragged me into the room. My heart caught in my throat. Its hands clenched the arms of its silver throne, and then relaxed. It was still alive! It too must have been telepathic for its head rolled down to stare at me, and I was frozen from the crimson glare that beamed from its eyes.

They were blood lined black wells that no human being should have been subjected to. A red tinged purplish dark light spilled out of those orbs, and Morlock squinted as if to get a better look at me. It smiled, and I thought I was going to pass out. The energy on the other side of those feet thick walls began to churn in earnest, and the bits of cloth from his ruined clothes began to fly about the room.

Edgar frowned. "That's enough. Let's go."

The twins almost had to carry me out of the room. I don't remember much of the walk back to their office. They seated me in front of a nasty old green metal desk and let me recover. Edgar got me a glass of water, and sat on one corner of the desk.

Edwin sat down on the other side of the desk, and smiled once he was sure I was coherent. "And that is why Adam, we must do what we must do. Morlock is the personification of evil. To our knowledge he's the only one of his kind in the world."

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Edgar leaned forward from his perch on the corner of the desk. "We've contacted our counterparts in other countries, and they've happily corroborated this fact."

"Can you imagine if there were more than one of those we had to keep confined?" Edwin asked prophetically.

Edgar frowned. "It may not be readily apparent, but it stretches our resources just to keep this one entity imprisoned."

"Why don't you just destroy it?"

Edwin sighed, "Oh that we could, but we don't know how. We've tried, but old Morlock's like a Weeble he won't fall down."

Edgar brightened. "There's someone working on it, but she needs more time. Maybe now that you've retrieved the Necronomicon for us we can find some way of neutralizing it. Maybe that information is in one of the passages in that tome."

Edwin leaned back into his chair. "You've done us great service already, Adam, but you can do more. It's not a bad gig."

Edgar smiled. "Remember this is a federal position. We offer a competitive salary with outstanding benefits."

Edwin flashed a pearly smile. "And the dental plan is phenomenal."

They finally got to me and I chuckled. I was tired . . . bone tired. I'd seen more in one night than any man should see in dozen life times. The problem was . . . I liked it. I'd been an adrenaline junky for so long, and now I had been exposed to an energy level that paled everything that had gone before. Weary as I was I was hooked, and they knew it.

That night I joined the Shadow walkers and never looked back. That was a little over eight years ago although it's as sharp in my memory as yesterday. Old man time kicked me in the head a few times since then, he and his buddy fate. I'm well past forty now, and not nearly as fast as I used to be, although maybe I'm a little stronger. I've tackled all kinds of monstrosities, and the myriad forces of darkness have done their best to send me to an early grave, but I've always managed to survive.



**A**s I kneel here catching my breath and reviewing my life I'm shocked by the synchronicity of it all. In the end I believe all the moments of my

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existence have just been training for this one moment. I've traveled the circular road of fate, and it's brought me back here to where it all began. Back to a prison in the middle of the desert that no one's supposed to know about. Back to a vault that houses a thing that scares me to death. Corpses litter the grounds about me and death whispers for me to come on inside. I'm about to face what is probably the most powerful force on earth, and all I can hear are the echoes of my own words . . . I have no powers.

The heavy double steel doors that used to secure the front entrance lie on the ground. The creature inside has blasted them out. A black light spills out of that doorway. It pulses with the rhythm of a beating heart. Every now and then I see a shadow cut across the source of the light.

There's more than just one monstrosity in there. Of course it's the big bad that I'm most worried about for I know that the horrible truth is that someone has let Morlock out.



**A**t first blush the case the twins assigned me to didn't seem like it was going to be all that different than any of the others they usually gave me. There was a psycho loose in Scottsdale Arizona that had a taste for beautiful women and torture. The papers had dubbed him "The Herald" because the victims were all found with the words, "He is coming" carved into their bodies.

Knowing my penchant for serial killers the twins felt I was the most appropriate Shadow-walker for the job. They also informed that I had been requested by some beautiful, mysterious woman at one of our sister organizations, to take this case. Evidently she had powers. A premonition inspired her to call us, and suggest that I had special talents that would be required. I pressed them on who this mystery woman was but all I got was infuriating, knowing smiles. I figured they were just bullshitting me as usual. They had made it a habit of busting my ass over the years.

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They warned me before I got on my flight at Dulles in DC, that there was a disturbance in the psychic rhythm of the world. They didn't expect that it had anything to do with my mission, but they warned me that they would be unavailable to assist me if I required such. Evidently they were spending their waking hours trying to track down this disturbance, and I eventually came to find out that they'd had no sleeping hours because of said disturbance. Whatever it was was attacking their dreamtime with horrific nightmares. They looked like shit.

I guess every one of the Shadow-walkers was busy with one terror or another. Usually we had at least one partner to back us up, but we were short staffed due to several recent battles gone bad, and I was on my own. My flight to Scottsdale was uneventful, and as I drove my rental car to the resort where I was booked for my stay I was struck by the normality around me. If they only knew . . .

Scottsdale was well lit at night which made patrolling the streets in my rental car a little easier, Batman in a Taurus. How cool is that? The police were out in force, but the few times they did spot me they had me pegged as a tourist and left me alone. I'd mapped out the location of each of the six murders, and it was pretty obvious to me that the sick son-of-a-bitch was tracing out a pentagram. If that were the case he was only halfway there.

I was only there three days when I had a nightmare too. Something whispered to me out of the desert. It spun fine words like a spider spins silk. I rose against the restraints of my slumber which dragged on me like leaden weights, and I strolled out of my ground floor apartment to face the desert night. The stars were like red drops of blood against an ink black sky. A long low hiss issued out from the desert to accompany words in a tongue that I had heard many years before. It was the language Alex Jennings had spoken before he invoked the beast.

I stumbled into the desert dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts to meet that silky voice. My feet bled from the thorns of the cacti that populated the hardscrabble ground, but I didn't notice. Even though I was entranced fear danced along the length of my spine, and caused the hairs there to stand on end. I marched on into the cool night air until I came upon two disembodied eyes that floated just above the desert

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floor. They squinted with mirth just as twelve inches of steel slashed across my bare stomach eviscerating me.

I bounced out of bed with a .44 automatic in each hand. I had taken to sleeping with them long ago. The Shadow-walkers had taught me that guns *can* be your friend. They don't always kill the kinds of enemies we go up against, but they usually slow them down.

I wiped the fear-induced sweat off my forehead, and threw the weapons on to the bed. I probably should have grabbed the sword first, but hell I was asleep. I'm lucky I didn't come up with a pillow in each hand. I looked down at the weapons on my bed, and sighed. Talk about your strange bedfellows. I was in a city filled with beautiful woman, and here I was sleeping with a sword and two Israeli made firearms. I really needed a vacation.

The next morning I got a call from Dexter Harrowman. Dex and I often partnered up in the field. We got along especially well since neither of us had any powers. Dex, however, was undoubtedly one of the best shots in the world. His mastery of the firearm bordered on a power, and he had taught me how to love the gun. Under his tutelage I had become a pretty fine shot myself.

"I've got some bad news Adam."

I sighed. I hadn't gotten much sleep, and bad news wasn't exactly what I had in mind for breakfast. "What's happened now?"

"We found the twins in a coma. They were piled on top of each other bleeding from the nose and ears. We've been unable to pull them out."

I was stunned to silence. Yeah, we traded barbs like stamps and banged heads on more than one occasion, but the twins were still my friends. I'd have given my life up for those two clowns in a heartbeat and to hear that they were . . .

"Adam you still there?"

"Yeah, Dex. Sorry. I'm just a little . . ."

"We all are. There's something you should know."

"What's that?"

"When Barb found them they were semi-conscious before going into a full blown coma. Before Edgar totally faded he told her to tell you that there's another."



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To say I was perplexed was an understatement. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Was he quoting Star Wars or was there more?”

“That's all she had. Sorry bud, I've got to go. Keep your head up and one down the tube. My gut tells me there's some serious shit on the horizon.”

“Yeah, will do. You watch your ass too.”

I felt pretty useless being a couple of thousand miles away from the twins. Not that there was much I could do, but maybe my presence could have added something. I figured the quicker I apprehended . . . terminated . . . whatever . . . *The Herald* the sooner I could get back to the twins.

I knew he was going to strike again tonight. It was the first day of the full moon. The crazy's just love the full moon. Of course then again so did I since it meant we're all working against the same schedule. The question was where would he strike? I was sure he was mapping out a pentagram. You need ten points to plot out the symbol, and so far he had marked each point of the star and its center base point. If he was following any kind of order his next pick would probably be one of the lower intersections. Since the police's forensics team had him made as a righty I decided to go with the bottom right point.

I pushed a pin into the map I'd taped on the bedroom wall. It gave me a location that was about one block big. It was lot of area to cover, but not unreasonable. I had an edge in that the twins had taught me how to use my native instincts to track down the bad guys. They called it proto-psychic ability, and claimed that all normal humans had it. I called it the willies, and it turned out to be a great locator. The only drawback was it also made you want to pee in your pants the entire time you were experiencing it.

I drove to the outskirts of Scottsdale, and watched the sun sink behind the mountains. Red fire burned on the horizon illuminating the hills in silhouette. It seems to me there should have been a portentous squall or something, but it was quiet... the calm before the storm. I had my arsenal in the trunk of the Taurus, and I was resolved not to fool around with this guy. Boom, boom, out go the lights . . .

About an hour after dusk I headed out to the suburb where I knew the killer would be stalking his prey. I drove around for a couple of

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hours, and was getting nothing. I began to doubt my pentagram theory when the willies went off like an army of fire ants down my spine.

I looked in my rearview mirror, and watched a flame haired redhead walk in the other direction. She was a Goth. Black leather attire bordering on being fetish wear wrapped her entire body. She looked back at me, and smiled as though she knew I was watching. I slammed on the brakes, and got out of the car. She continued to walk away from me seemingly uncaring about what I did.

She was definitely the source of my willies, but I wasn't sure if it was because she was a player or just scary looking. That whole Goth thing always did creep me out. I did a slow turn back to my car and for the first time I noticed the small house I was parked in front of. It was your typical middle-class Scottsdale ranch with white sand, and manicured cacti for a lawn. It was painted white with a classic red ceramic tile rooftop. Its major difference from that of its neighbors was the front door was wide open.

I strolled up the gravel path, and drew one of my .44's. Each crunchy step brought me closer to what I knew was going to be a nightmare. I only had to put one foot in the doorway before I found blood. It was a red soaked shoe print. A big blocky sole with a spiked heel print, exactly what Goth girl was wearing.

I took a few steps inside which led directly to the living room . . . now the dying room. They were a young couple in their early thirties. She'd tied them together on two fold-up chairs with bare copper wire and duct tape. I stopped crying for the victims long ago, but that didn't mean my heart didn't get ripped out every time I stumbled onto a scene like this. They were just two regular people going about their lives, and this bitch had turned them into ritual offering to some foul terror. Thank God there were no children in the house.

I spun and sprinted out of the room back to my Taurus. By the time I reached the curb Goth girl was speeding by. There are those moments in your life were time stops. Speed is reduced to a pace were observation becomes possible, and you're dumbfounded by the course of events that are spinning out of control. This wasn't one of those times. The bitch roared by in a late model Z28 like a bat of hell, and was

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probably headed straight back to that pit. I jumped in my Taurus and gave chase.

I could tell right off the bat, as we headed deep into the desert south of Scottsdale, that she wanted me to follow her. She knew her vehicle was a whole hell of a lot faster than mine was, but she kept to a pace where she was always in sight. Fine, I'd play her game.

We raced into the countryside for about an hour and a half until she cut over onto a dirt side road. We followed this for about ten minutes until we came upon some sort of compound of single story cement buildings. My willies powered up to willies squared as I recognized this place ... Morlock's prison.

I slammed on the brakes and fish tailed to a stop behind the now empty Z28. Something in the back of my brain was screaming this truly was the end of the road. I have no powers. Morlock had a shitload, and my gut was telling me Goth bitch was no slouch either. I sighed, and went to the trunk of my Taurus. I strapped on my combat vest, holstered .44 Desert Eagle automags, short length silver-plated Katana and other associated combat gear. The twelve gauge I carried at the ready. I have no powers, but I do know how to kick ass.

I slammed the trunk closed, and the hairs on the back of my neck started doing somersaults. Just out of the range of my vision I could hear the sound of slowly shuffling feet... the kind of shuffling meant for the dead not dancing. I made for the front entrance of the main building. Its steel doors were blasted out, and lying on the ground. The few mercury lights that still burned played out on the source of the shuffling. Half a dozen of the near dead stumbled out of that portal. I froze.

All around me the near dead emerged out of the gloom carrying sticks, scissors, razors, crowbars or whatever else they could use to mess me up. They were the dregs of humanity, the homeless, junkies, petty thieves and sundry other castaways of modern society. Not one of them retained their humanity for it had been stripped from them by Morlock's profound evil. This was evident in their wide unblinking eyes which burned with the hate of the demon possessed. I know . . . I've killed a few in my day.

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Goth bitch stepped out of the prison behind the phalanx of zombies and laughed at me. “What’s the matter Adam? Don’ you like our friends?”

They began to moan as they shuffled forward in anticipation of the night’s meal . . . me.

“Not at all sweat heart. I could use a little warm up before I go in there and chop up you and Morlock.”

She started to laugh until I blasted the heads off seven of her zombie friends. Their headless corpses fell to the ground slowing up the near dead behind them. I whipped out the .44's and placed a neat little hole in the forehead of 16 of Goth Bitches friends. Their brains exited out the back of their head. It has been my experience over the years that no matter what evil throws at you, if you take out the brains or take off the head, your assailant usually goes down.

Goth bitch frowned. I'd taken out her entire first line of attack, and this had obviously pissed her off. She gesticulated out with both hands, and it felt like my chest was slammed by a Mack truck. I flew twenty feet back onto the hood of my car and crushed the windshield as I slammed into it. My head spider webbed the glass behind me, and I almost went out. I saw a shadow flit by, and I heard Goth bitch scream something vulgar. There were sounds of violence, but I couldn't lift my head enough to see what was going on.

Eventually I slid off the hood of the Taurus onto my hands and knees. The force of her blow had sent my firearms' flying to God knows where. I reached back, and drew my blade to prepare for the worst kind of hand to hand combat. I was surprised the zombiekin weren't on me all ready, and when I rose to my knees I discovered why they weren't.

Something had sliced up every one of the remaining near dead. Body parts littered the ground. Nothing moved. Goth bitch was gone. What had done this? Another one of Morlock's pets gone crazy? As if to answer me the cry of some man-beast screamed like a rabid cougar from somewhere in the prison. Man-beasts . . . ducky . . .



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I'm kneeling here among the corpses wasting minutes. I've caught my breath and now it's time to finish what was started all those long years ago. I rise and survey the carnage one last time. I make my way to the main entrance that's been ripped open . . . a gaping wound into the bare heart of evil.

I step through. All my senses feel as if they are on overload. Florescent lights flicker overhead, their power source disrupted by far greater energies. I see a black, bug like helmet laced with electronics lying near the door. The remains of some poor bastard's head are still in that helmet. Blood inked graffiti paints the walls in the script of the evil dead. Long forgotten passages from the Necronomicon decorate the walls around me.

I stroll inside with my blade at the ready. My footsteps echo off the empty corridor walls. Each step plays counterpoint to the beating of my heart. From somewhere nearby I hear the scream of the man-beast, and I raise my sword a little higher. I stop at the intersection to another corridor. The rest of the prison guard is strewn about . . . in pieces.

I slice up and out as it comes out of the shadows, and slams into me. It must be over six and a half feet tall and two hundred and fifty pounds. We go over backwards as it tries to rake me with its claws. I roll over backwards with the beastie, and come up on its stomach. It arches forward, and in one swing I take its claws and head off. I stand. It twitches. First blood is mine.

I turn and continue to where I know Morlock lives. He can feel me coming. I can feel him all about me. It's like smog for the soul. His spiritual pollution invades every pore of my skin, and I know I'll be bathing for a week . . . if I survive.

I turn another corridor with sword at the ready. I am perplexed. The hall before me is strewn with the dead, but it's obviously Morlock's creatures that lie prone and in pieces. This isn't making any sense. Where's Goth-bitch? Why isn't Morlock sending his best and brightest after me? I shrug and continue.

I make my way to Morlock's lair without issue. I wonder why he never left this place. Had he been here so long that he considered this home? Had he planned for this to be the center of his corruption as he

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sent his evil out into the world? There I go again. Why ask why. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and continue on.



I rounded the intersection to where I knew Morlock would be waiting and then I froze. The light was crazy. The overhead florescent lights were barely functioning, and were acting more like strobe lights. A stream of amorphous blue light poured out of the room where Morlock used to be imprisoned. The vault door that had once kept him contained was wide open, and hanging by one hinge. It was from behind the three-foot thick glass and the center of Morlock's chair where all this light was coming from. I couldn't see the monster in all of that glare.

In front of me, something that appeared to be a woman and dressed in a white tunic was hunched over the prone form of Goth-bitch. Whoever it was had her back to me. I could only see Goth-bitch's outstretched hand. It twitched once, and was still. Blood pooled at the feet of the woman dressed in white. She stood, and for the first time I saw the two-foot long silver blades in each hand. When she turned I could see the front of her white tunic was covered in blood. I guess I had it wrong. It must have been a woman-beast.

Because the light was so bad I couldn't make out the face behind the shoulder length black hair. Her eyes burned an otherworldly blue. Morlock screamed in rage from behind her, but to my surprise there was no attack. I raised my sword and slide stepped forward ready to engage Morlock's pet.

It was my guess that Goth-bitch wasn't making her performance objectives, and Morlock replaced her with the lady in white. I wasn't sure what his game was, but whoever this new pet was had to be the baddest monster in the house. This was evidenced by all the monster bits that were strewn about Morlock's little shop of horrors. I moved closer, but she only watched.

I steeled myself for the attack, but before I could move she ripped the heart out of my chest.

“Hello Adam.”

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She took a step forward into the light, and a smile that I once lived for lacerated my soul. Angelique looked as beautiful as the day she had died.

I stumbled backwards unable to speak. Confusion clouded me and left me numb to action. I was the proverbial lamb ripe for slaughter.

I managed to form the word, "How?"

"I can never say enough words to apologize Adam. I never meant to hurt you."

"What are you talking about? What are you?"

She looked a little hurt by my last query, "Once long ago you asked me a question which I didn't answer. Now I will. Seraphim."

My confusion was evident, but then the light of realization began to beat back the confusion. "You're an angel?"

"Now . . . When we met I was as human as you. An agent of the light had approached me many years earlier. They recruited me to join them. My two weeks with you were to be my last on earth. They allowed me this time to live my humanity to the fullest. They allowed me the ultimate love so that I would always know what I fought for. You have been my inspiration all these years Adam."

"That's why I never saw your body."

"I was taken up into the ranks of the seraphim, and trained to be a guardian angel. Our paths have crossed before Adam, but I've always kept to the shadows."

"You told the twins to assign me to this mission!"

She smiled again and took a step forward. "I wanted to see you one last time."

I was shaking I was so upset. The source of all my despair was a lie, and essentially I had been used. "You tore my heart out! You took the express train to heaven, and left me to rot here on earth. Do you know what I've been through! That thing came from hell. I've been living in hell!"

The profundity of her sadness was evident in her fading smile. "I know Adam. I never meant to hurt you like that. In doing so I hurt myself just as badly. Do you know how hard it has been to see you from the shadows, and not be able to embrace you? My love for you was real, as real and as strong as yours. You have to believe this."

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Morlock screamed, and I jumped. Angelique's smile was replaced with a frown. She turned and gestured into the lair of the beast. Lightning sprang from her fingertips, and snapped into the room. Morlock screamed again.

“Silenzio, Verme!” she said with venom.

Angelique turned back to me. “It is contained for the moment. It is the reason I was recruited. Morlock's coming was foretold, and the pantheon of light needed someone to contain him, and eventually send him back to hell.”

“Why you! Why did they have to take you!”

She shrugged. “It's like anything else, Adam. Their resources are not infinite. They suffer losses too. Morlock was originally human, and they needed to create an opposite force from a human source. My families history ordained me to be the prime candidate.”

I went limp, barely able to stand. “You should have told me.”

She smiled again. “Would you have believed me?”

Of course she was right. At the time I would have thought she was insane. It wouldn't have mattered to me since I would have loved her even if she was a raving lunatic. I still loved her.

“So you became an angel. How come tall dark and crusty is still crackling in the back room?”

She frowned with the memories of battles past. “Almost eight years ago I helped the twins capture this vile thing. My training was not complete and my powers weak, but Morlock was on the move, and we had no choice but to act. I was badly hurt and drained. It has taken me this long to fully recover.”

I silently rolled her words over in my head. This entire conversation was leading to a conclusion I knew I wasn't going to like. “Your leaving for good aren't you? You finally come back to me and you are leaving for good.”

She moved closer, and took my hands in hers. I dropped the sword at the warmth of her touch. Any semblance of machismo left me, and I just wanted to pull her to me and cry on her shoulder . . . but I held fast.

“I finally have the powers to send this creature back to the hell from where he came. Once that is done I must go into the light. I am needed elsewhere.”



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The sadness was evident in her words and expression. I could tell she didn't want to leave, but I knew she would.

“How am I going to survive having seen you again, Angelique? I sewed up the wound long ago, but you've reopened it. My heart is bleeding and when it's done there's not going to be anything left.”

She pulled me closer until I could feel her breath on my lips. “I am an Angel, Adam. Healing is one of our talents.”

She kissed me, and for an eternity I disappeared. Time stopped, and our embrace was the only thing that existed in the universe. She flowed into me like silk through a steel ring. Where once stood two there was only one and for the first time in my life I felt one true moment of perfection.

When we parted my pain was gone. I didn't think that was possible. I didn't think that I could exist a moment without her, but she had filled me with a strength that came from the very foundation of heaven. We rested our foreheads on each other, and soaked in our mutual warmth for a moment. For the first time that night I mirrored her smile.

Eventually we parted, and she took a step back. “Now you know the truth of things, Adam. I will keep you in my heart always. Time is forever. We will be together again, my brave Shadow-walker, I am sure of it.”

She gave me one last smile, and then turned to Morlock. He screamed in rage, knowing that he was about to be sent back to the void. Angelique broke into a run, and slammed through the barrier that contained Morlock like it was sugar glass. There were more screams, and then a blinding flash of white light and then . . . silence.

I could not help but be a little sad. She was right. Now that I did know the truth our separation felt more temporary than fatalistic. In the grand scheme of things simply knowing that she was out there sustained me. I picked up my sword and left.

I returned to DC the next day, and as I expected the twins had come out of their coma. Morlock had been the source of the disturbance. We had a lot to talk about. They filled me in on everything they knew about Angelique, and about those years when she worked from the shadows. All that time I had a true guardian angel and didn't even know it.

# DARK TREASURES

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When Angelique kissed me that last time she slipped something inside of me. She didn't just heal me. I felt something course from her spirit into mine to imbue me with new energy. It was her parting gift to me, and the most precious gift any man could ask for. I have a power now . . . just one. I think its source is called love.

**THE END**



**FROM A.A. ROBERTS**

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# DARK TREASURES

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**BY FRIDA WESTFORD**

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It was the last day of October. The full moon rode just above the treetops, already white in the sky. Shadows cast by the spokes of his bicycle wheel stretched weblike across the walk. A jack-o'-lantern winked and grinned from a fraternity house porch across the street. Warren Frost shivered. The moon reminded him of his student Karen Brazauskas's pale, round face.

"You can't get away with this!" She had slammed *The Journal of Northern European Folklore* on the table after class. "Those quotes came from my grandmother. My name should be on the article as co-author." Her face was red, making her blue eyes seem even paler than usual.

"Ms. Brazauskas," Frost had been coldly polite, "you don't have a monopoly on Lithuanian folklore, neither does your dear, departed grandmother. I simply went to your cited sources and made scholarly use of them." He had walked out without further discussion. She had shouted something at him as he turned away.

A cold wind blew leaves into his face as he retrieved his bicycle and set off for home. He coasted downhill for a block on River Avenue. He

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warmed up after he crossed Seventh Street as he went up the long hill going south to Third.

Of course he'd mined that new material from Karen's paper for his class in literature and folklore three semesters before. The resulting article, just published, was his most important since his dissertation. Brazauskas had figured it out, but she had to take his seminar this fall in order to graduate, just as he'd had to continue with Professor Carstairs.

Frost knew from experience how shabbily he was treating his student, but that was the reality of the academic world: The big fish ate the small. Still, he had to admit he liked that kind of power, the same as he enjoyed being able to pedal uphill fast on his new bike.

He shivered again and his teeth chattered in the wind of his descent from the hill's crest. Frost shifted into high and continued to pedal until he had to slow down and stop for the light at the busy intersection of River and Third. Once across, he turned left and then right, continuing south on darker, quieter streets.

Big trees lined these streets, adding to the darkness, though they were now nearly leafless. His tires crunched on the leaves in the road. Bare maples cast skeletal shadows across his path.

Frost considered Brazauskas's seminar paper with its section on the appearance of the dead, and demons, at the old Lithuanian New Year, which was the end of October. She had found some more interesting stuff. He smiled. He was already working on a second article to send off. Publication of these articles would get him on track for tenure.

He noticed how his shadow moved up from behind to overtake him after he passed a street light, to fall behind again as he approached the next light. A few weeks ago the effect had been less dramatic; tonight there was no twilight left at 8:30 to attenuate it. The full moon would cast shadows but for the lights of the small city. It was a shame about the light pollution; he liked the night sky.

He ducked as the limb of the apple tree that stuck out into his path on Wright Street at the corner of Ames scraped his helmet. Funny, it hadn't been so low last week, and by now it had dropped most of its fruit.

He caught a glimpse of the impassive moon to his left and thought again of Karen's face as she confronted him. Whatever she had yelled at

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him must have been in Lithuanian; she'd probably learned to cuss in it from her granny. Off to his right a dog howled.

He was climbing another hill when he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He twitched involuntarily. Probably it was a hunting cat. It was so black he couldn't tell its shape on this dark stretch of newly paved side street.

He slowed down a little. He had forgotten to put the light on his bicycle this morning and he didn't want to hit something in the road and wipe out. At least he had a white helmet and he had front, rear and side reflectors. Drivers should be able to see him.

But there was no traffic, unusual even on this quiet street. He could hear insects, perhaps some late crickets. He swerved to avoid a fallen branch, invisible until he was almost upon it. The familiar street seemed odd tonight. It must be the glow-in-the-dark ghosts and skeletons and the orange lights some homeowners displayed. This was Halloween night. Some adults would be partying, though it was Wednesday; the kids had done their trick-or-treating last Saturday.

This cute, tame stuff was a comedown from the original meaning of the Eve of All Hallows, the Day of the Dead and the older Celtic festival of Samhain. Some of his students had probably headed for the woods to do something more "traditional." That neo-pagan silliness was "fake-lore" too. Still, he enjoyed the scent of wood smoke drifting from the chimneys and the earthy smell of fallen leaves.

Another dog howled off to the left and was answered by a neighboring mutt. The two voices swelled to a chorus as all the dogs on the street seemed to go crazy. They stopped after he passed. Then everything went dead still. No late insects chirped now, not a car horn or a voice could be heard. The wind had momentarily subsided to a whisper. The quiet felt creepy.

Frost shrugged mentally and pedaled faster. He turned left onto Carmine. The usually well-lit street was in total darkness. Another power outage. They were all too frequent. He slowed as his eyes fought to adjust. That didn't take long in the full moonlight. The moon did cast shadows now and they were not like those cast by street lights. They were softer, yet darker, their boundaries less clear. And he saw that the

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shadows in the road moved. Of course they did; the wind had picked up and was tossing the branches of the trees that cast them.

His mind told him everything was ok, but his stomach was churning and his hands clenched on the handlebars as he made the right turn onto Shirley. The few street lights here were dark as well. His knees pumped and his feet kicked at the pedals. He almost fell off his bike as he came suddenly upon a trio of white heads with blood-red hair swinging in front of a pale frame house on a corner. His heart was pumping as fast as his legs. You have to get hold of yourself, Warren! Those are just hanging plants.

He instinctively turned left onto a narrow street taking him east. He reached the normally busy High Street to find it, too, was dark and empty. He was facing the old settler cemetery, so quaint by daylight. Its tall, gaunt trees cast shadows like fingers pointing at him. He wanted to ride around them but they extended across the street. The shadows seemed to deepen as the rising moon cast ever more light. He struggled to calm himself. This was stupid and, if he panicked, he might have an accident. The last and darkest bar of shadow was before him. Then the bicycle was stopped dead by something invisible in the blackness and Frost was thrown flying over the handlebars.

He lay on the roadside, his hand at his crotch. The pain from hitting the bike frame drove all thought away for a moment. Then he took stock. The helmet had saved him from a head injury, thank God! He rose to his feet. He could walk. He stumbled to his bicycle and picked it up out of a fallen tree limb. The front wheel was bent. Groaning, Frost began to walk the machine in the general direction of home keeping as far over to the side of the road as he could.

The only sound was the wind, which, eerie before, had become oppressive. He fervently wished a car would come along and give him a ride. Was it just the wind he heard, or was it more dogs? He was cold, hurt and anxious. No, he was scared. His guts were in knots. Despite the pain he tried to move faster. He felt an overwhelming urge to run, but he wouldn't abandon his bicycle.

Dark things seemed to skitter along beside him. More shadows moved in his peripheral vision, disappearing when he tried to look at them. He heard rustling. Dogs started howling. They sounded scared.

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Frost almost sympathized. If he had a cell phone, he'd call somebody to come and get him, as embarrassing as that might be.

Suddenly a howl came from close by. Something hit him from the side, something big, and knocked him down. A black dog crouched over him, its hot stinking breath in his face. He hit at it and yelled "No! Bad dog!" The thing stood up growling; its fangs gleamed. Its eyes mirrored the moonlight and it slavered. Frost got up and backed away still facing the animal. It followed slowly, its menace silent now. He groped around for a stick to beat the dog off with, but found nothing.

Finally Frost could bear it no more and, dropping the bicycle, he turned and began to run. He ran flat out for several blocks. He was sure that the dog was following noiselessly, though it was invisible in the shadows when he turned to look for it. And those shadows were not all moving as the tree branches moved. Some of them, smaller and blacker, seemed to move on their own. The shadows that were cast by the tree limbs seemed like the bars of a cage. He saw the moon and some cold stars through the branches, more bars. *I can't get out*, he thought, knowing it was illogical. These were only shadows. He wasn't a superstitious peasant who thought they hid things that could kill. He was sick at his stomach.

He ran slower now, panting. God, he wished a car would come by. If he stopped to catch his breath, would the dog attack him? How many blocks to his house?

The pitch of the wind grew higher. He rounded a corner. This had to be Hill Street. He was almost home. But nothing looked right. The shadows weren't the familiar ones of trees and walls. They were looming, hovering things. As he tried to avoid them, they seemed to move into his path. They made a barrier that forced him back as he tried to get into his lane. He summoned the last of his strength and kept running up the empty street. Then there was nothing but a massive wall of shadow, black, with a blacker shadow in its midst. He thought he heard a dog's running feet on the pavement behind him. Then, as he entered the black wall, he saw pale eyes, and felt death-cold hands close on his throat.



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The Friday issue of the student newspaper carried a story of how Professor Frost's damaged bicycle had been found, but he had not been heard from. An investigation was ongoing.

THE END



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**BY STEVE LAZAROWITZ**

*Steve Lazarowitz is an animal lover, a stepfather, an origami enthusiast, a hiker, a lover, a husband, a movie buff, a game-player, an amateur entomologist and a writer though not often all at the same time. He currently lives in Tasmania with his wife, two stepsons, an insane dog and a giant spiny leaf insect. More info can be found at his web site at: <http://www.dream-sequence.net/>.*

Captain Marcus Talin had to check the readings twice before he could accept them. He had traveled the length and breadth of human space, searching for survivors of Operation Exodus. The closest he'd come thus far was a thousand frozen corpses, the result of faulty circuitry in the hyper-sleep units. How many times could he look death in the face and stay sane?

Marcus was well aware of the reason the University had chosen him instead of dealing with a larger outfit. His ship, Soulshadow, was the largest, fastest single-man vessel in human space. He also had a sterling reputation and no attachments to keep him planet bound. It was a pity none of that offered him protection from loneliness. If the money weren't so good he'd have packed it in long ago.

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He rescanned the planet once again. There was no error. There were humans down there. Now, finally accepting his turn of luck, he grew excited.

What would they be like? Would there be any ill effects from such long term hyper-sleep? What could they tell us about life in the twenty-first century? Marcus was keenly aware of the possibilities represented by the treasure chest of knowledge he was about to open. Quite a bit of Earth's history had been destroyed by the war, prior to the formation of the unified Earth government. He instructed the computer to commence landing procedures. He was finally going to earn his salary.

He landed Soulshadow in a meadow, not unlike those once more found on Earth. He tested the air before disembarking. The atmosphere seemed to fall within his sphere of tolerance. He didn't bother with a pressure suit. The various dangers of airborne diseases, and unknown and therefore undetectable particles, barely entered his thinking. Months of tedium made him reckless.

Taking his direction from Soulshadow's scans, he moved northward. As he walked, he reviewed what he knew about Ambrose Colony.

If his information was accurate, the colony and the ship were named after the sponsor. It carried a hundred people and would have reached this world about twenty years ago. The ship was of Eurocan origin and carried a mixed crew. As one of the first ships of Project Exodus to depart the Earth, the odds were astronomically against success, yet the crew was composed entirely of volunteers. Marcus couldn't understand how even a single person had signed on for such a mission.

The greater irony, of course, would be entirely lost on the crew as they were already fifteen years into their voyage before FTL travel was finally discovered. The initial years of FTL travel were sufficiently politically unstable to prevent even a single rescue attempt. After the war, the odds of survival were considered so low it was deemed a waste of resources. Only an organization with excess funds could afford to take such a long shot. Yet if he did manage to locate survivors, the discovery would be worth far more than the initial investment.

The passenger manifest listed seventy women and thirty men, the standard ratio. If you were going to colonize a planet, you needed numbers and females could provide them faster, especially if you packed

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a good fertility drug. A quick calculation told him there might be as many as five hundred colonists.

Even before he reached the settlement, he knew what the prefab houses would look like. The University possessed quite an extensive historical library and Marcus had spent several weeks in it, preparing. He even studied Eurocan and was confident he could make himself understood in the language.

Sure enough, after a short stroll, the first house appeared in the distance. It was a simple plastic box . . . gray, square and totally devoid of artistic sense. As he approached, he noticed several men and women about, all naked. There had been nothing about nudity in the records.

Several of them looked his way, but none made a move to investigate. As he was dressed and clearly not one of them, he found it odd that they expressed no interest. The closest was a tall man with a head full of gray hair that hadn't been combed in perhaps a decade. He possessed all of the attributes common to humanity, yet there was something off about him. Marcus watched for a time, unable to figure out what was bothering him. Finally he gave up and approached. It was time to put his Eurocan to the test.

"Excuse me."

"What can I do for you?" The man might have been talking to a neighbor. Marcus didn't need his intuition to tell him something was wrong.

"I'm looking for the Ambrose Colony."

The man's lips curved into a parody of a smile. "Ambrose Colony, eh?"

Marcus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. The man held out his hand. "The name's Eric."

He took it cautiously, wondering why his presence had been so readily accepted.

"I'm Marcus Talin. I've been hired to investigate certain aspects of the trip. You were on the ship, I take it?"

"The ship? What ship?"

"The one that brought you here. The Ambrose."

The man chuckled, but again, the humor did not seem to reach his eyes. "Son, I've lived all my life in these parts."

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Several others had approached and were watching the conversation. Only then did Marcus realize what was bothering him. Their eyes were empty. A town of people without souls. He shuddered, first thinking it was his imagination, then considering the possibility he was seeing the effects of extended hyper-sleep. He tried again.

“Who’s in charge here?”

“Why would someone be in charge?”

While Marcus considered how to rephrase the question, the man turned and walked away.



Marcus' first day in the village was more of the same. Of the colonists he'd questioned, not one recalled The Ambrose. Over the next three days, several other anomalies became apparent.

The population of Ambrose Colony, according to both his census and the ship's scan was approximately a hundred and fifty. Only after the census was complete, when he was looking for a reason for lower than expected numbers, did he notice there seemed to be no bonding between the sexes. In fact, he was unable to discern interaction of any kind. There were no friendships, no fights and even idle chatter seemed absent.

That series of observations sparked another. There were no children. Everyone in town seemed to be about the same age, which was impossible. There were only a hundred people on Ambrose. Fifty or so colonists had to be younger.

He tried interrogating several, but learned nothing new. It was as if each of them remembered waking up on this world, but nothing before. More and more he began to believe he was seeing the effects of the voyage. Perhaps memory could not be retained over such long periods of sleep.

Until then, he'd avoided the women, uncomfortable with their nudity. Yet if he were going to ask about childbearing, he would have addressed a female. The decision made, he walked to the closest, a brunette with a shapely form. Under other circumstances he might have found her

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attractive, but even after spending many lonely months, a single glance at her eyes put him off.

“I notice there are no children here.”

She stared at him blankly. “Children?”

“You know, offspring? Babies?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Where were you born?”

“What is born?”

He stared back at her, but knew it was hopeless. For whatever reason, she didn't remember. There were no answers here.

The historians would be disappointed. Of course, the opportunity to study a group of subjects who had been asleep for so long would be worth something, but the hopes of the University brass had been higher. Which was one of the reasons he waited to transmit his report. Perhaps another day or two would yield something that would justify their investment.

As he took to watching them, he became more and more confused. They did nothing but exist. He hadn't even witnessed anyone eating, though that was impossible. They had to take in nourishment somehow. As each day passed, his frustration increased. He had never been able to leave a mystery unsolved.

After he'd been there a week, he noticed two women he'd not seen before. Just to make certain, he rechecked the recordings he'd made. When he verified they were indeed new to the settlement, he retook the census. He was stunned to find there were fifteen less people than had been present when he first arrived. And that didn't take into account the two new women.

Something was seriously amiss.

He began watching the perimeter of the settlement, hoping to catch one of them leaving. The next day two new colonists arrived, this time a man and a woman. The following morning, he noticed a figure emerge from one of the plastic dwellings and head for the woods. Quietly as he could, he followed.

The woods were unlike any he'd ever seen. The trees were tall posts with tapered tops, completely barren of leaves. Only the texture of their bark assured him they were a natural occurrence. After walking for more

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than an hour, they reached a crevice in the side of a hill. The man disappeared inside. Marcus' heart beat faster. He felt he was approaching an answer.

He stopped only to remove the porta-light from his belt before continuing. If this new circumstance yielded nothing, he would make for Soulshadow and transmit his report.

The cave was a single giant chamber, most of it lost to darkness. He entered slowly, allowing time for his eyes to adjust. He turned on the light and pointed it in every direction, trying to get a feel for the place.

The first thing he noticed were several large objects hanging from the ceiling, looking almost like rolled leaves. He thought it odd they should grow in the caves, instead of on trees where they belonged. Then again, extraterrestrial biology was often unpredictable. He stared upwards for a few moments longer, then dropped the light to scan the cavern floor.

Several feet away, squatting, was the colonist he'd followed, lines of strain etched on that previously expressionless face. It wasn't immediately clear what he was trying to do. Then he began to defecate, though what emerged from the man's cavity looked nothing like excrement. The substance was milky and viscous. After a few seconds, a pool of it began to form on the ground. Within the liquid, dozens of small grayish spheres floated.

He stared at the spectacle, fascinated in spite of his disgust.

When finished, the man rose and moved further from the entrance. Marcus knew he should have fled, but curiosity drove him to follow.

The porta-light dimmed, then brightened. Marcus cursed. He should have checked the charge before leaving the ship. A few steps later, it happened again. Darkness crowded in. More cautiously, he continued his advance, estimating he had an hour or so before the light faded altogether.

More than enough time.

In the back of the chamber, several creatures ranging in size from two to five feet moved slowly along the walls and floor. In the dimness they looked gray, though he thought he could also detect a hint of green. Their elongated bodies moved along on dozens of tiny peg-like feet. Though he couldn't recall seeing such creatures, there was something

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familiar about them. After a moment's thought, he remembered. He turned his light again on the ceiling. The strange hanging objects seemed to reach even this far back. As he watched, one began to vibrate.

He laughed aloud, not surprised to find more than a little hysteria in the sound. While he watched, the object split open and a fully formed adult human emerged and dropped to the ground. The creature landed neatly on its feet and immediately walked toward the entrance. Marcus had no doubt it was going to the settlement. Which could only mean one thing. The colonist he'd followed had been laying eggs.

He turned his attention back to the creatures inching their way across the cavern. They were caterpillars. He'd seen them often enough in science labs when he was younger. What in God's name was going on?

As he stood, trying to come to terms with what he'd discovered, a voice entered his mind.

"You comprehend?"

He looked around, wondering which of them was communicating. "Yes . . . well no," he replied aloud.

He sensed amusement with the next sending.

The humans for which you search died long ago. We had never tasted anything like them. We found human flesh highly addictive. After consuming even a small quantity we experience dreams of unimaginable beauty.

"That's madness," said Marcus, beginning to back toward the exit. "You do not believe? I have no reason to lie. After our experiences with the crew of the Ambrose, we used our great biochemical and genetic skills to analyze and recreate humanity. It took us many tries to get it right. While our replicas are quite good, original humans provide a far more vivid experience. Still, we make do."

"Cannibalism?"

Among our kind, the adult has a single function. To breed. Once eggs are laid, the adult is useless and dies soon after. We recycle their nutrients by ingesting them.

"So one day, each of you will be eaten." He continued his slow retreat, fascinated in spite of his growing fear.

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Not so. I am not my adult form. After pupation, I will remember nothing. I will be a different entity.

He was almost out now. A few more paces and he would be safe. Then, from somewhere outside, a horrible sound ripped through him. At first he couldn't identify it, then he knew. "Ship's engines."

The creature's amusement grew. Quite correct, Captain. Your ship. We did not understand the concept of manufacture and the Ambrose, unfortunately, had been constructed for a one way voyage. You can see our dilemma. We needed more humans, but were unable to leave our world and so were forced to make our own. Not any more, of course. We were able to fit nearly a hundred of us inside Soulshadow's cargo bay.

Marcus Talin felt suddenly sick as he realized what had happened. They had looked into his mind and learned how to pilot his ship. The horrible, psychic, giant caterpillars would soon enter human space.

"And you think humanity will not defend itself. You underestimate us."

On the contrary. Our powers are more than a match for any human. Observe.

He felt his muscles seize. He tried to move, but his limbs did not respond. From the shadows, he could see the creatures converging on him. He tried to scream, but found himself denied even that.

Though he was paralyzed, he could feel the first creature begin to ascend his leg. Pain tore through him as a pair of mandibles closed around the flesh of his thigh. The porta-light fell from his limp fingers. The voice in his mind returned.

Ah, exquisite. I'd forgotten how sweet the taste of human flesh. Far superior to our replicas.

He felt a scream build in his soul, but was unable to bring it to life. In his mind, he could hear them laugh, though he could no longer see them.

There in the darkness, the caterpillars feasted. They took their time devouring him. After all, Marcus Talin would be their last genuine human until Soulshadow found its way home.

THE END



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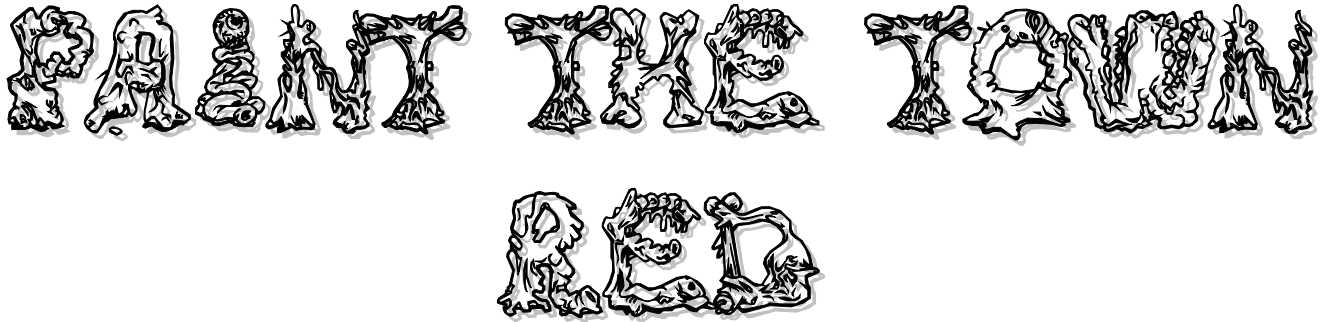


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**BY REBECCA M. SENESE**

*Rebecca M. Senese's work has appeared in ON SPEC, TRANSVERSIONS, THE VAMPIRE'S CRYPT, DEADBOLT and INTO THE DARKNESS as well as in STORYTELLER and SCAVENGERS NEWSLETTER. She holds a Creative Writing Certificate from George Brown College. Her work has been nominated for numerous Aurora Awards.*

**T**here is no meaning. All that was has vanished on the winds of time. It has been a dark, terrible night. I awake to the sounds of spiders scurrying in my brain. They leave webs of memory hanging in tatters in my mind. I listen for a moment to the silence until the pain explodes upon me with the thunder of a heartbeat. It has been a bad night.

I awake to the sound of the clock ticking away the seconds of my life. The pain is very bad today. The nerves up and down my spine seems to scream in agony from what feels like a burning, electrical shock. I lurch from the bed, falling in a heap to the carpet. The texture is rough and scratchy against my cheek. My stomach tightens and I feel a desperate need to vomit.

I begin to crawl towards the bathroom, the patterns on the carpet weaving crazily before my eyes. I reach the cool, comforting tiles just as I am sure I will never make it.

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Relief comes quickly afterward. I lean against the cool porcelain of the tub to catch my breath. I feel a little better; the pain has receded to become a dull, throbbing ache in my head, more manageable now.

I think of food for a moment but my stomach threatens to rebel again and I let the thought fade. I am feeling restless today. The bugs of activity crawl beneath my skin. Strange images of snakes and blood filter into my brain from some forgotten dream. Desire washes through my system like a powerful drug. I look down to see I have a throbbing erection. Suddenly I know it is going to be one of those days.

I sigh. I am used to this by now. It is one of the few consistencies in my long, nomadic life. At this particular time I am an artist, using the colours of paint to reproduce the visions that the sweet craving of the need creates in my head. I once read an article where a psychiatrist stated that normal people must ignore the horrors of everyday life in order to stay sane. The sick man is one who can see these horrors, and is sickened by them because he does not have the ordinary illusions he needs to remain sane. Perhaps this is why I exist, to rip away the safe, stale illusions from men's minds and force them to face reality.

The name I use right now is Richard Damon. It is a suitable name; it serves its purpose which is, of course, to be filled in on government forms and such. Most people consider names as a form of identity, but I believe this is far too complex an idea for any name to convey. My name does not identify me, for what I am cannot be put into mere words.

I glance at the travel clock that I left sitting on the sink before I went to bed the night before. It reads eleven forty-five; I have slept late. I hurry to the dresser to pick out some clothes, forcing my legs into cooperation. I had wanted to find an apartment today, but the pain and the need have collaborated against me.

I throw on some jeans and an old shirt. I feel slightly unsteady, as though I was a little drunk. My skin is burning where the clothes touch me. They trap my erection in a deathgrip, making me moan. It is the need, and I know it's time to do another painting. The unsteadiness is the first stage, before it consumes me like a raging tiger and I must go on the hunt.

Probably the best thing to do is to go to the gallery where it is quiet and warm. Few people go there on Thursdays and it is necessary for

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me to be alone at this stage. The presence of people only seems to deepen my pain and sharpen the need until I can barely control it. And control it I must. Even when I am driven to action, I maintain control. It is always so tempting to loosen my grip, to sink into that beckoning ecstasy where the visions in my mind blend into reality but to do this would cause things to go too far. That I do not care to contemplate.

The motel room is suddenly oppressive with its dingy walls and the grey sunlight slanting in through the drab green curtains. I pick up my leather jacket and grab my wallet from the dresser.

Pushing my feet into a pair of loafers, I leave, locking the door behind me. It is a habit, the paint and canvases would be of no interest to a thief.

The sun is stabbing-bright when I step out onto the street. I squint, causing all the objects around me to blur and blend into one another. The people walking by are strange blobs, and I feel distanced from them, watching them as a scientist watches an amoeba. Without warning, the pain sharpens in my stomach, causing me to double over. It splits and shoots up my arms like lightning, crisp and clean in its deadliness. I am not unfamiliar with this pain, but its suddenness always catches me by surprise. It is the taste of tin foil in my mouth, sharp and biting.

A man stops and grabs onto my arm, asking me if I am alright. The fool, would I bend down to the ground like this if I were alright? I shake his hand off angrily. He steps back, his hands fidgeting like a little rat's. His eyes are wide and entirely made up of pupils. He looks at me for a moment and I feel a stab of repulsion towards this specimen before me. My need surges forward, but I push it away. It is too early to paint just yet. I stare at this little rat. Could this one really be a man, could he be an example of whatever god who had created us intended us to be? I find it hard to believe and I lurch away from him, feeling nausea curdling in my stomach at the sight of him. Such a pathetic, weak little man. He is a recurring trend in mankind, one I wish to abolish. The thought sends blood rushing to my engorged loins, leaving me lightheaded. I, like a wolf among sheep, cannot find companionship here; I am of a different breed.

The pain fades, its memory blurring in my mind with all the other times. I feel its burning turn to anger at this strange and contrived world.

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I long to tear it down with my hands, to reveal the old, open sore that is man, to uncover the bleeding wounds that man in his stupidity inflicts on this world. I try to show it in my paintings, but each time the need comes and I act upon it, the paintings fail as if the ultimate essence of what I try to achieve cannot be captured on the canvas. I do not believe this, for I would then be living a lie, so each time I strain to capture that which seems unattainable, to grasp the sweetness that quenching my need brings.

My eyes grow accustomed to the light and I start to walk down the street. My skin still tingles, my senses are tuned to whip-sharpness. I am an alien from some other world, looking out onto this world of man. Cars drive by, honking at pedestrians who risk to run across the red light. The buildings stand like backdrops in some cheap Western film, as though they could be torn down and dragged away any moment. There is an aura of falseness about this city. I relish its decay.

I reach the gallery in only ten minutes. My loafers slap lightly against the concrete steps as I run up them to the door. The security guard Tom smiles and waves at me as I stroll by. I return his wave, though I do not like him. I've seen the way he looks at the children who come into the gallery and I know what he would do if ever he was allowed to escape the conditioning of society. He is a hypocrite like so many people. I do not deny what I am, nor what I do, in fact I revel in it. The need allows me the freedom to express my true self and find the reality that exists behind the masks.

It is as I had expected. Few people clutter the gallery. I move slowly towards the rooms in the back where the older paintings are. They by far are my favourites. Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Children" impresses me very much. A reproduction hangs here but I am fortunate enough to have seen the original. The angry colours and brutality of the scene is stunning and exciting. It has a trace of the flavour that I try to achieve, unfortunately it is a picture showing the monstrosity of gods, not man.

My footsteps echo on the marble floor like crystal tears. A woman and a small boy stand off to one side, the woman gazing at a painting and the boy looking about with obvious boredom. He glances at me and, feeling a momentary impulse, I allow my thoughts to reveal themselves

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in my face. The boy's eyes grow wide with terror and he makes a small strangulated cry. The woman jerks his hand almost absentmindedly.

For a moment I allow the hunger to let me consider the boy but he is really too small, too immature to quell the pain, to achieve the sweetness. I need an adult to devour, using their own life, their own pain to satiate my hunger, to sooth my need. Only then can I paint.

The boy seems to sense my attention. He cowers against the woman's legs. She turns in annoyance and slaps him across the face. I smile and am satisfied. My jeans do not strangle me quite so much.

I continue to the back of the museum to the room where my own paintings hang. As I draw near I can smell them, each individually. They all have a history, they all contain a germ of my hunger, a germ that I hope will infect mankind and lay waste to their lies.

As usual the room is deserted. No one appreciates my work. People tend to glance here and then look away or if they do enter, they keep to the centre of the room, their eyes wide and bewildered because their dim, little minds cannot comprehend what they see. When they can no longer stay in this room, they scurry away like mice leaving the heavy stench of fear hanging in the air until the ventilation system sweeps it away.

For me this room is a haven. While others cannot stay in this room, I find the closest thing to peace here. The air seems permeated with the smell of blood; hot, sweet and wet. It dances in patterns, flitting from painting to painting, weaving magical spells. My pain, my hunger seems to be less of a concrete thing here, less alive. Instead it seems to inhabit my paintings, speaking in unison. In this room, my need is controllable and I am almost human.

My paintings are nightmares some would say but I say it is reality. The reality that every man refuses to look at, the reality of blood, of the pulse, of the rhythm.

My technique is abstract, if such a word has a meaning.

And the paints. . . ?

I walk over to one of my earlier works. It is a large canvas, six feet by ten feet. I used only red in it, and there was so much red to use. It is my favourite colour. Harold once asked me if I got a discount by buying such vast quantities of one colour. I merely smiled at him.

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I sit on the bench in front of this work. The wood is a living entity beneath my buttocks, inhaling and exhaling, shifting slightly. I study the swirls of the colour, remembering when I made them with the brush in my hand. I find them now a little obnoxious and pretentious; I had a tendency to be cocky back then. The name of this work "Gregory in the Limelight" suits the look, firm and crisp. I remember him well.

I want to look over the rest of my paintings but the need, which has been relatively tranquil during my meditations, clutches at me with steel fingers, gripping my intestines like so many strands of liquorice. I gasp and fall from the bench. The floor slaps me hard on the cheek, the cold tile bringing me back to awareness. My heart pounds, blood rushing. I lie for a moment, rubbing my erection through the cloth of my jeans. My nerves are alight. I must paint. As soon as possible.

Slowly I stand. My legs are quivering but they hold me. I glance at my watch and see I have spent all afternoon here. It is almost seven.

Quickly I leave, ignoring Tom's farewell wave. I have only one purpose now, one direction.

Time contracts and I am back in my dingy motel room, searching through my clothes for something to wear. I don what I find, never mind the color, never mind the fit. I have a fire within me and I must hurry or be burned alive. I feel exhilarated.

I rush to the street. The night sounds are deafening. An old vagrant is leaning up against a glass storefront, his gasping breath a hurricane in my ears. He asks for money as I walk by, his voice almost bursting my eardrums. Agonizing, I lurch away. There is only the need, only the heat of desire, and the old man is not good enough for paint.

I am on a new street. I glance at the sign. Ridgeview. Near the university. Many students will be out tonight, laughing and dancing, pretending they are alive.

I walk along the sidewalk, calmer now. It is close, I can feel it. The need is a steady drive, it has devoured me and made me whole. I am alive now, the smell of the night is strong in my nostrils, the sounds are loud in my ears. The neon light reflects softly on the windows of the parked cars, distorting themselves, distorting reality. Distort is what man has done. It is my job to remove the distortions.

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I arrive at the bar. The door flies open and a couple spill out laughing. Music follows them like an eager puppy but is locked back in as the door swings shut. They stumble past me, weaving and shouting.

I ignore them. They are unimportant. But I could smell her in there. Tonight a “her” to quench the hunger, still the pain, satisfy the need. And then I will be able to paint again. I smile.

I reach for the door knob and it graciously fits into my hand. I push it open and descend into the pit. From the doorway I see the crowd bathed in blood light. It flicks on and off, making the people fade in and out like ghosts. To me they are phantoms, false and unreal. I push my way through to the bar.

The bartender brings me a drink and I can feel her eyes upon me. Her gaze slices through the crowd and splashes upon me like a shock of cold water. I look around and she is there. She turns her head when she sees me watching her, exposing the tender flesh of her neck. She waits for several heartbeats and then looks back. Her eyes are wide in invitation.

The crowd parts and I am with her before she can change her mind. It is always good to keep the prey off center.

Her laughter hangs in the air like wind chimes. I smile and tell her about my work. She nods eagerly; I am perceived as being intellectual, sophisticated, bohemian. She should look deeper and see the predator.

Manoeuvring her out the door is simple after another drink. She uses it to steel her nerves, I see it in the tilt of her head, the stance of her thighs. She rubs her hands on her skirt nervously and laughs again.

“I’ve never met a guy like this before,” she says.

I smile with understanding. I am so sensitive.

We start off down the street. It is deathly quiet after the assault of the bar. My pain is sharpened, tingling in my nerves. My body knows what is to come and craves it. This is how a lover must feel, the itch for the press of warm flesh, to engulf the body of another.

I take her back to my motel room. Her footsteps are soft on the carpet behind me. As I open the door to draw her in her brow crinkles slightly. She is apprehensive about it being a motel room. I smile to reassure her; she is so close, I must make her enter the room. The pain begins to return, making my nerves burn. I want to scratch the palms of



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my hands but I force myself to relax. She must enter the room. I lean against the doorway, away from her. She is intrigued, the way she licks her lips tells me so. Come in, I think at her, willing her to step over the threshold. Her large eyes, moist and wide, blink once, twice. A smile twists her lips.

She steps into the room.

I am in agony but I enforce casualness as I close the door. I turn away from her and lean my forehead against the wood. My face is slick with sweat from having to restrain myself. I feel weak. The need rages inside and threatens to drown me.

“Richard,” her voice whispers from behind me.

I turn to see she has shed her skin, removed her mask.

I barely have time to gasp before she is upon me. Her lips pull back from her teeth as she snaps at my face. I twist away but her hands as talons entrap me. We tumble to the floor. The rug scratches my cheek. I feel her breath on my neck. Her hands rake against me, shredding clothes. A moment later she is digging into my flesh. I feel hot blood pouring over my chest, my belly. It is intoxicating.

I raise my head to look at her. Her eyes shine in the darkness and I see my need reflected in them. Another devourer, another predator. I fall victim to myself. If I had the breath for it I would laugh.

She digs her hands into my sides, nails puncturing the skin. My blood pulses out from its fleshy cage, free to flow in the air. The headiness does not distract me from the conclusion. She means to kill me and use my body for her own needs.

It is a tempting thought, to yield to her strength, to allow her clawing hands and biting mouth to devour me. An end to the need, transferred instead to her. I would live on in her legacies, in the bloody entrails she leaves in her wake.

But even as I think this, my body disobeys. It lunges against her and I feel the need rise up, overpowering my resistance, crushing my desire for oblivion. It will allow oblivion only of my making.

I rise above her, a phoenix, and plunge down with my fists, again and again. She fights with fury. Her nails connect on my shoulders and rip through the flesh, but I ignore her defenses.

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My fists rise and fall, battering her face, until nothing is left but her eyes staring wide and unbelieving from the pulp where her head had been.

Slowly I become aware of the room. I stand over her body, my own body naked and slick with blood. I can not tell who bled the most, but she does not stir from the puddle at my feet. I step away and notice my erection is harder than ever.

I shower although I am reluctant to remove the marks of our battle. The water burns my penis, but I will not orgasm until the painting is done. I look back over the encounter and see how I should have recognized her, but the need was too strong. I could not see the subtle signs.

As I step back into the room to survey her wreckage I taste the regret that I know I will feel for some time to come. Another like me, she could have shown me ever more intricate ways to satisfy the need. Together we could have hunted as a pack and ravaged the innocent world. Alone I am only an irritant. Together we could have called down a holocaust.

I sigh and feel humble before this lost potential. Now that I know I am not alone I will have to be more careful.

I move to the dresser and pull out a paint brush. The light from the window is not yet strong, but she will still be slick and wet when the sun rises.

So long I have struggled to find the perfect subject. I only hope now my technique will prove worthy of her. The thought of dipping my brush into her is a fever in my mind.

I set a canvas on the chair by the window and settle down to wait for the light.

THE END

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BY ART CAREY

“Skip the data dump, captain,” growled Rankin, “how long do we have to live?”

A good question. And one that I had been trying to avoid. Not for Rankin. You could bounce a cargo loader arm off his shaven, bullet-shaped head and he wouldn’t blink. No, it was for Gupta, who usually looked as if his new puppy had piddled on him.

I looked down at my scrawled notes as if trying to decipher them. All for show, of course. Once you feed the variables into the ship’s computer—cubic footage and the rate of oxygen consumption, recycling, and CO<sup>2</sup> absorption—the answer comes all too quickly. But by dragging out the techie details, I had hoped to delay the bad news.

“One hundred and six hours, give or take,” I replied.

“With the air scrubber down, we have to rely on the chemical canisters to remove the carbon dioxide. Unfortunately, half of them were damaged when we took the hit.”

“That’s barely four days,” whispered Gupta. He shook his head in disbelief.

Rankin looked unruffled. “How long will it take for the Houston to reach us?”

“About 131 hours,” I said. The Houston was a Glenn-class frigate that had been diverted from patrol to rescue us.

I was the captain of the Mollie B and the only woman aboard, a 42-year-old space knockabout only slightly less battered than the ship itself. The Mollie B was an aging freighter with a crew of three that hauled mining supplies on an endless loop between creatively named Supply Depot 5 and the asteroid camps. Or at least she had been until a

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bloodthirsty race called the 'natalii—that's a Denebian word for "destroyer"—had showed up six months ago and begun raiding outlying Terran colonies, leaving shattered plexiform domes, twisted and blackened metal, and mangled human remains.

With a population winnowed to only 8 billion by the Population Control Act and colonization of dozens of planets, the Terran Federation was ill prepared to watch, let alone defend, its frontiers in space. So some desk-bound admiralty geek had come up with the clever idea of commandeering commercial spacecraft, retrofitting them with far-see sensors, and stringing them along the fringes of the federation as an early warning system. That was the job of the Mollie B. It was sort of like being a spider waiting for a fly to bumble into your electronic net. Unfortunately, since the Mollie B was unarmed, the fly would wind up eating the spider.

"But that survival estimate is for three people and a cat sucking up the oxy, isn't it?" persisted Rankin. He threw a disdainful glance at Mephistopheles, who was reclining on my sleep rack, calmly licking one paw. "If it was just two people, "—Rankin gave me a wolfish grin—"they might be alive when the Houston arrives."

I consulted my notes again and nodded. "They might." Although I didn't tell them, I had also programmed the computer to provide survival rates for other scenarios. What if only two people consumed air? What if there were only one? How much air does a cat use? I had all the answers and none of the solutions.

Meanwhile, Gupta looked even greener. An apologetic, nervous beanpole, he was the sci guy, a newbie drafted off some college campus in Calcutta or Bangalore. Gupta monitored the impressive array of sensors that bristled atop the Molly B's reconfigured hull. It was his first trip into space, and when he wasn't tweaking the sensor arrays or analyzing electronic returns, he spent much of his spare time vomiting into our dwindling supply of *Pouches, Plastic, V-4, Stomach Disturbance*.

Rankin, a balding space monkey with bulging, tattooed biceps and bad breath, was chief engineer and cargo master of our happy ship, a rated spacer like myself. Rankin had ruffled my fur the moment he boarded and stumbled over Mephistopheles. "Get out of my way..." he

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had sworn and aimed a kick at the bolting black cat. Before he could finish, I had bounced him off a locker, jammed a forearm across his throat, and pinned him, choking, to a wall.

“Touch that cat and I’ll cut you into kitty bites and dump your entrails out an airlock with the other garbage,” I hissed. Since I’m 5’10 and 187 pounds of mostly muscle thanks to countless hours on the treads and isometric torture devices, he took me at my word. Like other men who resented serving under a woman captain, he had initially sized me up with a smirk, starting at my bustline and working his way up to my face. The smirk always faded when they reached my eyes.

Sure there was a little cat hair floating about now and then, but I cleaned the litter container every day and bagged what I found with the trash. Besides, it was my ship. If I wanted a cat for company, I’d have one.

“Look, Sally...” Rankin began, but I cut him off.

“Captain Larkin, chief.”

He flushed. “Okay, *Captain* Larkin. It seems to me that we’ve got a choice: The Houston can pick up two survivors when it arrives or three corpses.”

I suspected that he was right. Life had been boring but predictable until three hours earlier when Gupta had shouted that a meteor shower was about to hit the ship. But what struck us wasn’t just a shower, but an avalanche of hard rock. Fragments pounded the Molly B, carrying away the aft long-band antenna, ripping open the ‘midships cargo bay, holing the auxiliary air tank, and battering the propulsion and life-support systems, including the air scrubber. After a hurried distress call and response, communications went down, too. We had no power. Worse, all of the CO<sup>2</sup> that we exhaled wasn’t being absorbed by the backup regenerative removal system because many of the chemical canisters had been shredded. So there we were, adrift without power, nursing a supply of oxygen that shrank with each breath. I didn’t need to draw a blueprint of what the CO<sup>2</sup> buildup would lead to: headaches, sweating, vomiting, shaking, and unconsciousness. Did the air seem stuffy already? Probably my imagination.

“What are you suggesting?” I asked Rankin warily.

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“The only choice possible,” he replied. “One of us overdoses on pain chillers so that the other two keep on breathing until the Houston arrives.”

Gupta flinched. “No...” he protested softly.

The minutes ticked by. Emergency lighting bathed the foredeck in a weak yellow glow. We had battery power, so I activated two com displays—the time clock, which I set to count down from 106 hours, and the oxy status gauge, which still registered in the green but was edging down to the red line. CO<sup>2</sup> had built up.

Rankin was right. Enough air remained for two but not three.

“We all have to agree on this,” I insisted.

“Not if I was captain,” said Rankin.

“You’re not.”

Gupta said nothing. After a long moment, he nodded. I sighed. It always comes down to the captain. “All right. Let me think about it and. . .

“Leave it to the shell game,” cut in Rankin. “The first two to win live; the loser gets permanent naptime.” He laughed. “Let the fur ball live. It’s a light breather.”

I hated him at that moment. I also didn’t trust him. Mephistopheles didn’t like him either, avoiding Rankin at all times. Cats have good instincts about people.

“Is playing the game all right with you?” I asked Gupta. He looked pale and sickly in the garish light.

“Yes,” he said, eyeing Rankin suspiciously, “providing we speed it up so random chance will prevail, not skill or experience.”

The game was a new addition to our library of time-killers. It was a souped up, computerized, three-dimensional version of the old shell game, the gambling con in which a pea is placed under one of three half walnut shells. After the game’s operator has switched the shells back and forth, the sucker bets on which shell covers the pea. Usually, he’s wrong. That’s because the grifter running the game has palmed the pea and moved it.

Our shell game, however, was played in a cylindrical holotube at dizzying speeds, testing visual acuity and concentration. A small white ball had replaced the pea, and the game could be sped up. Rankin, who

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played for hours, could track the shell with the ball as it moved horizontally, vertically, and diagonally up to Level Four, sometimes Level Five. Gupta and I rarely got beyond Level Three. But at Level 8 and higher, the colored shells became dazzling bands of light, flashing by faster than the human eye could track. When we played at that level, guessing which of the three shells contained the ball involved blind luck. No palming allowed.

I turned on the holotube and set the speed at Level 8. “Who’s going first?” I asked.

Rankin offered another infuriating smile. “Ladies first. The number cruncher here can go second. I’ll go last.”

“Is that all right?” I asked Gupta. He nodded.

I pressed the “Start” button and watched the shells move faster and faster until they became a blur. I pressed “Stop” and they came to rest. The odds of picking the shell with the ball were one in three.

“The blue one,” I said and pressed the “Uncover” button. The shell was empty.

Gupta took my place at the controls and started the game. He was sweating, his thin mustache a wet, dark line above a quivering lip. When the shells stopped, he sat silently. “Yellow,” he muttered and opened the shell. A small white ball gleamed in the pale light.

Rankin sat down and set the shells to whirling. When they stopped, he didn’t hesitate. “Green. I choose green.” He uncovered the shell to reveal the small white ball. “Well, well,” he said, registering no surprise.

I was the odd person out.

I agreed to take an overdose of pain chillers in two hours. Never satisfied, Rankin protested the delay, but I ignored him. I had some com messages to compose, one to a brother in North California (voters had finally decided to split the state), and another to my lawyer, directing him to sell the Molly B—if it survived the war—and to give the proceeds to the Retired Spacers Home.

“Get some rest and conserve air,” I said, “unless you want to stick around and watch me die.” I suspected that Rankin would have enjoyed doing just that, but he and Gupta wordlessly climbed into their racks and shut their eyes. Mephistopheles, my dear companion these past seven years, leaped up onto the chart table, rubbed against me for

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reassurance, and settled down to sleep. Brushing aside his tail, I tried to concentrate on the message tablet, memory of the shell game still vivid in my mind. Gupta had been sweating profusely when he played, and my heart had been thumping. But Rankin had been confident, almost bored, and he hadn't hesitated in picking a shell. Mephistopheles purred, but the smooth rhythm of his breathing ended in a wheeze. He woke up, bewildered.

"There, there," I soothed, stroking his back until he relaxed and drifted into an uneasy sleep. The oxygen level slid another mark toward the red.

Why hadn't Rankin been nervous? I got up and walked over to the Holotube, switched it on, set the level at 8, and started the game. When the shells stopped careening about the tube, I picked blue, as I had done before. Empty. Then I played again. This time when they settled into place, I chose yellow, Gupta's color. That, too, was empty. On the third play, I waited for the shells to stop and chose the green nut—Rankin's—confident that it would reveal the white ball. But, like the others, it was empty. I opened blue and found the ball. I reran the same sequence of choice three more times to be sure. The results were different each time. The ball was being distributed randomly. Rankin hadn't fixed the game. I was simply the victim of bad luck. No longer could I rationalize what I was about to do.

I walked quietly over to the med kit and unlocked the compartment containing the tranquilizer gun. My hand shook as I removed it, checked the load, and clicked the safety off. I walked up to Rankin and pressed the barrel against his neck. The coldness of the metal must have disturbed him because his eyes fluttered open and widened. I pressed the trigger. He blinked and closed his eyes. Then I walked over to Gupta and did the same. They were in slumber land. Returning to the med kit, I removed a can of sticky wound sealer and sprayed Rankin's nose and mouth with an air-tight foam mask. I did the same to Gupta. As their oxygen-starved lungs sent frantic messages to their brains that would never be acted upon, they began to twitch. I turned away, sickened. To calm my nerves, I made a cup of tea. Mephistopheles climbed onto my lap and I brushed his shiny coat. He calmed down after I turned up the air flow.



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I left Rankin and Gupta in their sleep racks. The wound sealer would be absorbed by the skin, and autopsies, if there were any, would reveal that they had died of asphyxiation. As for me, I'd wait until the Houston hove into range and then bleed off most of the remaining air and take a sleep pill. When rescuers broke into the ship, they'd find two dead crew members, an unconscious captain, and a comatose cat.

It was too bad that meteors had damaged the Molly B, too bad that Gupta couldn't fix the air scrubber, too bad that the winners of the game had ended up losers. But what else could I do? If something had happened to me, who would have fed my cat?

**THE END**

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## THE WOLFENSTEINER

BY DAVID BAIN

*David Bain's stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several anthologies and magazines, including WEIRD TALES, DEAD BUT DREAMING, DUST DEVIL, SIDE SHOW: TALES OF THE BIG TOP AND THE BIZARRE, MYTHIC DELIRIUM, BARE BONE, FLASHSHOTS 1, TERMINAL FRIGHTS VOL. 1 and The THORNS OF NATURE. He is also an editor/partner with CYBER-PULP and has work in several of their anthologies. He is also the editor of WHISPERING WORLDS, a large free poetry e-book. It is available free via Bain's web site at <http://www.geocities.com/davidbainaa>.*

**M**y Opa's disappearance a few years back—the one even the police are calling supernatural—began with his broken arm.

He was seventy-seven years old at the time, but still hale and hearty. He was working on a hochsitz with a crew of younger jagers when it happened. They were making a large one, the kind that's basically a small tree house on stilts. The boss, Herr Konrad, had just bought the hunting rights to several of a farmer's fields and this particular plot was huge, requiring three of the tall little buildings—treehouses, basically—for adequate animal scouting and harvest. They'd already built the other two that day, and it was by all accounts a beautiful dusk, with a magenta red settling in over the fragrant pines, adding a coppery hue to the golden wheat field.

My grandfather was looking up at the newly completed structure when one of the supporting posts gave and fell on him.

The break was not clean and even his bruised ribs would cause him pain until he disappeared—which wasn't that long after.

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I drove from Heidelberg to my grandparents' little town of Hirschau that very night. I was on summer break from the university and was working as a director of tour guides at the castle. I had not used any of my month's vacation for the year, so I took two weeks off.

At first my grandfather took the break fairly well. He was out of the hospital within days and, against doctor's orders, I had him back at his favorite pub, *Der Weisse Swan*, a day after that.

He was the guest of honor at the stammtisch, the table specially reserved for regulars. My Opa had trained nearly all the young hunters who'd been with him the night the hochsitz collapsed; they'd each spent years in his apprenticeship—each was indebted to him for passing the rigorous schooling and tests required to become a hunter in Germany—and they all felt absolutely awful about the incident. I don't think either of us paid for a stein of the local weizen beer all night. There was a miserable rain outside, but inside, once Opa waved away his subjects' apologies, the mood got downright festive.

Although I wouldn't recognize two of them as such until about the time my Opa disappeared, there were three significant events around the stammtisch that night.

Two of them involved gifts.



The first gift was a small wolpertinger.

After several rounds, my grandfather's eldest student, Hans Jurg Obermeijer—who was himself old enough to have an infant grandson—presented him with a large gift-wrapped box.

What was inside drew a chuckle from everyone around the table.

“Gott im Himmel, boys,” my Opa said. “You shouldn't have—I mean you *really* shouldn't have!” But you could see from the color rising in his ruddy face that he was pleased.

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A wolpertinger is a taxidermical nightmare, limited only by the taxidermist's skill and imagination. This particular wolpertinger was standing upright. It had the body and ears of a rabbit. The rest of its head was that of a ferret with the small button antlers of a yearling buck between the rabbit ears. Its arms came from a small fox. Its feet were those of a duck. It was wearing a green vest and a little tri-cornered hat between the ears and back from the antlers. It was carrying a tiny rifle.

You saw dozens of these things in taxidermy and tourist shops all around Bavaria, but what made this particular wolpertinger impressive and unusual was its wings. They were most likely from a pigeon, but they were nonetheless spread majestically behind it. The ferret face was also surprisingly serene, considering the rapacious beast from which it had been culled.



The second gift, given when we were still more lubricated, was a large scrapbook, filled with newspaper clippings and photos from the length and breadth of my grandfather's career. My Oma had obviously helped Hans Jurg on the project.

"We were going to display it at your funeral, old man," Hans Jurg said. "But after you lived through that accident the other day we figured we might as well give it to you now. You are, after all, going to outlive us all." Much laughter and clinking of mugs to this.

Then we worked our way through the copious pages of the book and many refills, making sure the innkeeper, Herr Zimmerman, was busy until far past closing time.

There it was, my grandfather's entire life in pictures.

A rare early shot showed him with a buck outside the Czechoslovakian mountainside home where he lived with his parents and eight siblings until the War came.

A photo of a young man, quite handsome, in uniform—supposedly a “protectorate” of Germany, Hitler's boys had nonetheless given Opa an ultimatum by the time they rolled their tanks into the remote corner of his country: join up or die. My grandfather joined up. Nowadays he said that

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most Nazis had simply been arrogant young fools. He also added that he would never have met his wife nor had his daughter, had it not been for the war.

I always cringed a bit—inwardly at least—when I heard that line. My parents died in a car crash on the autobahn, that highway of death, four years ago. My grandparents never really overcame the denial stage.

Here was a curled, sepia photo of a man posing on a motorcycle. A little girl, my mother, sits in a sidecar. My grandmother, a pretty, dark-haired north German woman, is behind him on the cycle. They criss-crossed the country on that motorad, joining up wherever there was need for a hunter, rarely staying in any locale for more than a few months at a time.

Finally the glory days. A Polaroid of a man entering his peak, shaking hands with a thick-haired Herr Konrad, the largest electronics shipper in Europe. Photos of the family moving in to the house on Conrad's warehouse complex, where they still lived.

Opa served three functions for Konrad. Living on the warehouse grounds, he was the security guard, though more by reputation of his dogs and his gun than by virtue of active patrol. He was also Konrad's chief jager, and as such played host to the many dozens of well-to-do hunters invited by the boss—my grandfather was never a rich man, but most of his guests were.

Glossy photos and newspaper clippings of my grandfather with prize bucks, with hunting buddies, with hunting medals, with hunter-green jeeps, with a series of hunting dogs. Opa climbing a hochsitz. Opa toasting the camera with a bottle of beer, a wild boar at his feet. Opa putting feed in a trough for deer during a particularly hard winter.

Always, always he was in full hunting regalia, every stitch green from head to foot -- boots, overcoat, probably even his underwear. Always the tri-cornered felt hat with the traditional bushy mountain goat or boar's beard stuck in the band. Usually, even if he was emerging from a lake in muddy green waders, he was wearing a forest green necktie, bowtie or cravat.

And here the pinnacle: articles profiling him in *Wild und Hund*, the magazine which is the equivalent of the jagerei Bible. The last article is coverage of his seventy-fifth birthday. *Wild und Hund* had a full-page

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spread on the hunters from across the country in attendance, each caption containing their comments on Opa's career.

Reminiscing about this party, Konrad's fabulous layout and gifts, was the highlight of that evening around the stammtisch.

Although I didn't comment, I remembered what Opa had said, only half-joking, after he'd seen the article for the first time. I remembered it because I was getting the same feeling from the scrapbook that night.

"Gott im Himmel, Holger," he had said to me. "It's nice to get the praise, but it's as if they're already writing my obituary."



I can barely remember the third item, and yet it is clear enough. It has the dreamy aspect that can only come from memory intruding on the nepenthe of a long, beer-soaked night.

We are gathering our overcoats. Zimmerman is waving at us, half-drunk himself, wiping up the stammtisch.

One of the younger men, Hansi Schweinfurth, a big, round blonde fellow, is telling my grandfather and me that he was off to the side, taking a piss against a tree, when the hochsitz post fell.

He is rosy-faced, seraphic, ebullient as he tells us this. "I heard the post break. You know, that distinct, almost-wet, ripping sound of wood still running with sap. I turned, making sure to hold my schwanz out straight and not piss all over myself. I swear, Alfred," he says to my grandfather. "I swear I saw that post actually turn to fall on you. It's like it aimed at you! The arschloch aimed at you, I know it!"

He is chuckling, his eyes twinkling and merry and severely bloodshot as he shrugs his green overcoat onto his heavy shoulders.

"It was like some outside force was controlling it," he says. "It was like the schweinhund had it in for you."



My grandfather took his pain pills and slept late every morning. I would help my grandmother by doing all the shopping. I tried to help her with

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the cooking and housework too, but, being the consummate hausfrau, she was having little of it.

I allowed Opa to sleep until noon, but then I would go to his room—where I noticed he'd put the wolpertinger on his nightstand—and drag him out of bed. Like many elderly couples, my grandparents now slept in separate rooms. Oma said it was due to Opa's legendary snoring, and I could believe it. There were times when it kept me awake in the guest room, two doors away.

I spent the afternoons trying to keep my grandfather up and around, but to be honest, there wasn't much to do. Mostly, when the weather was nice, we sat on the back porch and drank beer. At first I half-heartedly cautioned my grandfather about alcohol interacting with his medicine, but separating a German from his beer is like separating any other human from water. We did not get drunk, of course, but we often found we could reminisce about the same things over and over again every afternoon without being bored.

Most days my Opa's latest and greatest hunting dog, Distel—"Thistle"—would join us, lying contentedly at his feet. A small, compact black terrier easing into the latter half of her second decade, Distel was nearly as much of a living legend as my Opa—she'd had her own feature in *Wild und Hund*.

I had been along one early dawn about five years prior when my grandfather shot at a fox. We found blood, but no body.

He gave Distel the scent and off she went.

We waited until well after noon.

My grandfather left a blanket with his scent on the ground—she was trained to wait by it, should she return—and we went home for some brew and food.

When we returned, it was getting on toward evening.

And still no Distel.

We started reminiscing about the dog then, tale leading to tale. We talked, lying on the blanket on the hood of the jeep, until the full moon was high in the sky and a scattering of stars shone down on the clearing. Finally, my grandfather sighed at the Milky Way and said, "Every now and then, Holger, you lose one. Every now and then one disappears. But this is the best way for her. This is how she would have wanted it."

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We got up and he spread the blanket on the ground again, as much to honor the dog as anything, and we turned to leave.

Distel was sitting there in the driver's seat—she must have gotten in through one of the open windows.

Her face and most of her body was covered in fox blood, her jet black fur glistening in the moonlight. At her feet was one of the fox's forelegs. There was an unmistakable glee in her eyes. I swear that dog grinned for days afterward.



**W**e were sitting there one evening, bleary-eyed and beers in hand, watching the evening news, when I surprised myself by saying, “We're going hunting tonight. No more drinking. Tonight we go auf die jagd.”

My grandfather complained about his arm, his ribs, how he couldn't operate a gun, but I got him to go.



**E**ach field in Konrad's hunting jurisdiction had its own name, and we roamed and roamed that night, visiting nearly all of them, my grandfather telling myriad tales about each one. Sometimes it was named after the farmer who owned it, such as die Mullerwiese. Sometimes it was descriptive, such as the Holzwiese, where wood was cut in winter. Sometimes it was historical, such as the Goldbockwiese, where Hans Jurg had shot one of *Wild und Hund's* bucks of the year. And sometimes it was simply and unashamedly poetic, such as Die Heilige Hertzwiese—“The Meadow of the Holy Heart”—the lush natural clearing where we'd waited for Distel.

As dark came over the world and I was mentally debating the stammtisch or home, Opa said, “You know what I've seen tonight? You know what I see in these fields?”

We had sighted several animals that night, so I wasn't sure what he was getting at. “Animals you want to hunt,” I said. “Animals you *will* hunt when your arm heals.”



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“Gespenster,” he said. “Ghosts. I see ghosts. Every field, every meadow, behind every tree. I see ghosts. Ghosts of deer I've hunted. Ghosts of deer I've spent years nurturing and watching over. Ghosts of rabbits and weasels. Ghosts of feral cats and boars and hunting dogs. Look, in that mist settling on the heather just over there. I see nothing but ghosts.”

I didn't know what to say.  
We drove home in silence.



**T**he next night was to be my last in Hirschau, so I tried a different tact—the stammtisch.

It was a decision I regret.

I don't remember the American's name, but he'd been Hansi's exchange student a few years back. As I recalled, he was one of those exchange students who learned little in Germany except how to drink, but to his credit, he'd gone on to major in German in college.

It was one of those hazy-clear moments again. We're talking about hunting, the American impressed with a shooting range the others had been to earlier in the day—when out of nowhere my grandfather goes on the attack.

“You damned stupid Americans, you're no real hunters,” he says, suddenly glaring at the man. “You get drunk every autumn and go crashing through the woods, shooting at everything that moves, dressed in orange—orange! Gott im Himmel! —because you've no respect for life, no respect for weapons or even your fellow hunters. I've seen Americans hunt—I've given them some of my best animals—and half the time they're shaking in their shoes as they aim. You practically have to hold their hand for them, it's such a big event in their minds, to point a stick at an animal and make it go bang.”

Everyone at the table chuckles nervously. The tone's not right, but maybe my grandfather's bluffing, making a joke.

“It's not funny!” my grandfather shouts. “You blundering idiots, shooting horses and houses and children and each other! I've had

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American hunters darken the doors of my house! They've been my guests at this very table! I've heard them laugh about rampaging through the forest in their big trucks, shining lights and frightening the animals out of hiding, terrifying them before they die! Cutting off their heads and leaving the bodies to rot by the roadside! Disgusting! Disgraceful!"

The American looks a moment at my grandfather, licks his lips, speaks slowly.

"Please," he says. "You Germans hunt from a treehouse. You hunt from a hideout in the air. It's about as difficult as a Nazi sniper picking off Jews in a concentration camp."

Some of the other jagers start to protest, but my grandfather explodes. "We hunt animals we've nurtured for years! We give them good, natural lives in a world that's closing in all around them! We are the watchers of the woods, not its despoilers! We do not see the hunt as a drunken party! We are the hand of God in the woods! Can you understand that! Can you begin to comprehend? We are the forest's champions!"

"Old man," the American says, still not raising his voice but managing to break in before anyone else can speak. "Do you understand that you've made a life out of what we consider mere sport? I have no illusions. I'm only on vacation here. Hunting is a pastime for boys and young men, not crippled old farts who make ridiculous speeches and can't hold their beer. You've made a life of hiding and, like you said, pointing sticks at defenseless animals."

"This is my stammtisch! *Our* stammtisch, and I won't be—" my grandfather begins.

"You're a hollow and empty shell," the American says. "A boy in man's clothing. Go home, old man. Go to bed."

Now the other Germans do protest—Hansi is flushed near-purple and looks ready for violence—but it's too late.

Eyes welling in his beet-red face, broken arm, bruised ribs and all, my grandfather kicks his chair halfway across the room and strides away from the table, moving much too quickly. He is reaching for his overcoat, which is hung on a peg by the entrance. His drunken grasp is unsteady, and the coat catches on the peg as he makes for the door. It is a rainy night and the entryway is wet from patrons' feet. As the whole inn

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watches, the snagged coat pulls my grandfather back and he slips, coming down hard, full force, directly on his broken arm.



A few younger jagers stopped by the house or called, giving their regards, but only one or two of the older men made brief, token hospital visits to my grandfather. They said the American had flown home early and everyone was taking my Opa's side in the matter, but in my Oma's mind—and mine—their actions spoke louder than their words.

As for my grandfather, he would only say that he didn't know what had come over him. He had indeed hosted several American hunters for Konrad, but most had been very respectful of the German way of hunting, he said.

I told my grandparents that I sincerely wished I could come directly back to Hirschau, but the semester was starting, and there was my job to consider. They said they'd get by.



I knew something was wrong when, starting sometime in October, after he went home again, Opa would never come to the phone. Oma always said he was asleep.

I would ask her to have him call sometime when he was awake, but he never did.

It got to the point where I called Hans Jurg one early November evening.

"He *is* sleeping a lot," Hans Jurg said. "But he needs his rest. He needs to heal. The doctors are optimistic."

Then there was silence on the line.

"Zum Teufel, Holger," he said. "I have to tell you the truth. Your grandmother tries to feed him, but he wouldn't get any sustenance if it weren't for beer—and that's all he gets out of bed for, to fetch more beer from the pantry."

Hans Jurg sighed.

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The silence this time was even more hesitant.

“Tell me,” I said.

“All right,” he said. “But don't tell your grandmother it was me. Several nights ago, when he was in his cups, your Opa reached through the glass front of the gun cabinet in his room for a rifle—I don't know what he'd planned to do with it—and he cut his good arm and part of his chest all to hell. Your grandmother called me and when I got there he was so drunk he couldn't stand. She didn't want an ambulance because she didn't want neighbors gawking. I literally carried him to my jeep and even though he was bleeding all over the seat, he seemed to think we were going hunting. He kept asking me to turn around, said we'd forgotten his gun. He was talking crazy. He said we both heard the call of the wolpertinger and at last he was going back to the woods. I told him that the wolpertinger I had bought him was at his bedside and I'd bring it to him in the hospital if he wanted, but he probably wasn't going to see the woods again for quite a while.

“He's back home now. Your grandfather is a great man, Holger, but I don't think he's long for this earth. He's fading. He can't use a gun, he can't work in the woods, and that's all he knows. His mind is turning inwards. I don't want to see him go this way, but I don't know what can be done about it.”



I drove.

I drove and I thought not at all.

I guided my old VW down the winding two-lane roads through the small towns, the fields and forests, that night, avoiding the autobahn, and I thought not at all.

I drove for several hours, but all I recall is that the air was black and crisp and that sometime in the night a lazy, wet, sparkling November snow began to fall.



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I found myself at my grandparents' door in the middle of the night, my front door key in hand, with no idea what I was going to do.

All was silence in the slowly falling snow.

And something about that was dead wrong.

It took me a moment, but then I knew what it was.

Distel.

The dog should have raised holy hell at the sound of my car engine breaking the stillness on Konrad's grounds, and she should have been going absolutely mad, hearing me move through the night.

A shiver ran down my spine.

I turned and saw the dog was sitting there directly behind me, not five paces away, grinning and wagging her tail.

I was going to ask her—as if she could answer—how she got out of her pen, but I closed my mouth. Seeing the grinning dog there, lazy, magical snowflakes drifting between us, I knew what I had to do.

When I went in, Distel just sat at the doorstep and waited, as if she knew too.



Being careful of his cast and numerous bandages, I had my grandfather out of his nightshirt and half-dressed before he really understood what was going on, I think. There was beer on his breath, but I don't think he was besotted. His chin was stubbly and his combover was hanging the wrong way, but he was soon dressed in his full hunting gear.

Neither of us said a word as I did this.

When I was done, I swept his hair into place and put his hat on his head. Then I went to his shattered cabinet and got his favorite rifle, one he still carried from his pre-war days in Czechoslovakia.

He met my eyes as I handed it to him.

In them I saw a firmness and resolve I realized may have been fading even for a long time before he broke his arm, perhaps ever since his birthday party.

“Thank you, Holger,” he said. “Tonight I am young again! Tonight we go auf die jagd!”

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I smiled and nodded to him. It seemed to be all I needed to do.

“Wait,” he said. “Tonight we do it right. I need one more thing.” He strode into his trophy room and from amidst all the antlers and stuffed creatures and medals and plaques on the wall he pulled a golden trumpet. It was rather small with a circular, leather-wrapped handle that was part of the horn itself.

Then, taking charge, he led me out into the snowy night. Distel fell right into step beside him. We assembled ourselves in the Jeep, and I knew as I started the vehicle where I was going.



I'm not sure if we talked during the drive.

It seems that we talked enough to fill up books, to fill up years, telling hundreds of tales of the land, tales of the forest, tales of hounds and the hunt.

And yet it seems that we sat in silence, watching the headlights and windshield eat up snow and the road, watching the distance come and recede behind us.

I drove, of course, to The Meadow of the Holy Heart.



The snow hadn't been sticking anywhere else, but here everything—the meadow, the pines—was outlined in white. Everything seemed to glow silver from some inner moonlight.

Distel and I hung back and watched as my grandfather strode forward, rifle slung over his good shoulder, horn in hand. He raised his head to the sky. There were already flecks of white collecting on the dark green felt of his overcoat and hat.

Opa put the horn to his lips and blew a long call—the same four short notes repeated three times, then a long one, the whole cycle repeated four times. To my amazement, I recognized it as “Aufbruch zu Jagd”—“The Hunt Breaks Open.” He often played ancient cassettes with hunting music on them while scouting his domain, and one had consisted of

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nothing but hunting calls. The calls—there were dozens—were still employed at tournaments sometimes, as a nod to tradition, but they hadn't been used in the field in ages.

I had no idea what would happen, but I could tell from the upward tilt of his chin that my grandfather was obviously expecting something.

There was a rushing sound through the pines then, a strange, sibilant hurrying wind. It came from every direction at once, blowing the snow into a central whirlwind in the middle of the meadow. My grandfather stood, head raised to the white, churning mass, his overcoat whipping around him, though his hat somehow stayed on. He looked tall and proud, despite the cast.

The dog began barking, but it was the sort of enthusiastic bark she normally reserved for greeting my grandfather.

The swirling snow started giving shape to the wind, or so it seemed. As the three of us stood there, our chins toward the sky, I could make out huge animals in the windstorm, each materializing for less than a second. There was a rabbit head with ears the size of a man. Here was an elk with a rack half as tall as a tree. Here there was tusk of boar, forepaw of fox, fang of badger. No beast seemed forgotten—there were frog faces, fish scales, insect antenna; swan neck, skunk stripe, pointed bobcat ear; bushy tail of squirrel, gentle hoof of doe, bandit mask of raccoon; a flurry of feathers and beaks, talons and wings, sometimes songbird, sometimes wild turkey, hawk becoming bluebird, sparrow changing into crow. Each animal seemed to be trying to emerge, yet each seemed an integral part of the whole.

Then came the call. Perhaps it was only the wind, but my mind perceived the mingled call of each of the animals I'd seen. It was a roar and a howl, a chittering, screeching bellow. But it wasn't threatening. It was the sound of all the forest announcing itself, fully alive, and it was simply overwhelming. Distel cowered and I shut my eyes against it, covering my ears.

When I opened them, I saw a constantly shifting blizzard of animal features on the face of the intersecting winds—they melded as they shifted until all were one—and then I saw my grandfather's face. It lasted longer than any of the other animal apparitions had.

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I could plainly see my Opa still standing not far in front of me, also watching, standing firm against the roiling cacophony—but there he was, his face huge, looking out of the warring winds.

I understood then. Whatever it was, this thing had not stolen my Opa's countenance. It was not mimicking him—he was already a part of it.

As the winds churned into animals again, he glanced back at me with a half-smile, touched the brim of his hat with two fingers, and, turning, strode into the storm. One moment he was there, walking, the next there was nothing but swirling white.

Distel barked again, then whined. She looked to me, her anxious eyes full of longing and anticipation.

“It's okay,” I told her. “Go.”

She grinned at me and yipped just once, as if in thanks, then tore off, leaping into the snowy whirlwind.

Her face was the last thing I saw in the snow before the wind rushed away. I swear I heard her bark echoing and fading off in the distance.

I don't know how long I stood there, looking at Distel and my grandfather's fading footprints and the silently falling snow in that beautiful meadow. Probably not that long.

I truly don't remember anything else about that night. I can't recall returning my grandfather's jeep to his garage or driving home, though I must have done both. All I know is that I woke the next morning in my own bed in Heidelberg to a phone call from my grandmother.



**S**he said she usually would have woken him to make a token offer of breakfast by now, but she hadn't gone into his room yet.

She was worried because she couldn't hear him snoring.

That, and she'd had a particularly vivid dream in the night.

In that dream, she was walking alone through a forest in spring. She'd had the feeling that Opa had walked with her for a long while, then had gone on ahead. Eventually, she came to a hochsitz on a high ridge, and she knew my grandfather was up there, watching her approach.



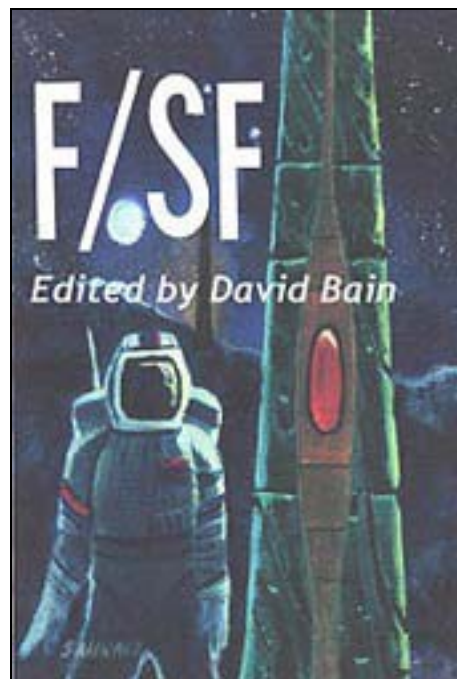
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“As I climbed up the ladder,” she said, “I noticed this was no ordinary forest. It seemed to go on forever. I could see past the horizon, it seemed. I could see Distel busily scouting in a far-off field. She must have been kilometers away.

“When I got to the top, I saw the hochsitz was actually a small house with all the comforts you'd require. And there, at one of the windows, sat your Opa. I noticed that he had no gun. He was just up there watching over things. Then your grandfather turned and smiled at me. It was a warm smile. He touched two fingers to the brim of his hat and welcomed me home.”

THE END



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BY JAMES R. CAIN

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**A**nd she tripped, pumpkin ass in the air, forearm striking the pavement, and her face nose-dived into the path. A resounding *snick* of splintering bone, and the wrist became a right angle; the hand spun out to the side. Groceries flew across the grass.

I watched all this out the kitchen window while sipping my tea; the tassels of my pyjama pants dangled on the unwashed dishes in the sink.

I smiled. *Unlucky bitch. That must have hurt.*

Enthralled, my toes burrowed through the holes in my slippers into the kitchen floor, and I rubbed the side of the mug against the stubble on my chin, relishing its warmth. Delighted as the old lady twitched in spasm on my drive. She must be floundering into unconsciousness, poor broken sparrow beyond my gate—she lay with eyes clenched shut, mouth gasping. And her perm jiggled in the autumn breeze.

I suppose I could have gone outdoors and helped her. In retrospect I probably should have. If I'd done that, things might have turned out differently. Different for me. But I was dumbfounded and bored. An old

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lady falling—not a sight you see every day. Teach the bitch to invest in some glasses.

Then I saw *it*. Rising from the cement to creep across the path like an impossible shadow, small, inky tendrils—the roots of a tar-baby plant. It came to the woman as she lay there on her back, licked her skin, tasted her sweat, and wrapped her up in lover's embrace, slithered around her body, black ropes, and embalmed that rag doll wrist. A lump of roots pulled out of the crack en masse, from beneath the ground, and flowed over to smother the wound with dirty bandages; suck that skin with soil-ink tongues.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes. Pressed my eyelids with my thumbs. And then I looked again.

The tentacles pulsated on the wound.

This disturbed me greatly.

I imagined this lascivious thing was the undiluted essence of humanity, suckling grief and pain. Imagined and *knew*, and in knowing became mighty pissed off.

What right did the essence of human evil have to go squatting beneath *my* path!

“Son of a bitch!” I punched the bench, absent-mindedly dropping my mug in the process. It shattered on the basin, and sprayed hot tea on my crotch.

“Fuck!” I screamed and doubled over, clipping the edge of the Formica with my face on the way to the floor. Lay there with my cheek on the Linoleum, watching a cockroach sucking a pea.

Twenty-five minutes later, the ambulance arrived and took the casualty away. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the lounge-room, watching the scene unravel through the blinds. Some charitable neighbour must have witnessed the fall and called Emergency. Certainly wasn't me. The thing beneath the path had withdrawn, and the busybodies at my gate were ignorant of its visitation.

*What ever did it want? What purpose did it serve?*

I sat and thought on the *thing*, that monster beneath my path. The evil creature that fed off pain. I fondled my balls, massaged my scrotum, and replayed the incident in my mind. Man, the lady falling was funnier

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than a clown slipping on a banana peel. Funnier because it was real, no show or act.

And I laughed at the memory.

The ambulance departed, and the crowd dispersed. I furiously scrutinized each neighbour as they glanced at my house before meandering away: the overgrown lawn, bedraggled flowerbeds, Fred the headless gnome decapitated by the door. I bet they were wondering what went on inside? Behind my doors—them with curious minds. But curiosity killed the canary, or didn't they know?

And the canary always has to pay.

**T**he morning sunlight was a bitch, grass-prickling the nape of my neck. I suppose I could have worn a hat, but I couldn't be bothered going indoors to find one.

I stood on the road and inspected the path, leaning over: a web of cracks, uneven ruptures in the cement. I was in a good mood still, as I had this morning's entertainment replaying as a tight loop in my brain. The old bitch kept a rictus smile on my lips, and humour in turn kept fear at bay.

The thought of those tentacles was unnerving though I had to admit. How long had it been there, festering beneath my street, spawning beneath the city? And why here? Were there more? I had no idea, but I'd hardly be able to sleep now, knowing evil slept outside my door. Those black tentacles, cold like space beyond the stars, stygian black like Satan's abyss. Maybe it was dark matter; scientists loved to theorise about that shit? Absent reality with a mind—solid *nothing* groping for torment.

And I saw: *Cracks -- millions of cracks in this path.*

I mounted the kerb and fell to my knees on the nature strip, a little too hard, and struck my left kneecap on a stone. A friggin' rock half-buried in the dirt! I rolled onto my ass cursing, holding my leg, and then I saw *it* reappear out of the path.

A slender shoot of black rose from a thumbnail-crack. A malignant runner of buffalo grass lifted its tip from the dust, swayed, sniffed the air

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then reached toward me. That dreadful aberration unravelled my way, and reached up to touch my trouser leg. Tentatively stroked my shoe. I gasped, and my eyes rolled involuntarily back in their sockets, peering for the sun. That awful feeler speared up into my trouser leg with a chilled-sewerage feel. Numbed the skin in its passing, found my wound, that aching kneecap and with a snow-tip lick, took away the pain.

God have mercy on my wretched soul if this didn't excite me sexually! It made my penis throb like a hotdog balloon on a pump. I panicked as an erection inflated in my pants, and I abhorred the thing more than ever. I gurgled a cry as I ejaculated, and scuttled backwards on my ass, kicked my feet, punched my leg, the denim of my jeans where the tentacle was beneath. I rolled onto the road, and then I ran.

As I bounded across the porch, I knew it had to be stopped.

I knew there was no one to stop it but me.

**Y**ou can't exactly dig up a footpath in Bodie without getting into strife, especially when your neighbour is a total ass-wipe and will surely dob you in. I knew I'd have to be careful, and tunnel under the path from my garden. Circumspect and sneaky would become my middle names. I was in trouble enough with the council already; in fact, I had a court summons trapped with magnets on my fridge.

I had to appear in court for chopping down a blue gum in my back yard. Now, the tree was half-eaten by white ants, and was a menace to my house and safety. It had to come down before it killed someone - namely me. I was feeling slack at the time, and couldn't be bothered getting a permit. You know how long it takes to get one of those things? The council employs lazy buggers, and by the time I'd gotten authorisation, I might well be dead. All it'd take would be one decent storm, and Bodie has an abundance of storms this time of year. Anyway, I thought no one would know or care. I thought people would understand, especially as Bodie is a mountain town, surrounded by bush.

I thought wrong.

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I was in a harness, up the tree with my chainsaw, lopping branches, when this red-bearded ranger turned up in a jeep. He got out and held an Infringement notice in the air. I had to cease work immediately of course until the case was heard, and that tree's in my backyard still. Denuded of leaves. Waiting for its kamikaze storm. And me? I lay awake on windy nights waiting for that trunk to fall.

My old buddy, my neighbour Mr Green called the council. I know it. Him with his monocle, grey hair and skin yellowed with age. Always asking questions, peering through the blinds. Likes to walk his dog each afternoon, a fat Labrador, and trots along with a walking cane with an eagle head. Usually wore a tweed jacket, thinking he's all refined and superior, puffing on a curvy pipe, like he's Sherlock Up-himself Holmes and the dog is raggedy-ass Watson.

I was in my garden digging, removing the flowerbed with a shovel, and flipping away dirt with its blade. The hole was getting deeper, long and shallow-like, but still reaching a decent depth—two-feet down and sinking. I was excavating a pit right against the front fence so I couldn't be questioned. Angling towards the road to see what I'd unearth. I figured, if I dug deep enough—say eight feet—and tunnelled across, I'd find the thing in the crack sleeping. If not, a thin burrow beneath the path would finish the job, and wouldn't do any harm. No damage -- no council trouble. I'd find the creature easy, or so I thought, after all, it'd seemed fairly large when its tentacles had cocooned the wounded lady. Such a thing would certainly need space and should be easy to find. And I'd see what it's like without protective cement on its head—some slug-thing that I could maybe dismember with a shovel.

By now, my mind had rationalised what I'd seen, and experienced. I thought of it as a prehistoric lawn grub that had evolved tentacles and nested outside my house. It was probably nurtured on sewerage from the sullage pit out back. A sick-fuck parasite that had a propensity for eating misery, and lay waiting for accidents to happen. Maybe I could capture it? Get some cash from the Discovery Channel and go on a holiday. This thing was unique. But, grub-baby didn't count on me; it'd grown in the wrong neighbourhood that's for sure. Didn't gather I'd watched it from my sink, inspecting it like David Attenborough on the

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moors. Thought it could discreetly feed. Well, not on my bloody watch. Not near my house.

So, I dug and dug and was getting mighty hot. My arm muscles ached, and the sweat was thick on my forehead and neck, glutinous like slime, and the skin on my forearms was speckled with dirt and fragments of grass. I'd taken off my shirt and discarded it on the lawn behind me, and I was feeling uncomfortable in the sun. My jeans were stiff at the crotch where my fluids had dried into a dark patch in the denim, but I wasn't getting changed - these are my good pants.

Then along came ol' monocle-eye from his house, peering my way. His fat dog tagged along at his heels, swaggering that flea-bitten ass. The dog snuffled a bush and sniffed a tree, trotted across its owner's immaculate lawn, wandered out the gate and peed on a weed.

"Afternoon." Mr. Green nodded his head and puffed his pipe. Tilted his face slightly sideways; looked my way like an inquisitive bird. Wondered what I was up to. Then meandered in my direction, slowly tapping the path with his stick, whacking the cracks with his cane, waking the perversity that dozed beneath the dirt.

Bastard.

Now, I knew my neighbour's customs, and he never walked past my door. He goes the other direction, down the road, toward the town and shops. Usually returned with a paper, and three litres of milk. Sometimes biscuits or bread. So, I was suspicious, and squinted upward at him from the pit, half-blinded by the sun. There's nothing up the road, down *my* end of the street—this I knew. Nothing past my house except the park and some swings, and dogs are definitely not allowed in the park. There's a sign and all, painted in red with an illustration of a canine with a damn red line through it—obvious. Monocle or not, he's not fucking blind! No way he's going to the park, he's just having a gander this curious canary, and if he's a canary, I'm a tabby cat.

I remembered then, this was the prick that had dobbed me in. I grated teeth in this knowledge. Slowly began chewing my lower lip. I stood in the pit, waist deep, watching him watching me, watched his dog as it slowly sniffed my way. Tried to look innocent, as I wanted to unearth old squiddy without a fuss. My neighbour waved, and swung at a fly, and then his brow furrowed.

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“What yer doin' Joe?”

As if he didn't know.

“Nice one for a walk,” I commented, trying to change the subject. Tried to restrain my anger. Tried to keep my cool.

He looked baffled and somehow offended inspecting my pit, as if I'd bent over, dropped my pants and flashed him my sack. “Doin' a bit of gardening?” he said as way of explanation not really believing it himself. He put his weight on my little white fence for support as he spoke, and all the while wondered why I'd dig such a thing as a pit? He eased in over the dead daisies.

“Maybe I'll plant a tree,” I reply caustically, then paused for effect, “a *gum tree* in fact. Get those roots in deep so the wind won't blow it down.”

He was visibly taken aback, and withdrew to the path. Shifted the pipe to the other side of his mouth. Didn't reply. Just looked meek and innocent, and slowly blinked his one watery eye. Looked mighty flushed too, red with just the hint of a blush.

*Hello, my mind said in a singsong voice. I've got you now you asshole. Feeling a tad guilty? I have my proof.*

The old man adjusted his monocle, and whistled to the dog. But the Labrador was occupied crapping on the path, shitting on *my* driveway if you want to be exact, just down from the crack where the old lady fell. It hunched over straining; whimpering like it's laying a half-dozen eggs. This embarrassed the old man, and he tried to divert my attention: “Are they geraniums?” He pointed stupidly at some bulbs in the heaped dirt behind me.

As if I'd know.

“No.” I say keeping my eyes on him. “They're dead. Who knows what they were?”

“Goin' anywhere this summer?” And Mr Green tugged at his collar nervous like. Huffed his pipe.

I knew what he was up to. He was trying to distract me while his dog completed its crime, and defecated on *my* property. I knew what was up, but played along anyway. Pretended I didn't see the hunchback dog hopping around on its back legs, turning around in a slow circle trying to do its dump. I smiled glibly and wiped the sweat from my eyes with the



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back of my wrist; blinked away dirt. But I was constantly watching, peering out the corner of my eye, face turned to the front, a dispassionate mask for the old man. Watched that dog dance, all the time wondering, listening to its plaintive whine. It was constipated you see, and that turd did not coming easy, but slowly come it did.

Willowy shoots of black arose from the crack—towards the dog's ass. The dog gave a sharp *yip* as the feeler touched its blind eye, then grizzled in relief. The tentacle felt around the dog's anus, inserted its tip inside, and seeing this, I became enraged.

*This is sick shit. This thing's evil, and must be stopped!*

The octopus fed, and it repulsed me to witness the dog getting horny while old squiddy had a snack. Then the dog yelped, and trotted away, wagging its tail, freeing itself in the process, a dangleberry in its fur.

My neighbour sensed the dog's departure and blew a smoke ring into the air. Wandered towards my drive always eyeing the pit, towards the crack, not seeing the creature at his feet. I was hoping he 'd step in his dog's mess—that would be a laugh. That maybe, he'd stumble on the path instead, like the fat lady, or perhaps those inky shoots would deliberately trip him up? There were lots of possibilities, lots of cracks you see—that path was severely fractured and in bad need of repair. Being an imbecile, Mr Green would probably tumble straight face-first to the cement. Fall and hurt himself, break a hip or some other bone—old people are fragile—and my neighbour the asshole was the undisputed king of fools.

But he didn't.

I had to stop him.

I leapt from the pit. Bolted towards the gate, shovel in hand. "Wait!"

He was almost at the crack, where the monster lay. Shadowy feelers were oozing from the ground, unfurling into the air.

I bounded over the fence -- swung my shovel in an arc. Connected with asshole's face with a resounding crack of bone—shattered his nose, and sent his dentures flying, scarlet ivory to the path. He toppled backward with a grunt—a clothes peg kicked by a mule—bounced and went sideways onto the nature strip, mashed his lips into the grass.

"YOU DON'T," *whack*, "GO," *whack*, "THIS WAY!" *whack, whack!* "AND I KNOW YOU DOBBED ME IN!" I pounded the flat of the shovel

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on his head as I ranted. “There's something beneath,” *whack*, “the path you see?” *whack, whack!* “Something a one-eyed bugger like you wouldn't understand!” And I hit him once more.

The dog charged, barking, bit my leg. Growled like fucking White Fang in the fighting pit.

Elephant-snout tentacles tore loose from the earth shedding chunks of path. Liquid flesh swayed around me, bubbling out the cracks like piss-treacle through a sieve, forming appendages to flay about, whipping the air around and behind the hound. I swung the shovel, but they were quick; dodged and I missed. The dog bit down hard, ripped my jeans and calf. My neighbour groaned and attempted to crawl away, so I sprung at him, and struck him savagely, pinning him to the grass with the shovel blade on his spine. Pressed his head with my boot. The dog was ravaging my other leg, snapping and growling, shredding denim, and I could see blood entering my boot. Tentacles flayed my back and legs, suckers groped Mr Green. I grunted and pushed down on the shovel, trying to end the old man's pain; stop the monster's feast. One thick root quivered through the dirt and suckered Green's head, pulled his face into the grass. I swung at it, but all I succeeded in doing was clipping off my neighbour's ear and a ragged chunk of scalp.

I was roped in tentacles and brawling, when the dog yelped, put its tail between its legs and scampered toward home. I swung at it of course—mongrel wrecked me jeans—but missed, and the cheeky beggar escaped. ???

Squiddy congealed into an inky cloud hovering above the ground, stinking of fungal earth, writhing with worms, dangling feelers that dripped ichor onto Mr Green. The old man's body twitched, and he rolled on his back, unseeing of the abomination feeding above. Black patches on his cheeks were like jigsaw pieces of a night sky. Javelins of putrescence violated his nose, and forced themselves into his mouth, widening his jaws to do it. One blind stump fondled the hole that was once an ear, and a mass of thin stems entwined his neck, rose over his chin and covered his face.

I'd made a mistake.

My neighbour twitched and shuddering.

*Alive?*

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I had to finish the job; abort the feast. This amorphous entity was already bloated with pain, but I was betting it liked its food fresh and feeling. Maybe if the canary was dead, ol' tentacles wouldn't be so eager to feed?

That's when I killed him, Mr Green, although the memory's now little more than a blur. I recall bellowing and leaping into a cloud of eels, landing on the old man's chest, amid a sea of midnight vines. Ripped at his face, freed his eyes. Grabbed his throat and squeezed that scrawny neck, throttling until the monocle eye bulged. He struggled slightly beneath me, not much, not near enough, and then he breathed his last.

I buried the corpse beneath the garden in that hole I'd dug. It was conveniently the length of a grave, a shallow grave, but practical none-the-less. I covered the old man with dirt, and smiled as his ashen eyes disappeared beneath the soil.

The creature squealed when my neighbour died—I remember that too. Squealed like a lobster tossed into a cooking pot. I guess it somehow tasted death and that's what caused it to retreat, slithering away beneath the ground.

The police arrived and investigated. Dug up my garden after three days of inquiry, the garden I'd meticulously replanted. They'd found the monocle beneath my letterbox you see. My torn and bloody jeans on the clothes line. Bloodstains in the grass. Put one and two together and came up with six-six-six. The number of the beast, but the wrong beast, and arrested me instead.

I got institutionalised in an asylum, and the judge in condemnation threw away the key. I tried to warn them that there were creatures spawning in the cracks beneath the city, hiding beneath our footpaths and roads, but the prosecution made slight of my testimony. Said the only thing beneath my path was black ants, and not of a dangerous variety. All ants eat are dead insects and crumbs, not neighbours, and certainly don't kill with spades.

Ants don't need spades, I thought. They have pinchers and jaws, and if they were just a little bigger . . .

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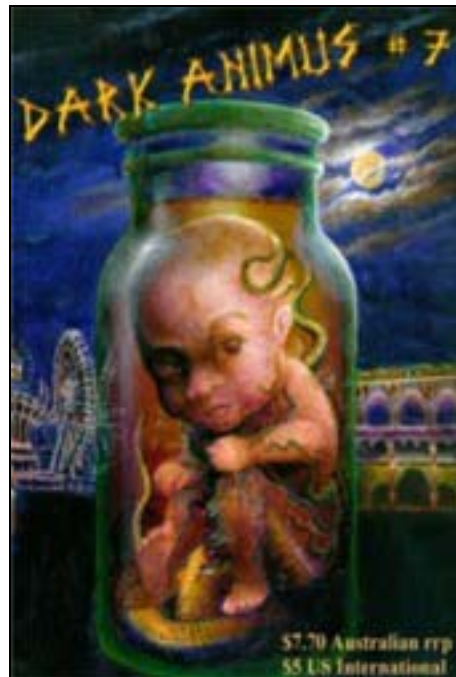
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And now, I sit cross-legged in a padded cell, staring at the moon watching me watching it from behind a shred of cloud. I don't have a bed, only a mattress on the floor. I'm not allowed anything metal since I took out an orderly's left eye with a spoon. They think I'm dangerous, but I'm not. Just protective. I'm the victim here. And, I'm staring into the dark, wondering . . .

Because there's a crack in the wall, just above the door, and I can't reach it, but I know it's there, a crooked rupture in the plaster. On nights like tonight, when it's dark and creepy, when I'm hurting inside, and feeling sorry for myself, depressed and in pain—it crawls forth into shadow. A little baby crack beast that lowers its roots to the floor. Slithering tendrils towards me in a numbing embrace. Feelers like so much black cotton, finding my shirt, past the buttons on my back, licks my skin, and breast, knowing the beat of my heart . . .

And when I'm feeling bad, really, really awful, it has mercy and takes away my pain.

THE END



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