

# CIRSOVA



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*Joshua Liebling, some Internet tough guy*

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# The Last Job on Harz

By TYLER YOUNG

***A bloody disaster has jeopardized the Company's mining interests on Harz, along with the fortunes of the local workers! Can Rick and the rookie assigned to him get to the bottom of the deaths that threaten to shut down the mining operations?!***

After seven days working on the planet's desolate surface, Hank was desperate to get back to the Company's central compound and take a real shower. At least it had been a profitable week, he thought. They had extracted nearly two thousand kilos of ore, which, depending on the day's market rate, could net them as much as \$2,000,000. Split among the fourteen of them, Hank was looking at more cash than he could've made in *months* back on Aho. Even so, his head was splitting from the too-bright sun, and his whole body felt grimy and chafed from the exposure suit that covered him from head to toe.

They were four miles from the compound when their transport broke an axle. They piled out of the passenger compartment, cursing Galt for his horseshit driving. It was quickly agreed that the axle couldn't be fixed in the field.

Kirk, who insisted that everyone call him Mr. Jepsen, spotted Hank edging away. "Hey, Hank. You're low man on the pole. Get up that ridge and set up the dish. Get Frank to send out one of his trucks to tow us in."

Hank sighed and looked at the cliff apprehensively. The steep incline of the rock face was the same dull red as the rest of the planet.

"And hey, don't you dare agree to a percentage of the haul. Flat fee only, you hear me?"

Hank ignored him and gathered the gear he'd need for the climb. After five sphincter-tightening minutes with a piton gun, he clambered over the top of the cliff face and lay on the plateau, chest heaving. He sat up and saw that he had a direct line of sight to the compound, a gleaming metal structure more than two kilometers in diameter.

Hank set the dish up quickly enough, but the negotiation dragged on interminably. Hank could hear Mr. Jepsen shouting over the intercom channel, but the interference made him unintelligible, so he muted it. In the end, Hank had to threaten to go with another towing service just to get him to accept a \$20,000 fee, which both of them knew was extortionate.

Whatever, he thought, they had all made a small fortune in a matter of days, and there was more where that came from.

Hank packed up the dish and swung himself over the edge to start the climb down. He was tired, but he made himself take the climb slowly. That gave him plenty of time to brace himself for the angry tirade he was sure to receive when Jepsen heard about the \$20,000. As if he could've done any better, Hank thought.

His boot hit the ground, and he turned around, expecting to see the other miners leaning against the transport, cracking jokes. But he didn't see anyone. He took a step forward, tripped over something and fell on his face. Looking back, he saw that it was the bloody stump of a leg, still in its heavily shielded exposure suit. He scrambled to his feet, heart hammering in his chest.

He flipped on his intercom and shouted, "Guys! Where are you?" But there was only the crackle of static. He rushed toward the transport, and then he saw them, lying in a heap near the rear of the vehicle. He darted to the transport's cabin, grabbed one of the rifles, and then inched toward the bodies, his breath coming in ragged gasps that were deafening in his helmet.

Their limbs and heads were torn off seemingly at random. Jesus, Hank thought, what the hell am I doing out here? He heard the sound of rocks clattering down a hill; something was moving on the

other side of the transport. He raised his rifle and stepped around the edge of the vehicle. And then he started to scream.

Rick woke up in his own bed for the first time in three months. Without opening his eyes, he reached over to his wife's side of the bed, but felt only cool sheets there. Jane must have been up for a while already, he thought, rolling over onto his other shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw that it was hours later than he expected. He was terribly space-lagged and wanted nothing more than to pull the covers over his head and fall back asleep. But it was procedure to report to the division chief within 24 hours of returning from any off-world mission. As his feet hit the floor, the room lights brightened, and the monitor mounted on the bedroom wall turned on, set to GNN's morning news show. Rick muted it with a downward slash of his hand. Jane might like to wake up to the news, he thought—an unsurprising habit for an investigative reporter—but it was too early to hear about the war, as far as he was concerned.

Rick walked into the kitchen to find Jane standing at the stove cooking French toast. He walked up behind her, put his arms around her waist, and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“You know you don't have to keep going to all this trouble every time I come back from a case. I really don't mind the stuff from the processor,” he told her.

“It's tradition,” she said, flipping a piece of toast. “Besides, I'll only need to do it a few more times before you're retired and home for good. Retired enough for us to finally see some of the system together, anyway.”

Rick grunted, kissed her on the cheek, and sat down at the table with a hard ball of stress forming in his belly. He was grimly aware that it would likely remain there for the rest of the day. I should just tell her, he thought.

Like many couples who spent much of their marriage apart, they had developed their own particular ways of staying close and



connected. In the past few years, their shared hobby had been planning their perfect, glorious retirement, which was going to start with a 6-week, 8-planet cruise through the system. But there was no way they could afford that now, thanks to Bill, Rick's goddamn brother and former business partner.

No, Rick decided, he would figure out a way to fix this: Jane didn't need to know, not yet, anyway.

"You do like my French toast better, right?" Jane asked with a note of mild concern in her voice.

"What? Of course, I do, hon. That's most of the reason I married you."

"Then why do you look so grouchy all of a sudden?"

"I just need to get down to the station and get this report over with before I can relax. And hey, didn't I set the alarm for 6:00? It didn't go off until 8:00."

"Oh come on," she said putting a plate down in front of him. "John won't mind if you're an hour or two late because you wanted to see your wife."

"Now that you mention it, I really like what I see," Rick said, undoing the belt of her robe.

An hour later, Rick tumbled into his car and started scrolling through his case notes on the way to the office. In truth, he didn't really need to review. This had been one of the longer off-world assignments of his career: three months on Vero untangling a seemingly never-ending series of vendetta killings between two of the ruling families. At the end of the case, he'd had no one to arrest—they'd all been killed—but he had negotiated an uneasy peace between the two factions. And just as importantly, to Rick at least, he had figured out what started the whole gory affair. HQ's data analytics department had predicted that the feud was, at heart, a territorial dispute, perhaps even a struggle for control of the local

political machinery. But in truth, it had all started with a love affair gone bad. As far as Rick was concerned, he'd solved the hell out of the case. And frankly, he was looking forward to receiving some well-deserved accolades during this debrief. Not many agents were capable of this kind of work, even fewer now that half of the senior agents had left to fight at the Rift.

The transom light above his boss's door showed green, so Rick put his palm on the access plate, and the door slid open immediately. Rick was one of the few agents with walk-in privileges to this office, and he was justifiably proud of that.

"Rick!" his old friend said, coming from around his desk to deliver a bone-crushing hug and a few teeth-rattling backslaps. "It's good to see you, bud. You've seen Jane right? You didn't come straight from the 'port?"

"I won't make that mistake again, chief. We just shared a nice little breakfast," Rick added with a chuckle.

John smirked. "Really? Good for you, old man!"

The chief moved back to sit behind his desk. Life in management was starting to catch up with him, Rick thought. John had always been a powerful guy, with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, and disproportionately long arms. In the academy his nickname had been the Gorilla. But in the past few years, John had started to develop a hard little paunch. His dress shirt was stretched taut across it, and Rick doubted that he could button the suit jacket hanging off the chair. Actually, Rick thought, the belly made him look even more like a gorilla, but not in a flattering way.

"Well, I know you're busy, chief, and I'm sure Jane's got a table for the four of us booked somewhere too expensive for tonight. Do you want to knock out this briefing quickly?" Rick slid into one of the visitor's chairs and pulled out his tablet so that he could access his files during his oral report.

John grimaced, "Actually, bud, I'm going to have to take a rain check on your report and probably the dinner, too."

“Everything all right, boss?”

The chief shifted uncomfortably in his plush seat. “I’ve got to find a senior agent to send off world, basically right now. And all of my senior dicks—like you—just finished off-worlds and are on guaranteed on-planet rest time. Everyone is ducking my calls.”

Something big must have happened, Rick thought, cursing himself for turning off the news. “What’s the case?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. All I know is that the Company requested—no, I guess requested is the wrong word—ordered me to get one of my senior agents out to Harz ASAP.”

“Wait, *the* Company?”

“Yeah,” John said, nodding, “*the fucking* Company: Universal Resources. Some exec from the Chairman’s office,” John looked down at his reader, “Phillips, called me and told me that this was my top priority.”

“Well, you know what they say: he who has the arbitrium makes the rules.”

John heaved an enormous sigh. “Yeah, that has a ring to it. Look, I hate to do this to you, but I’ve got to kick you out right now. I need to start hitting the phones again. I can’t order any of these guys to go off-world again so soon, so I’m going to have to try to call in some big favors.”

Rick’s mind was racing. The Company. *The* Company. Always growing. Always expanding. Always *hiring*. Rick knew it was a ridiculous thought, but the wheels were in motion. It would mean a desk, sure, but a big desk. Maybe with one of those massage chairs like John was sitting in. His own secretary. Benefits. Security. Jane would never have to worry. She’d never even have to know how Bill had skipped out with their life savings...

“Send me.”

The chief rocked back in his chair and pursed his lips. “Rick, you haven’t seen Jane in months. What’s going on?”

“Can’t I just want to help out my oldest friend?” Rick plastered his best shit-eating grin onto his face.

“Nope. For 20 years you’ve been telling me that everyone’s playing an angle. I think I finally learned that lesson.”

“Hey, I thought you were in a bind, chief.” Rick shrugged his shoulders.

“Look, I could really use your help. But I don’t want to send you out if you’re on the ragged edge. Besides, you know how Jane will react. She’ll complain to Sue, and then Sue’ll take it out on me. I’ll be sleeping on the cot for a fucking week, buddy. So come on: tell me why.”

“Let’s just say it couldn’t hurt to be on the Chairman’s good side.”

“Hey, for what it’s worth, I know government work doesn’t pay all that well, so you know if you and Jane ever need money—”

Rick shot him a look, and John stopped in midsentence. John let out a slow breath as he scratched his chest. “I guess that’s reason enough. All right, I’ll smooth things over with Jane,” the chief winced, “and I’ll have a recruit meet you at the ‘port with a duty bag. You better hit the road.”

“You got a case file for me to read on the way?”

“No,” John growled. “The Company shit said this was ‘sensitive.’ They’ll transmit the info to you once you’re in-flight. Little shit,” he added.

“See you, John.”

Rick stood up, thinking of the best way to explain this to Jane. Before he reached the door, the chief called out, “Oh, and one more thing: you’re breaking in a new rook’ on this case.”

Rick stopped in midstride and let his head fall forward until his chin rested on his chest. “John, come on. Give him to someone else. I don’t want to babysit some green kid.”

“I wouldn’t stick you with a liability on an off-world mission, Rick.” There was a hint of ice in John’s voice now. “He’s a two-tour Rift vet, and he’s smart. I was going to send him on your next mission in a month or so, but if you’re taking this case, he’s going with you—period. He’s got a future here, and I want him trained by my best. That’s you.”

“Yeah, or maybe you’re thinking I’ve lost a step and need someone to—”

John interrupted, “Rick, you’ve gotta stop looking for the ulterior motive with your friends, okay? I’m not working an angle.”

As Rick walked out the door, he called over his shoulder, “Just because it’s a good angle doesn’t mean it’s not an angle, boss.”

“See you in a couple of weeks, hombre,” John shouted back, laughing, as the door slid shut.

Rick jogged down the moving walkway toward his departure hangar. The monitors lining the wall next to him blared out the morning’s reports on the Rift War: one of the Squids’ attack ships had made it past the defenses and was screaming toward an inhabited world. Seven Corps ships were harrying it. Rick listened for a minute to see if they were going to say anything about Harz. When the anchor started talking about the upcoming election, Rick knew he wasn’t going to hear anything interesting, so he killed the audio.

He called his wife’s line but it went straight to voicemail. “Hey baby, I think John’s already called you. Maybe you’re on the line with him now. I’m sorry about going off-world again. I’ll make it up to you when I get back. I promise.”

Rick was still nearly a kilometer from gate 14, so he pulled up his partner’s profile and started to read. Four minutes later, Rick realized

that he didn't need the agency photo to spot his new partner. Brian Kole was immediately recognizable as a former, and recent, military officer. He still had the ramrod straight posture of a Corps trooper. But, Rick admitted, you didn't exactly have to be a detective to notice the harsh military haircut, either. The kid was staring intently at a reader, and waiting for the transport to start boarding.

"Brian, I presume?" Rick asked, holding out his hand.

"Yessir. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant Marlowe."

"Rick."

The kid smiled guilelessly. "Okay, Rick."

"Whatcha reading?"

"Oh, the wiki on Harz. I guess that's all we've got to go on right now."

The two men sized each other up in silence for a moment. Rick was uncomfortably aware that the comparison didn't do him any favors. Unlike John, Rick had kept the fat off, thanks to a combination of stress and daily runs. But the rookie was at least 10 centimeters taller, well over two meters, and looked well rested and alert. Even the rookie's suit looked flawlessly pressed, his tie bar a perfect horizontal line. He might as well have been wearing dress blues.

"So, kid, why'd you leave the Corps, and how'd you end up in the agency?" Rick knew the answer to both questions from the personnel file, of course, but he wanted to see how the kid would react.

"Well, the answer to the first one's simple," Brian replied, lifting up his left pant leg to show a custom cybernetic prosthetic. "I'm not exactly battled-rated anymore."

Rick nodded his sympathy.

"As for the other question," Brian paused for a moment, as if trying to decide between the true answer and the right answer, "I guess I

just didn't want to sit in an office all day long." He shrugged.

Rick tilted his head to one side slightly but said nothing, the oldest trick in the interrogator's manual. But the kid stared back with a degree of self-possession that surprised Rick. After a long pause, the kid broke. "Besides, I imagine you know as much about me as I do after reading my file."

Rick barked a laugh.

"Well, why'd you join the agency?"

For a moment Rick thought about brushing the kid off but realized that he liked him already. "I joined because I wanted adventure. At the time, the agency was a good way to see exotic worlds and maybe kick a little ass."

"That sounds pretty good."

"It may sound good, but it ain't. Trust me. Exotic is frequently just shitty, and dusty, and so high-G that you're tired even when you're lying in bed. The reason I'm still here after twenty years has nothing to do with adventure."

Brian opened his mouth to say something but was drowned out by a disembodied voice announcing that their flight was now ready to begin boarding.

"Okay, kid. They'll wake us about four hours before we land on Harz. They tell me the case file will be loaded by then. Read it. Then read it again. When we land, be ready to tell me what you think we're going to find down there."

Brian nodded.

"This is not a training mission, got it? There's something there that's hot enough to get the Company spooked. And that worries me."

They started walking up the ramp, and Rick leaned in closer and said under his breath, "And lay off the barber for a while. We're a

little more effective if people don't recognize us as government a mile away okay?"

Another 15 pounds or so would also help the kid blend in, but Rick thought that problem would solve itself by the kid's third or fourth stakeout.

Four days later, Rick found the kid at the bottom of the rocketway, talking to the most beautiful woman Rick had ever seen. As Rick approached, she tucked a lock of jet black hair behind her ear, flashed a 10,000-watt smile at Brian, and then turned to Rick and held out her hand.

"You must be Rick. I'm Helen Mauer, SVP of Colonial Resource Development for Universal Resources."

They shook. Her hand was dry and cool and amazingly soft. Rick felt his pulse quicken.

"I hear that we may be seeing a lot more of each other if this goes well." For a moment, Rick was puzzled and then he realized John must have been doing some matchmaking. He was searching for an appropriate response when Helen continued with her smooth introduction.

"Anyway, thank you both for coming on such short notice. We don't mean to seem hysterical, but as you know this is a very valuable and *strategically important* installation. The company has nearly fifty billion dollars invested in the planet's development, not including the valuable mining machinery that's currently leased to our nearly 1,000 independent contractor mining consultants. We want to figure out what happened ASAP. We're not taking any chances."

Both men nodded, faces serious. After a moment, Rick realized that she expected some kind of response. "Believe me," Rick said, "we understand the sensitivity. My boss told me that this case was his number one priority. We're going to act accordingly."

Helen nodded and led them away from the ship.



Well, Rick thought, I'm going to have to work on kissing up to suits if I'm going to make this work. Helen led them out into an open area that had the feel of a warehouse. Men wearing bright orange jumpsuits were using heavy machines to load what must have been arbitium into shipping containers. Helen walked through the clanking chaos and toward a corridor marked Corporate Offices.

"You've both read the report and seen the pics we sent, yes?"

"Of course."

"Good. I assume you'll want to start with our exobiology lab."

Rick cocked his head to look at Helen. "You have an exo lab on a mining planet?"

Helen laughed, an intoxicating, tinkling sound. "Yes, it's a little unusual, I suppose." As she spoke, she reached up and patted Rick casually on the arm. Without thinking, Rick flexed his bicep under her touch and then cursed himself for doing it.

"I came up in the bio-sciences side of the company, and I suppose I'm biased by my background. I always insist on decent bio facilities on any planet I run. Although, I'll admit the techs haven't had much to do here until recently. And they complain constantly because they can't really communicate with the universities on a regular basis—solar interference," she explained, pointing up. "But it's a good thing we do have the lab. They've been able to do some good preliminary work on the secretions left on the bodies."

Rick grunted in acknowledgement. "All the same, I'd like to start by examining the claim that the deceased were working."

Brian opened his mouth to speak, but Rick held up his hand to silence him.

Helen seemed nonplussed for a moment, but recovered smoothly, "Of course, you're the experts. I'll have transport ready for you presently. Here's my private number." She touched her wrist computer to each of theirs in turn. "If you need anything, don't

hesitate to contact me. When you get back, just ping any terminal and it will direct you to your quarters.”

Twenty minutes later, Rick and Brian, dressed in full-body exposure suits, were bouncing out over the rough surface of the planet in a heavily shielded rover. A soft, pleasant voice perpetually reminded them, “Surface conditions are extremely dangerous. Solar radiation is more than 100 times higher than Earth conditions, and the atmosphere contains toxic gases. Protective gear must be worn at all times. Surface conditions are...” until both men had hit a button to acknowledge the warning.

The red waste stretched out before them in every direction, a desert landscape of sharp jutting cliffs and treacherous crevasses. Like Mars before it was terraformed, Rick thought, only less hospitable. The only relief from the dusty red monotony was the occasional stunted tree, which resembled Earth’s acacia trees, and the steaming urine-yellow chemical pools. The service road they were following was the only sign of human occupation. At the edge of the horizon, Mount Harz, a 14-kilometer-tall volcano, glowered, belching ash and smoke.

“What a godforsaken place,” Brian said after a few minutes of silence. “But I suppose there is *some* nice local scenery.”

Rick looked around for a moment and then said, “Oh, Helen. Yeah.”

“I think she was vibing you a bit, man.”

Rick chuckled. Did this kid really not recognize when a woman was playing him? He’s still young, Rick reminded himself.

“Anyway, you’ve had four hours to think. What are we going to find?”

“Well, you saw the same pics. It looks like an alien attack. The miners were pretty torn up, and they had nasty chemical burns from some kind of base or acid. My guess is they got ambushed on the

way back from their claim. As for what we're going to find out at the mine they were working, I have no idea," Brian finished, a touch of frustration creeping into his voice.

"Back up. Don't think about what it looks like. Think about what we know: fourteen miners, pretty rough customers themselves, torn up and killed before any of them could get a shot off. Now, ask yourself *cui bono*?"

"Who benefits," Brian translated. Rick was a little surprised that the kid knew his Latin.

Brian was quiet for a second. "Who benefits from an alien attack? No one. I mean, a few terrorists have tried bioweapons, but they never seem to work, and I can't imagine they'd attack Harz. It's out in the boondocks, and also no one wants to risk fucking up the Rift War by interrupting the arbitium supply."

"We don't know this was an alien attack. In fact, I think that's highly unlikely. The Company has had thousands of people on this planet for the better part of a year now, and there haven't been any attacks. More importantly, there's just way too much money sloshing around out here. These miners took a big chance leasing a claim from the Company—and probably took a few years off their lives working out here—but if they hit it big, they'd be rich. They don't draw a salary from the company, but they get a piece of the ore their mine produces. They're basically sharecroppers. My guess is that we'll find that these guys hit the motherlode, and that's what got them killed, probably by other miners hoping to jump their claim, somehow."

"And what, the miners threw acid on them and tore them up to make it look like aliens?"

"Convinced?"

Brian scoffed and shook his head.

"Look, kid, when you've been doing this as long as I have, you're gonna realize people are capable of just about anything when money

is on the line. If there's enough of it at stake, they get pretty creative, too. And here we are."

They crested a rise and saw the miners' claim spread out in the valley below. It didn't look like much: a cluster of rudimentary shielded huts grouped next to a large drilling platform. The machinery seemed tiny in the red, blasted landscape, but Rick knew that the shaft extended several hundred meters below the ground. And if there was ore down there, this crappy little outpost could generate millions upon millions of dollars.

It took them half an hour to figure out what button told the drilling platform to raise the coring mechanism. And it took the winch another five minutes to do the job. After a few whacks with a wrench that Rick found lying on the platform, he managed to dislodge a manageable chunk of unrefined ore. Rick dropped it into a plasteel evidence container and locked it.

"I'm guessing this is nearly pure arbitium," Rick said, shaking the container.

Brian didn't respond. His head was swiveling back and forth, his eyes scanning the horizon.

"What?"

Rick could feel the anxiety radiating off the other man in waves. Was the kid freaking out, he wondered? His psych profile was clean of PTSD indicators, but it's always a possibility. All the same, Rick pushed his tongue against his lower jaw, and the weapon strapped to his wrist—a J&H Mark-50 rapid-fire flechette gun, known as an enforcer in agency slang—hummed to life, safety off.

"I heard... something."

"Machinery?"

"I don't think so."

They stood for several minutes, straining to hear over the sound of the wind and dust being piped into their helmets. Finally, Rick stood up out of his battle crouch and said, "Let's get out of here."

They walked quickly back to the car. The conditions were oppressive. Rick could understand how the kid got spooked. He opened the rover's back door and tossed the ore sample into the cargo bay. As he moved to the driver's door, he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. Before he could react, something enormous struck him in the lower back, slamming him into the rover. His faceplate cracked under the impact, and grit and sand immediately swirled in, stinging his eyes. Rick fell to the ground. He was completely disoriented, but his training took over. He rolled over three times until he was sheltered under the rover.

He looked out in the direction the attack had come, but the world was a reddish-orange blur. He blinked several times and put a hand over the crack in his faceplate, which at least stopped new sand from blowing in. Through blurry eyes, he saw something black and green bound away, leap up against the nearest cliff face, and then charge back toward him. Rick tried to lift his right arm to sight the blur hurtling toward him, but a lance of pain shot down his shoulder and wrist. He bit down, concentrating. But before he could target the creature, the air was split by the clanking, grinding sound of Brian's enforcer firing at maximum, accompanied by the high tinkling of the tiny shells hitting the rocky ground.

The creature stumbled under the barrage. For a split-second, Rick thought it might just keep coming, but then the explosive rounds started to detonate and the creature hit the ground. Its momentum carried it to within 20 feet of the rover. When it was clear that it was dead, Rick rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, gasping for breath.

A moment later, something grabbed his boot and dragged him out into the harsh sunlight. He raised his arm to fire but saw that it was Brian, his arm still pointing out toward the horizon, pulling frantically.

"Jesus kid, give me a—"

“They’re coming!” Brian shouted. He hauled Rick to his feet, firing with his free arm. Now Rick saw what must have been hundreds of the black and green shapes bounding down the hill toward them. Rick opened the door and half crawled, half fell over the transmission hump into the passenger seat. Brian’s enforcer thundered again as he jumped into the rover. Rick’s eyes were burning terribly now, and his vision was starting to go black at the edges. He pulled off his helmet and searched frantically for the eye wash, vaguely aware that the rover was now hurtling forward, bouncing over hillocks and crashing into potholes. At last his hands closed over the smooth cylinder and he sprayed the gel into his eyes. The pain dissipated immediately and his vision cleared a bit. The speedometer read 85 km/hr.

“Kid, slow down, you’re going to break an axle. We’re outta there.”

“Uh, I don’t think you want me to.” Brian’s voice was taut with tension.

The side mirror was gone, so Rick clambered around to kneel on his seat, facing backward. The creatures were keeping pace with them, he saw, leaping forward in huge, apparently effortless bounds. It was like they had springs in their hind legs, Rick thought, like a cross between a praying mantis and a fucking kangaroo. A powerful leap brought one of the wolf-sized creatures within spitting distance of the rover, and Rick caught a blurry glimpse of an armored, segmented body, long arms ending in curved claws, and a narrow insect-like head.

Rick was trying to figure out the best way to shoot from inside the rover when he felt a searing pain spread across his back. It was agony, like someone had a blowtorch up against his spine. And now he could smell his flesh burning. Frantic, he fumbled for the straps on his chest plate. As the last one popped loose, he felt Brian pull the heavy plasteel plate off of his back and fling it into the cargo area. It was smeared with a greenish, bubbling substance that was eating through the rugged material like paper.

“Thanks,” Rick said, flopping forward against the rover’s seat. He breathed deeply for a few seconds and then moved to heave himself up again.

“Relax, relax. We’re on the service road now. I’m doing 140. They gave up.”

“Thank God. Hey, kid, I think you’ve got a future in this agency,” Rick said weakly, and then let himself slip into unconsciousness.

Rick woke lying on his stomach in an infirmary bed. He pulled himself up onto his elbows and looked around. He occupied one of five beds in a sterile medical facility, every inch of which seemed to be made of brushed steel. He felt something touch his back and looked over his shoulder. A nursebot—an older model; just a computer hooked up to an actuator arm, really—was slathering some kind of goo on his burned back. It tingled. Maybe that meant it was working.

“Doctor?” he called.

But the room appeared to be empty. Rick pinged Brian’s comm but got only static. After thinking for a moment, he tried Helen’s. She answered immediately and held up her communicator so that Rick could see Brian as well. The connection was bad, but she said they would be there to debrief him in ten minutes and then hung up.

Rick lay there, turning the attack over in his mind. Something was niggling him, something that just didn’t seem right. Brian had fought like a real trooper and had certainly saved Rick’s ass when he could’ve left him for dead. He’d write the kid up for a valorous service citation, an honor rarely earned on a rookie mission. But there was something off... No, he just couldn’t put his finger on it. He knew from experience that he couldn’t force this kind of connection. He’d have to distract himself and hope it emerged.

Rick pulled his wrist computer up onto the bed and tried to establish a connection with the agency, but the status bar wouldn’t move. After a few seconds, a dialog box popped up and told him:

“off-world communications down due to solar flare.” Frustrated, Rick checked his agency email, hoping that the system had managed to pull some data down while he was out. He was in luck. He had just over a hundred unread messages but they were all junk. The only interesting message was an alert informing him that his wife had published a story. After a moment, he realized that his wife hadn’t sent him the link. Bad sign.

With nothing else to do, Rick started to read with real interest. It drove him crazy, but Jane would never let him see her drafts. He knew the subject of her stories and the names of the participants in advance, but he didn’t know the story until he read it on the web, same as everyone else. Within the first ten paragraphs, he knew this was one of the better pieces, a thoughtful exploration of life on the breakaway polygamous colony of Nephri.

He forced himself to finish the article before checking its UPV count. He hated himself for checking at all. Jane drew a salary from the Galactic Herald, but it wasn’t much. She, like most newspeople, was expected to get the bulk of her compensation through incentive payments based on unique page views or UPVs. Her numbers were up on this article, probably because of the sex angle, but they were still nowhere near the UPVs garnered by the most banal update from the Rift. Jane had never had any interest in being a war correspondent, though—Rick’s train of thought was broken by the sound of the infirmary’s doors sliding open. He craned his neck and saw Helen and Brian walking toward him.

“How you feeling, chief?”

“I’ve been worse, thanks to you, kid. You saved my ass.”

Brian shrugged, an aw-shucks gesture that seemed too boyish on a hardened killer, and said simply, “You’d’ve done the same for me.”

Helen leaned down to Rick’s level. “Rick, I just want you to know that the Company deeply regrets this. We never meant for anything like this to happen to you.”



“Of course you didn’t,” Rick said, a little perplexed, and turned back to look at Brian. “How long have I been out? And have you managed to check in with HQ?”

“You’ve been out for fourteen hours, and no, comms have been down the whole time. Once in a while, we’re able to pull something down passively through the interference, but getting anything out has been a nightmare. Still, the forecasts are saying that the solar flares will die down in the next four to six hours. The satellites might—*might*—even be able to punch through and give us some recon pics of the area.”

“Okay, what have you been doing while I’ve been out?”

“Well, I got a solid ten hours of rack time, I don’t mind telling you.”

“Good. Hey, did you get hurt at all?”

“No, not a scratch, thanks. Okay, I ran the analysis on that ore sample. You were right: it’s basically pure arbitium. That mine is worth a fortune.”

“Huh, it’s always nice to be right. But I guess it doesn’t matter now; I doubt those things were interested in the miners’ landholdings. Go on.”

“After that, I checked in with Exo. It’s a good thing they’ve got an Exo department, by the way, because they engineered the compound that’s being applied to your back. Without it, you’d be paralyzed by now and dead in a day, so the docs tell me. As it is, you’re going to be stiff for quite a while.”

“Great. Can I get up and move around now?”

“Sorry, boss. You’ve got a few more hours of treatments ahead of you. What should I be doing?”

“First, connect with the head of security. Make sure the compound is buttoned up tight. And send a security alert pulling all colony personnel back to the central compound.”

Helen cut him off. “Excuse me, Rick. I want to do everything I can to accommodate your investigation. But that’s my call. You haven’t declared an HLC, so I’m still running this planet.

“Ms. Mauer—”

“Look, I want to figure this out as much as you do,” she plowed on. “But I answer only to the Company. Every hour our operation is shut down costs roughly \$1 million, okay? I’m not ready to do that. I’d appreciate it if you could think pragmatically and figure out a way to address the safety concerns but minimize the impact on operations.”

“Okay,” Rick said, taking a deep breath. It was clear this was a job-interview moment, so he thought carefully before responding. “Will you agree to inform colony personnel to be on alert and recommend that those who are not actively working return to the compound?”

Helen considered this for a second and then nodded. She started typing furiously on her wrist computer.

“Next, we’ve got to figure out where these things came from. Let’s get whatever the Company has on indigenous life forms. I didn’t see much in the case file. There’s got to be more than that. And if there’s nothing written down, let’s start talking to people. I want to know what we’re dealing with here. Oh, and go ask your buddies from Exo if they can tell if this is an engineered organism.”

Helen looked up sharply from her communicator. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s just a thought,” Rick said. “You’ve had people on this planet for a year with no attacks. Now you’ve had two attacks in a week. There are lots of possible explanations. Maybe the miners just crossed into the Roos’ territory.” Brian laughed at the name; Helen frowned. “Or maybe we’re seeing these creatures now because they just got here. Anyway, it’s worth asking.”

“That’s a great point,” Helen said. She smiled brightly and patted his shoulder appreciatively. “I’ll have my exo people look into that

immediately.” She walked to the other end of the infirmary and started talking quietly into her communicator.

“All right. Be back here in four hours. If the storm’s cleared, we’ll report and see what HQ wants us to do. If not, I guess we’ll sit tight for the night.” He gestured for Brian to bend down, and whispered, “I really don’t want to call an HLC without running it by the brass. That’d automatically dispatch the system’s local Corps brigade; that’s a bureaucratic nightmare, and I bet the Company would hate having them on planet. But if there are any more attacks, I might not have a choice.”

The waiting was driving Rick crazy. Another gel application, another round of tingling, and then the pain would start to creep back until the robotic arm painted his back again. He had another two hours left, and he didn’t want to think about what it would feel like when the treatments stopped. A bit stiff, my ass, he thought.

He tried to connect to his email again without any expectation that it would work. Same error message. Rick slammed his hand down in frustration, and a new message was waiting for him: “Would you like to access the colonial mining network?” Hell yes. The browser told him that he had been given guest-level access. After a few minutes’ exploration, Rick realized that this only allowed him to read the local news page and review public records, like land claims and leasing contracts.

He pulled up the news site, wondering what they reported on out here on Harz. If things didn’t improve, he thought bleakly, he and Jane just might end up finding out firsthand. The banner headline ran “Three Weeks Until the Measurement.” The tone of the article was almost giddy, a far cry from the detached, clinical tone the Herald cultivated, but Rick couldn’t quite figure out what all the fuss was about. Like any specialized news site, it assumed a great deal of knowledge and familiarity with terms and players. Rick had to read four different articles before he pieced it all together. Apparently, the Federal Services Department of Mining and Extraction was coming out to test and measure every mine. It sounded pretty unremarkable,

but the comments were ecstatic, chattering about the prospect of a huge payout.

Brian's face replaced the text over an incoming-call banner.

"Boss, I think they found the guy who did it. But you're not going to like it."

"Already? How'd you find him?"

"I didn't find anyone. Apparently, Helen had the Company start running background checks on everyone on planet with any sort of bioscience training. This guy, Michael Dettman, popped up. He was a hair's breadth away from his PhD when he got tossed out of LU for selling research materials. He worked for a couple of startup biotechs, but nothing ever took off. He arrived on-planet six weeks ago."

"Jesus. How many fucking bioscientists are there on a mining planet? That's a pretty good lead. Okay, what am I not going to like?"

"Well, Helen thought the same thing, so she sent in the cavalry to apprehend the guy," Brian panned his camera around to give Rick a view of an austere, modular housing compartment, the interior of which was dominated by scientific equipment and large vats. The walls were scorched and many of the vats were now shattered. "I guess the local cowboys put two and two together when they saw all of the growth vats. After that, things got... a little carried away. He's dead."

"Are you telling me that one lab rat made all of these things?"

"It looks that way, boss."

"How'd he manage it on his own? And what was the fucking point?"

"You got me."

"All right, I'm coming out there. My last treatment's almost done. Can you tell Ms. Mauer to kindly have someone waiting by my door to drive me?"

Brian nodded, and Rick killed the link.

Fifteen minutes later, Rick rode out of the central compound in another heavily armored rover. The boy driving him couldn't have been more than 19 years old, which made Rick realize that Brian wasn't actually such a baby; he was just such a geezer. The boy was twitchy, keyed up, obviously scared.

"What's your name, son?"

"Danny, sir."

"Take a breath, Danny. It's going to be fine. How long have you been Colonial militia?"

"Five weeks," the kid said with a laugh that sounded more desperate than amused, "but I've been mining here with my mom and dad since the planet was settled."

He really is just a baby, Rick thought. Better take his mind off the fact that we're going outside the compound.

"So what's this measurement thing I read about on the net?"

Danny smiled broadly. "Only two more weeks now! The standards department is going to come in and inspect all the claims. For genners—sorry, first generation miners like us, the ones who got here first—we get a bonus of 15% of the total 'accessible ore' in our mine. We don't know how big the payout's going to be exactly, but we're gonna leave this slagheap in style, I tell you that! The company can work the mine itself, as far as I'm concerned." The boy was warming to his topic now, and Rick noticed that his hands had relaxed on the wheel.

"Why'd the company agree to that?" Rick asked, mostly to keep the boy talking.

"Had to, didn't they? When people realized how toxic it was to work out here, they wouldn't leave the compound. They had a four-

week strike. It got pretty rough for a while. There was even some talk of a revolt.”

“Really?” Rick asked, frowning. He hadn’t heard about a strike, which surprised him.

“Well, I doubt it got much press off-world. We weren’t producing yet, so it didn’t ding the ore supply, and no one really seems to care what happens out here, aside from the ore. In the end, they had to offer these incentives to get people to work the mines. My dad says that if he’s going to grow gills, he wants to be able to afford a really nice fishbowl to swim around in.” The boy laughed at his dad’s joke, which endeared him to Rick immensely.

Danny pulled up outside a prefabbed metal housing unit marked 742. The squat metallic trailer stood alone in the landscape of desolate red plains dotted with an occasional yellowish chemical lake. The only signs of life Rick could see were a few scraggly patches of purplish crabgrass. What were the Roos living on, he wondered?

“Here we are, sir.”

“Thanks. Stay here and keep the rover running, okay? Hit the horn if you see anything.”

With that, Rick slammed the door and jogged to the building, ignoring the pain building in his back. Inside, the odor was assaulting, a combination of stinging cleaning products and wet, rotten flesh. Rick looked around at the one enormous room, and realized it was exclusively a genetics laboratory. The only indication that someone actually lived here was a small dirty cot and an open trunk in the corner.

Brian and Helen walked up to him. Helen seemed to be doing her best to look chastened and repentant, but it didn’t suit her.

“I’m sorry about the raid, Rick. I didn’t think it would go like this.”

“It’s too late to worry about it now. The bigger issue is how the hell this guy managed to get this much-restricted technology onto your

planet, Ms. Mauer. Just having this stuff without a license is a serious felony.”

Helen crossed her arms. “Look, these are miners, okay? Why do you think they’re out here on this rock? They’re all paleolibertarians; most of ’em vote Rand Party religiously. They don’t take kindly to snooping. So we mind our own business. Everyone understands the rules. As long as they’re not killing someone or interfering with the ore supply, and they keep it out of the company’s face, we don’t care.”

“They’re not overly concerned with many laws, it seems,” Brian interjected.

“Oh?” Rick turned to look at his partner.

“Yeah, I was looking into the dead miners, like you said. They’re all deserters, under active warrants from the Corps.” There was real venom in Brian’s voice. “It looks like the Company’s brilliant hands-off policy is working really well, Ma’am.”

“Listen, both of you—” but Helen’s voice was drowned out by the wail of an alarm, and the militia troops swarmed toward them, pushing them out of the building. They struggled to get their helmets back on before they were forced outside and into the waiting transports.

Once inside the vehicle, Rick could hear the radio chatter over the vehicle’s speakers, and the militiamen’s panicked expressions started to make sense.

“—’re coming right—” The transmission cut off in a squawk of static. “—the captain’s dead. Oh shit, there must be thousands of them. They’re—”

Helen sat forward, face ashen, “Thousands, how can there be?”

“Can’t see—back to—” and then the line went completely dead, without even the crackle of static.

The transport was thundering back toward the compound. Through the rearview window, they could see the flash and flare of gunfire in the distance and the occasional firework of orange as a grenade detonated.

“I really need that uplink,” Rick said.

Brian shook his head, face pale, eyes vacant.

The compound was a frenzy of activity. Miners with their families were milling around, company suits were frantically pecking at their computers, and armed men, apparently hundreds of them, were jogging in tight little groups toward various security checkpoints.

As they stumbled out of the rover, Rick grabbed Helen by the arm. She spun around to face him, too stunned to protest the rough treatment.

“Helen, how many men under arms do you have?”

“Uh, about 100 active at any time, but another 200 are militia reserves with decent training.”

Rick was pleasantly surprised. For a colony of just over 1,000, they were heavily armed and apparently well trained.

“Call them all up. Get your defenses manned.”

“It’s already done.”

“Good, do you have a command post?”

Helen was staring vacantly at the churning crowd, one hand grasping the other convulsively.

“Helen!” Rick shouted, shaking her.

Helen’s head snapped around. Her eyes seemed to focus. “Yes, this way.” She turned on her heel and quickly led them through the open hangar back into the company offices, scanning her palm repeatedly as they moved into increasingly secure areas.



Eventually, she led them into a room marked Communications and Security. There were three computer terminals, each with a harried-looking company employee typing furiously. The far wall was devoted entirely to an enormous monitor, which was split into eight windows, each showing a different view of the compound's perimeter.

"Any contact?" Brian asked the room.

One of the techs turned to look at the room's new occupants. Helen nodded, and the tech answered.

"The last of the rovers just pulled back into the hangar. They had rolling engagement up until about two miles out, when they got on the better roads and could outrun the things. No direct contact on the compound's perimeter yet."

"What about the miners? Did anyone send the alert telling them to get back to the compound?" Brian asked.

Rick looked over at Helen, who had the decency to look embarrassed.

"We did just a few minutes ago. Sorry, Ms. Mauer, we just didn't think that we could wait for you."

"You did the right thing, Brad." Helen smiled that dazzling smile at the tech.

"Anyway," the tech continued, "we got lucky there. The first alert spooked 'em enough that nearly everyone came back to base, even though it wasn't required. Those who stayed out must have been listening to the militia band because they started pouring in minutes after your outriders got hit. We just did a transponder check, and it looks like everyone's tucked in safe and sound. And not a moment too soon. At the speed those things are moving, I'd guess they'll be here in about thirty seconds."

Helen tossed her hair, any trace of embarrassment gone. "Well, it sounds like everything worked out just fine. Everyone's in the compound. We're safe here."

Rick frowned. "Let's maximize the view from the side they'll hit first."

The tech punched some keys, and a single video feed appeared on the screen. Nothing moved. It might as well have been a still picture of the landscape.

"Relax, sir. Whatever these things are, they can't possibly get through the compound's walls. They're incredibly tough," the tech boasted.

Rick just watched the screen in silence.

Just when Rick was starting to wonder if the Roos were going to leave the compound alone, they crested the horizon like a single green and black wave. Leaning forward, Rick tried to pick out individual animals. They moved incredibly quickly with no apparent effort, bounding forward as if on springs.

"Holy shit!" Helen shouted. Rick looked over and saw that her face was transfixed by some intense emotion. Experiencing real personal fear was probably an unfamiliar sensation for her, he thought.

"Still no off-world comms, boss." Brian chimed in apologetically.

"Green light to engage?" the tech asked Helen. Helen said nothing, apparently frozen.

Shit, Rick thought. He moved to the nearest terminal and called up the agency's emergency channel. He didn't know when the interference would clear enough for the message to get off-world, but he had to make the call now. "All right, everyone, this is Special Agent Rick Marlowe, and I am declaring a Hazardous Life Code. As of now, Harz is under a declared state of emergency, and I am assuming control, on behalf of the Republic, pursuant to the Colonial Charter." He turned to the tech: "You have a green light to engage."

The tech spoke in an undertone into his shoulder mic, and then punched the keys again. The screen split into three views, a broad view of the horizon, showing hundreds more of the animals bounding forward in a mob, and two profile views, showing the wave of flesh

hit the side of the compound and start to flow out to both sides, encircling it.

“Watch this,” the tech said with genuine excitement.

For a moment, Rick wasn't sure what the man was talking about, but then he saw a few men move out onto a shielded platform some fifty feet above the ground and assemble a plasma cannon. The creatures seemed uninterested, until the first blast of light cut into the herd, splattering at least a dozen animals into unrecognizable steaming chunks of meat.

“Hit,” a deadpan voice drawled over the radio.

The animals reacted instantaneously. The closest animals leaned backward and then snapped their heads forward in convulsive motion.

“What's this shit?” a voice squawked over the speakers.

“Keep firing,” the tech commanded.

Another blast of light hit the mob, leaving another scorched crater surrounded by twitching, bleeding animals. The closest animals snapped their heads forward in the same unique, almost ritualized gesture. The men on the platform reacted instantly. It wasn't clear from the video what they were doing, but their movements were no longer practiced and coordinated; they seemed to be milling about randomly.

“—ink they fucking spat something at us.” The voice said again, the confident drawl now replaced with disgust.

“Shit,” Rick said, suspecting what would happen next.

Several voices started screaming in panic over the radio in unison. “It's fucking burning! It's eating through my fucking suit! Open the hatch, open it, open it.”

The dull resonant sound of someone pounding a gauntleted fist on plasteel echoed over the speaker.

Helen and Brian were talking over each other, and the techs were furiously typing commands, all trying to bring the situation under control. But Rick was watching the animals, which were doing something new. They were hopping around, higher and higher, in some complicated pattern. It took Rick a minute to realize what was happening, because the bodies seemed to blur into one undulating, coiling mass. When the realization hit him, his bowels turned to water, and he leapt forward to grab the mic.

“Belay that,” he shouted, “keep the door shut.”

But as he looked up, he saw that he’d been too slow. The Roos had formed a pyramid and were now running up each other’s backs. The first bounded onto the platform, just as the blast-shielded door swung open. And then fresh screams joined the chorus over the radio. Rick hung his head. He walked over to a terminal and called up the agency comm band again.

Helen grabbed Rick’s elbow. “We’ve got to get reinforcements up there right now. If we’re going to last until the Corps arrives—”

But Rick cut her off, “I’m ordering a planetary evac, right now.”

Helen was livid. “They’ll overrun the entire compound! We’ll never dig them out!”

“It’s my call, Helen. You may be well armed, but you’re not up for this kind of fight. Your men just proved that. Don’t worry: my report will reflect the fact that you protested.”

As Rick spoke, his voice broadcast throughout the compound, Helen sank into an empty chair and buried her face in her hands.

It was touch and go for a while. Trying to fit the colony’s nearly one thousand inhabitants onto the one off-world transport ship seemed like an impossible task at first. Rick was just starting to wonder whether he’d have to leave a detachment in place to try to defend the base long enough for another ship to arrive when he realized that the ship’s reserve cargo hold was packed full of ore. When he gave the order to dump it, he was prepared for a bitter harangue from

Helen, but she just gave a high sharp laugh—almost a shriek—and put her head back against the wall to stare at the ceiling. Fifteen minutes later, Rick was the last person to step onto the transport ship.

Rick felt the thrusters start to fire. Brian and Helen walked up to him. They stood in silence for a few minutes listening to the roar of the engines.

“What now?” Brian asked.

“First, let’s do a headcount and see if anyone needs medical attention. I didn’t spot any serious injuries coming in, but you never know. The last thing I need is someone dying of shock now that we’re off-world.”

Helen and Brian nodded.

“But let’s move quickly, okay? Both of us,” Rick said, looking at Helen, “need to report in to our bosses pretty damn fast, I’d say. We’ll be out of the interference in about three hours. I’ll take the first 20 sections, Brian you take the next, Helen you take the last. Grab some colonial security people and get them to help you. Is there an ops room or something where we can meet up?”

“Yes,” Helen said, “right by your quarters. Oh, I told the militia that you and Brian would be taking two of the crew cabins. I figure you’ve earned it. There’s a little meeting room right next to the cabins.”

“Okay, let’s try to meet there in 90 minutes, okay?”

In the end, Rick didn’t get to the conference room until two hours later, and Brian didn’t arrive until thirty minutes after that. Neither had encountered any serious injuries, but they had been overwhelmed by frantic questions and angry calls for some kind of justice.

As Brian collapsed into a chair, Rick said, “All right, let’s just get started. Helen will get here whenever she does. What do I report?”

“I think it’s pretty straightforward, boss. That psycho scientist bred the Roos and let ’em loose. They killed the miners. They nearly killed

us a couple of times. You called the HLC and then the evac. Hell, you had to. No one's going to disagree with that when they see the video."

"But why did he do it? What was the point? It doesn't make any sense!"

"Maybe it just doesn't make sense. Sometimes people do crazy shit. I saw plenty of that at the Rift."

Rick shook his head. "No, not in a situation like this. This was planned. This took time and energy, and quite a bit of luck to get that much restricted tech onto the planet. You don't do that without a *reason*. This doc may have been crooked—it sure looks like that—but was he crazy?"

Brian slapped the table in frustration. "Look, maybe nobody *bonos* here, okay? I mean, what's the upside to driving everyone off the planet? There's billions, maybe trillions, in ore down there that's going to go unmined until they can clear the planet, if they can clear the planet."

Rick's blood went cold and he felt the odd sense of vertigo that always seemed to accompany a moment of insight. "What did you say?"

"I said no one benefits from ruining the planet."

"Maybe that wasn't the plan. Maybe the Roos weren't supposed to ruin the planet." Rick bit his lip. "Is this ship loaded with the colonial database?"

Brian shrugged and lifted his hands, palms up. Rick ignored him and moved to the nearest terminal. The ship wasn't connected to the colonial network, but it had an archive of colonial documents. Rick logged in and pulled up the public records. The documents were unfamiliar, but he had an idea of what he was looking for.

After a few minutes, he found one of the documents, identical to a thousand others in the files. It was entitled Mineral Extraction and Improvement Agreement. This one was between the Messerschmitt

family and the company, executed on its behalf by SVP Helen Mauer. The agreement was long and dense with legal jargon. The primary purpose of it seemed to be to make clear to the miners that they were certainly going to die a horrible, violent, painful death—and that wouldn't be the company's fault in any way, shape, or form.

Brian read over Rick's shoulder for a few minutes and then asked, "Boss, what are you looking for?"

Rick shushed him. Brian shrugged, walked back to the table, and started to clean his weapon.

Finally, Rick found what he was looking for: the addendum with the incentive-payment provisions. Under the original agreement, the miners were to be paid a fraction of that day's market rate for every ounce of ore extracted. But the incentive-payment addendum entitled them to a one-time payment—to be assessed one year after the addendum was executed—based on the total ore extracted from their mine to date plus the total ore that was deemed accessible through "conventional extraction means," as determined by the federal standards office. Rick kept reading, suspecting, knowing what he was going to find. And there it was, under the heading *Force Majeure*:

Whereas the incentive-payment plan is premised on the company's ability to continue its mining operations on Harz for years to come, the incentive payment plan will be null and void in the event of certain qualifying events, including (a) the closing of the Rift, which would materially diminish the demand for arbitium; (b) a solar event that renders the planet uninhabitable; (c) a hazardous life condition, as determined by the Galactic Investigation Agency...

The list continued for several more lines, but Rick stopped reading. Did they really do this?

"Kid, look at this."

Brian walked over and looked at the screen. After a minute he said, “Boss, I’m pretty fried, what are we... holy shit!”

“Yep.”

“You think? What, the *Company* did this on purpose?”

“Well, no, not exactly. I doubt the company wanted it to go this badly. It’s not in their interest to lose the planet, like you said.”

Brian started to pace. “They risked the ore supply for this—for money? Oh, it’s on. We are going to crush them. I can’t wait to slap the cuffs on Helen and wipe that smug smirk off her face.” He emphasized the last few words by punching one hand into the other.

Rick’s mind was racing. He realized immediately that it was a mistake to let the kid in on his suspicion. Rick turned off the monitor and spun around. “Slow down, kid. We need to be very, very careful right now.”

“What do you mean? We’ve got them! You saw the contract.”

“It was just a thought. What can we prove? Did you grab a sample of the alien tissue before we got on this jalopy? Did you get anything out of the doc’s lab? We don’t *know* anything.”

“Still, we’ve got enough to get an indictment. Hell, if not that we can at least hold Helen for questioning. We can do that for 24 hours without charge!”

Rick stood up and put his hand on Brian’s shoulder. “Take a breath. Yes, we could do that. But maybe we’re wrong. What happens then? You’re still probationary so your career’s over. Maybe I’m terminated for cause and I can kiss my pension goodbye. That’s the happy version. Now imagine we’re *right*. Do you think the company is going to take this sitting down?”

Brian shrugged Rick’s hand off and resumed his pacing. “I didn’t kick tentacled ass for years to run and hide from some corporate suits, man. No way.”



Shit, Rick thought. After four years at the Rift, the kid had no business being this idealistic—this naïve. He was going to talk both of them right into an airlock if he wasn't careful.

“Think about where you're standing. You're on a fucking company ship right now. If this really happened, do you think Helen did it *on her own*? Use your fucking brain.”

Rick poked him hard in the chest, and Brian's eyes widened, blazing. For a moment Rick thought he was about to get decked. Brian's nostrils were flaring, and his chest was heaving.

“Don't make me suspend your commission, son. This is my mission. I'm giving you a direct order right now. You're not going to say word one about this. You're going to sit there and smile. If you get cute, I swear to God I will run you out of the agency. Hell, we're under a state of emergency right now. I'll have you charged with insubordination and dereliction. Do you read me?”

Brian made a strangled noise and stomped away, kicking over a chair. He stopped facing the wall, staring out a porthole at the stars.

Rick sat down and started composing his -report, trying to ignore Brian's exaggerated exhalations. A few minutes later, Helen walked in the door, and Rick leapt to his feet.

“Ms. Mauer, how's everyone doing?”

“Oh, shaken up. Disappointed. Grieving, really. But no one seems to be badly hurt. We've got a couple of sprained ankles and muscle pulls from the excitement. A grandfather had a heart attack during liftoff, and a pregnant lady thought she was going into labor. It's subsided now. All in all, I guess we were lucky.”

“Lucky, huh?” Brian asked, glancing at Helen over his shoulder.

Rick shot him a warning look. “I'd say so, given an evacuation of this size.”

“Well, that's largely due to you, Rick. I know I freaked out when you called the evac, but you have to understand that this planet's

been my baby for a year now. I don't like abandoning it. But I think you saved a lot of lives. The company won't forget that."

Rick nodded. "Thanks, Ms. Mauer."

"Call me Helen. So what do you think happened?" she asked.

"Well, I'd say it's pretty open and shut, Helen. You had a whacko scientist on your planet. You weren't watching the incoming cargo shipments too closely." Rick held up a hand to forestall her explanation. "I get it. I'm just telling you what I think happened. He engineered a bunch of these things and let 'em loose. I guess they must have bred. Although I wonder what they were feeding on." Rick shook his head to clear the thought. "Anyway, he must have been pissed at the Company or the military or... who knows; maybe he was a religious fanatic. Anyway, that's the deal. The Corps will be on-planet in a day or two. Given the importance of the installation, I assume they'll stay until the things are exterminated."

Brian walked over and sat down next to Rick. "What if there was someone else involved?" He was staring daggers at Helen.

"Kid," Rick said warningly. "I enjoy a good conspiracy theory as much as the next guy. But there's nothing to remotely support that here. And now is *not the time* for speculation."

Brian got up and walked back to his window. Helen smiled at Rick. "The Company appreciates your judgment and your discretion, Rick. We could really use someone like you if you ever decide to hang up your spurs."

"Well, actually, I have been thinking about calling it quits. I'm getting too old for these shoot 'em up missions. Do you think there's a place for me somewhere in corporate security?"

Brian spun around, looking incredulous. Helen didn't seem to notice; she smiled that same dazzling smile. "Absolutely. We could *definitely* use someone like you, and not for your gun-slinging skills. We've got plenty of 20-year-olds for that. We need men with your kind of experience and judgment."

“Great, thanks, Helen. Well, I’ve got to finish this report,” he held up his tablet, “and I imagine you’ve got one to write yourself. Just so we’re totally on the same page, I view this as a probable bioterror attack, motive unknown. That’s the way I’m going to write it up in my preliminary. Does that jive with what you’re thinking?”

“Perfectly.”

Two weeks later, Rick was wearing the customary oversized cowboy hat at his agency retirement party. Jane was on his arm, looking radiant. She’d been glowing since he told her he was done with off-world missions.

“After twenty years of worrying about you, I can finally relax,” she’d told him that morning.

He felt a little guilty about that.

Rick was just forking a piece of cake into his mouth when John stood up, clearly drunk, and announced that it was time to celebrate the best damn lawman the agency had ever seen. Rick heard a loud scoff amidst the cheers, and saw Brian leaning against the wall, scowling. No one else seemed to notice. He couldn’t blame the kid for hating him, Rick knew, especially after he’d given him only a moderate grade on his mission performance. It was for the kid’s benefit, Rick tried to remind himself, but it didn’t make the kid’s hate any more pleasant to bear.

John clambered up onto the table. “I’ve known Rick since before this agency was a thing, and it’s going to be poorer without him. I wrote a speech, but I don’t need it.” John threw a stack of note cards in front of him, and they fluttered to the ground. “I’ll tell you what you need to know about Rick. He’s won three meritorious service awards. He’s got more departmental commendations than anyone.” John was slurring a little bit, but the crowd loved it. The man was a natural raconteur, Rick thought, always had been. No wonder he’d ended up in management.

John reached down to grab a champagne flute and drank half of it in one gulp. “Convicts are serving more than 25,000 years of incarceration because of Rick’s investigations. He saved my life twice when we were out in the shit together. But that’s not what you need to know about Rick. That’s just the packaging. What you need to know about Rick is that he kept going out into the field when he could’ve taken my job.” John paused and started to speak with the earnest solemnity of the truly drunk, “He did it year after year, leaving Jane again and again,” John took a long pause, visibly reveling in his control of the crowd, “even though he knew every man on the planet was hot for her!”

The crowd roared its laughter, not so much at the joke, Rick thought, as at the delivery. Jane buried her face in his shoulder, and he whispered into her hair, “I love you.”

The laughter died and John continued, “Well, that’s all over now. It was fun while it lasted, Jane.” At that point John’s wife threw a cupcake at him, hitting his square in the chest, and the crowd roared again. John continued, laughing harder than anyone, “Rick’s joining Universal Resources as a Vice President of Colonial Security. It couldn’t have happened to a better guy. Seriously, brother, good luck. We’ll miss you. Just don’t let anymore Harzes happen!”

Three months later, Brian, now a commissioned agent, was sitting at his desk, filling out his daily operations report. He had joined the agency because he didn’t want to sit in an office and do paperwork all day. What a joke.

The office door banged open and Larson, another young agent walked in. Brian sighed. Larson hadn’t qualified to fight at the Rift, and he seemed to worship Brian because he had. He followed him around like a puppy.

“Can you believe this shit?” Larson called.

“What shit?” Brian put down his tablet. He resigned himself to talking to Larson for a few minutes.

“You don’t know? How is that possible? Weren’t you on Harz? Here you go,” he said, typing quickly on his wrist computer.

Brian looked down and saw a link pop up on his screen. He clicked on it, and it took him to a news site. The banner headline read: COMPANY RELEASES BIOLOGICALLY ENGINEERED MONSTERS ON HARZ TO AVOID PAYING BILLIONS TO ARBITIUM MINERS, by John McNutt.

“How crazy is this?” Larson asked.

“Shut up and let me read this!”

Yes, Brian thought! The expose was incredible. It was all here. Internal documents. Emails. Transcripts of voicemails. The Company had done it—all of it—Rick was right!

They’d hired that scientist to breed the Roos. They called the agency in *hoping* for an HLC, which would mean they didn’t have to pay the miners who had killed themselves extracting the ore for them. They thought they would be able to kill the creatures off in a few days, maybe after they let a few more miners get killed, and then things would go back to normal. But the Roos were badder than they had planned. The article speculated that the scientist had realized the company was going to ice him, and that was his revenge. Brian smiled broadly at the thought.

After he finished reading the story, he scrolled back to the top and started again. It didn’t mention Rick by name, but on the second read it became clear to Brian that he was the source for much, if not all, of this material. The quotes were in Rick’s voice.

Brian brushed past Larson and into one of the private conference rooms that lined the walls. After a few minutes haggling with human resources, he got Rick’s private line. He called but it rolled to voicemail immediately. After another few unpleasant minutes with Cindy from HR, he had Jane’s number, too, and tried that, but it also went straight to voicemail. Brian left messages on both lines. He was thrumming with nervous energy. He went back into the office.

“How long has this been up?” he asked Larson.

“About an hour, I think. The networks are just picking up on it. GNN’s going with it now.” The kid gestured at the wall monitor, which showed an extremely thin woman speaking animatedly. Over her shoulder, the pictures changed every few seconds: the Rift, Harz, an image of the Roos. The screen cut to a shot of a silver-haired man emerging from a limo to face a bristling array of microphones, which he brushed past with the help of several armed guards.

Brian’s comm chirped. He looked down and saw that he had an anonymous message: “Go home. Lock door. Don’t talk to anyone. Rt now.”

Brian walked out of the office without another word, ignoring Larson’s calls. Back at his flat, he turned on GNN again and watched it on mute. After about an hour, they managed to unearth his enlistment photo from the Corps and plastered that up on the screen next to Rick’s agency photo. After that, his comm rang roughly every two minutes. He ignored all the calls.

Hours later, his comm chirped again, and Brian saw the last name Marlowe blinking on the screen. He picked up on the first ring.

“Rick!”

“No,” a ragged voice answered. “It’s Jane. Rick’s dead.”

Brian sat down, numbly. This was happening too fast. Nothing was making sense.

“What—how?”

“How do you think? The company’s calling it an industrial accident... Rick said I should call you.” Rick heard the sound of paper rustling. “He sent me a package with instructions, got delivered just before the story got posted. I think he was already dead by then.”

Not knowing what else to say, Brian fell back on platitudes. “I’m so sorry, Jane. He did a great thing.”

“Yeah! Widowing his wife to prove how clever he was.” Her voice was raw from crying. “He knew what he was doing. That’s why he gave the story to McNutt. He knew I’d never put a bullseye on his back like this. But I guess he felt guilty for not giving me the scoop—he sent me a bunch of material he held back from the first story.” Her voice broke into sobs. “Oh, he even took out a life insurance policy—I just found out—I guess I’m a rich woman now!”

She cried openly for a few minutes, and Brian realized the best thing he could do was just let her do it without trying to comfort her. She was suffering from a wound that couldn’t be salved. Trying to console her would be like presuming that her pain was so mundane that it could be relieved by talk therapy: an insult to Rick’s memory. So Brian just sat in silence, digging his fingers into his thigh.

After what felt like a long time, Jane brought herself under control. “He left a message for you. I’ll play it. I can’t stand to hear his voice right now, so I’m going to go. Just hang up when you’re done. I don’t think we’ll be talking again, so goodbye, Brian. He really liked you.”

“Bye, Jane.”

After a few seconds of rustling, Rick’s voice crackled to life. “Hey, kid. I’ll keep this quick. I kept you out of this for a reason, as you can probably understand now. Don’t fuck that up. As for the bad mark I gave you, now you probably see why I did it. John knows you deserved better; he’ll take care of you. I told him you saved my life. He’s not going to forget that. Like I told you, kid, you’ve got a future in this agency. Just remember, everyone’s playing an angle. But that’s not always a bad thing.”

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*Tyler's writing has previously appeared in Daily Science Fiction. When he is not writing, he is usually at a zoo or museum with his wife and two young children. Follow him @Tyler\_A\_Young.*



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# Death on the Moon

By SPENCER E. HART

***The Second Great War is over, the conquest of space is on, but tensions run high as the first ever murder on the moon brings work on the Oswald Observatory to a halt! Bert Henderson must follow a murderer's trail to stop him before he kills again!***

Bert Henderson walked into the only police station on the Moon. His lead-weighted overshoes kept his feet from drifting too far above the gray floor of atomic-melted moon dust as he slowed to a stop at the counter.

Behind the counter sat a blue-uniformed constable of Roosevelt Base's detachment of Space Police. The constable looked up from where he was fiddling with something behind the counter. The face scowled at Bert, pale and sickly in the artificial light of the underground government facility.

"Can I help you, mister?" he asked.

"I need to speak with the Chief Constable, please," Bert answered.

"He's not in."

"Can you tell me when he'll be back?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know if you can tell me, or you don't know when he'll be back?"

The constable rose to his feet. "Mister, if you're such a smart fella, how about I ask *you* a few questions? Starting with, what is your name?"

Bert reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a brown leather card holder. He flipped it open as he rested it on the

counter.

Printed in silver on a black background, the card read:

HERBERT HENDERSON  
PHILLIPS ATOMICS  
CORPORATE SECURITY

Bert put the card back in his pocket and stared into the constable's eyes.

The constable's eyes widened, then he sat back down with an air of defeat. "One moment, sir." The constable reached under the counter, and a moment later a buzzer sounded.

"Chief?" started the constable.

A voice grated back through a nearby speaker, "Charlie, I told you I'm not to be disturbed."

"Sorry, Chief," the constable said, "but there's a man from Phillips Atomics says he needs to speak with you."

The voice from the speaker sighed with resignation, "All right, Charlie. Send the gentleman in."

"Down the hall, second door on the left, Mr. Henderson," directed the constable.

Striding into the indicated hallway, Bert came to the second door on the left. An engraved metal plaque read:

DANIEL McCREEDY  
CHIEF CONSTABLE  
U.S. SPACE POLICE

Bert knocked on the door. "Chief McCreedy?"

The door swung open. "Come in," said the man in the doorway. His uniform was rumpled, he didn't look like he had shaved that

morning, and there was a slight odor of something alcoholic in the air.

Bert took off his hat with his left hand while extending his right. "Bert Henderson," he introduced himself as the other man grasped the proffered hand.

"Dan McCreedy," the haggard man said in turn. His handshake was firm.

Bert followed McCreedy into the office, pulling the door closed behind him.

McCreedy walked to a desk and sat in a chair behind it. "Have a seat," he waved in the direction of a second chair on the other side of the desk.

Bert settled himself into the plain chair. The bare walls and ceiling were the same smooth gray as the floor. All the furniture was made of a dull metal.

"Chief McCreedy, I'm here because of the Wilson case," Bert said.

"Figured as much," replied McCreedy. "It would take something big to send a Phillips man up from Earth. Such as the first murder on the Moon."

Bert took out his card again and presented it to McCreedy. "Mr. Phillips himself sent me. This needs to be settled as quickly as possible, so work on the Oswald Observatory can resume."

"You know how many men are on the Moon now? Over two thousand. Know how many men I have to deal with them all? Eight. Eight!" McCreedy thumped his palm on the desk.

"Mostly, we break up fights and lock up rowdy drunks until they dry out," continued McCreedy. "Don't get any serious crime here. Now I've got to deal with a labor strike, on top of a murder. The construction crew is refusing to go back to the observatory site until the killer is found."

"Surely, you've had to deal with deaths before?" Bert prompted.

“Accidents, sure. The workers may have fancy atomic drill-cutters these days instead of picks and shovels, but digging the tunnels to expand Roosevelt is just as dangerous as working a coal mine back on Earth. Although it’s really rare for somebody to die on the surface.”

“So, what makes you think Wilson’s death wasn’t an accident?” Bert asked.

McCreedy opened a desk drawer and took out a file folder. “Have a look,” he said. “Photo of the body.”

Bert opened the folder as McCreedy passed it over. The photo showed a pressure-suited figure with a fist-sized hole clean through the chest. The green suit and the flesh around the hole looked to be melted together.

“What could have caused a wound like that?” Bert asked.

McCreedy leaned back in his chair. “Most likely, a drill-cutter set on narrow-beam. Our M-Guns don’t have that kind of power, and no bullet did that.”

“That reminds me,” Bert said, “I’m carrying a new model of the M-Gun the size of a pistol. Any problem with that inside the base?”

“No, everybody knows M-Guns just make you feel like you’re on fire. Mind if I have a look at your piece?”

Bert reached into his jacket and drew forth a metallic cylinder. It resembled a flashlight with a pistol-grip more than a regular gun.

“Certainly is a lot smaller than our M-Gun carbines,” remarked McCreedy.

“Mr. Phillips has some whiz-bang engineers working for him.”

“The death report and statements from the workers who found the body are in that folder, too,” McCreedy steered back onto the subject at hand.

Bert put his M-Gun away and shuffled through the papers. "Says here the two that found Wilson's body are Alan Krause and Clyde Foster. Any ideas where I might find them?"

"The address of their bunk room is in there, but I hear tell they spend a lot of time in the bars since work stopped on the observatory. Ask Charlie for a tunnel map of the base on your way out."

Both men rose, and McCreedy led Bert back to the office door. Bert got Charlie to give him a map, and he was back in Central Tunnel a minute later.

Not much to go on yet, thought Bert. Need to talk to the men that found the body. Probably too early to start checking the bars for them.

Mr. Phillips had given Bert one additional task to perform while he was on the Moon. Might as well get it over with.

A short time later, Bert stood in front of a door in the Science Tunnel. The plaque on the door read:

DR. CLARENCE OSWALD

ASTRONOMY

Bert rapped lightly on the door. "Dr. Oswald?"

Bert waited fifteen or twenty seconds, but there was no answer.

Bert knocked more loudly. "Dr. Oswald? Are you in, sir?"

This time, the door swung open. "Yes?" inquired the short, portly man in the doorway.

Bert removed his hat and offered his hand. "Dr. Oswald, I'm Bert Henderson. Mr. Phillips sent me."

"Well, if you've come all this way, I suppose the least I can do is invite you in."

Bert followed Oswald into the office. Unlike McCreedy's bare room, practically every square inch of three of the walls was covered with photographs, diagrams, and sheets with long columns of numbers on them. The last wall had a large blackboard affixed to it, covered in equations and diagrams.

Oswald sat down behind a desk identical to McCreedy's, but piled high with books and charts. "Please, make yourself comfortable," Oswald waved to a second chair, which was occupied by another stack of books. "Just set those on the floor for now."

Bert carefully lowered the books and sat in the now-cleared chair. "Dr. Oswald," Bert began, "Mr. Phillips sent me to assure you that we will do everything in our power to get your observatory construction back on track."

"You must know I'm eternally grateful for Mr. Phillips' support; without it, the big telescope would never be built. The government is more interested in looking at the Earth than away from it. We'd have to keep using the smaller telescope that was shipped up."

"Doctor, could you give me a brief overview of the observatory?" Bert asked.

Oswald stood up. "Certainly." He cleared his throat with an "ahem," and walked over to the blackboard.

"It had long been a hypothesis of mine that a telescope on the opposite hemisphere of the Moon—that is, the side facing away from the Earth—would provide a superior observing location." Oswald grabbed an eraser and wiped out a random portion of the work there, then picked up a piece of chalk and began drawing.

"With the bulk of the Moon obscuring the Earth, and thus the reflected light of the Sun, the darker environment would permit observation of dimmer stars and other bodies."

Bert interrupted, "Do you mean, the telescope site is on the Dark Side of the Moon?"

Oswald let out a sigh. "It is a common mistake on Earth to refer to the 'Far Side' as the 'Dark Side.' Just as is the case here on the 'Near Side,' the 'Far Side' is subject to alternating periods of light and darkness lasting approximately fourteen Earth days each."

Oswald put the chalk down and walked back to his chair. "Is that enough to satisfy your curiosity? I really should be getting back to my calculations."

At that moment, what Bert had taken to be just another part of one of the walls swung open. Through this doorway strode a brunette woman wearing a yellow blouse and khaki trousers.

"Father, it's time for your medicine again," she said. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had a visitor."

Bert rose to his feet. "Bert Henderson, ma'am."

The woman took two steps towards Bert and thrust out her hand. "Margaret Oswald."

Bert reflexively grasped her hand and lightly shook it. His own hand was strongly held in return.

"Mr. Henderson, my daughter Margaret," said Oswald. "Margaret, Mr. Henderson is from Phillips Atomics."

She stood maybe an inch taller than her father. Her brown hair was rolled up short, as Army women had done during the war. The healthy tone of her skin was in sharp contrast to the dull tint everybody else here showed, and her hazel eyes were quick and alert.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat.

Bert realized he was still holding her hand.

"So, Mr. Henderson," she slipped her hand out of his grasp, "what brings you to the Moon?"

"Mr. Phillips sent me to take care of the problem with the observatory construction." Bert's hand slowly fell back to his side.



“It’s a terrible thing that happened,” said Margaret.

“Miss Oswald, would you know if there’s any way I could get to this construction site?” Bert asked. “You know, just to see where it happened?”

Margaret glanced in the direction of her father. He was busily engaged in writing figures on a sheet of paper. She turned her attention back to Bert.

“Well, Mr. Henderson, the rocket-bus usually only makes one trip a week, but it brought the workers back early last time because of what happened.”

She turned back to her father. “Father, do you think it would be all right for Mr. Henderson to visit the observatory?”

Dr. Oswald looked up from his calculations. “What’s that, Margie?”

“Mr. Henderson would like to see the observatory,” she said.

“It would be most impolite to refuse; he is, after all, a representative of Mr. Phillips,” Oswald replied.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’ father.” Margaret turned back in Bert’s direction.

“It just so happens we were planning to go to the observatory tomorrow morning,” she said. “You’re more than welcome to tag along.” Her head tilted as if examining him.

Bert’s breath seemed to catch in his throat for a moment. “Sure,” he blurted out. “What time should I meet you?”

“Takeoff will be at 0800, but come a half-hour early to get a pressure-suit fitted,” she answered. “The observatory doesn’t have a ship-lock like here at Roosevelt, so we’ll have to walk from the landing field.”

“I’ll be there,” said Bert.

Margaret turned her head and took a peek at her father. He was engrossed in his columns of figures again. She swung her head back

to face Bert and delicately lifted her hand to him.

“Until tomorrow, Mr. Henderson,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

Bert awkwardly put out his own hand, and with a slight bow of his head said, “Until tomorrow, Miss Oswald.”

As Bert turned and walked to the office door, he heard Margaret address her father.

“Will you please stop for a moment and take your medicine? You know that I won’t stop pestering you until you do.”

“Yes, Margie,” Oswald sighed.

An hour later, Bert was on his second beer and third Lucky Strike, occupying a bar stool in a place called “Mel’s Moon on the Rocks.” Said name must’ve been a joke, as Mel could only serve beer since hard liquor was on the contraband list.

He was keeping an eye out for Krause or Foster, but thoughts of Marge Oswald kept creeping into his head. He’d seen very few women on the Moon. Marge was no beauty queen, but certainly pretty enough that men in a place like this would be willing to fight over her attentions.

She had brains, too, certainly more than she let on. Her father might be a famous scientist, but Bert wondered if Oswald would remember to tie his shoes without Marge.

And that flirting routine—right in front of her old man!

Bert took another sip of his beer. Had to drink it out of a little spout on the edge of the mug. The bartender had explained that otherwise the beer would fly out unless handled *very* gently in the low gravity.

Bert turned his head and glanced around the room. A man was just getting up from a table in the back corner.

Alan Krause!

Bert wanted to slap himself for mooning over a dame when he was supposed to be keeping a look-out, since he had not noticed Krause before, but quickly guzzled a last mouthful of beer and got off the bar stool.

Krause was making his way towards the door as Bert moved to intercept his path.

“Mr. Krause,” Bert called in a raised voice.

Krause glanced in Bert’s direction but kept moving towards the exit.

“A moment of your time, Mr. Krause,” Bert said as he closed the distance.

Just then, a group of men entered the bar in a bunch, and Krause slipped out the door before Bert could reach him.

Bert dodged around the men and strode out into Central Tunnel. He quickly scanned the area and spotted the top of Krause’s head among the crowds.

Good thing Krause is so tall and blond, thought Bert, as he pushed his way through another group of workers approaching the bar.

Krause was heading for the lock to the East Barracks Tunnel but was not making speedy progress through the throngs entering and leaving the lock.

Must be shift change, thought Bert, as he wove past a trio of men and started gaining on Krause.

Krause pushed through into the other tunnel, with Bert only a few yards behind him.

As Krause slowed to open a door on the side of the tunnel, Bert caught up and grabbed Krause by the shoulder.

“What’s the hurry, fella?” asked Bert.

Krause’s head snapped around in Bert’s direction, but his blue eyes seemed to be looking past Bert as they opened wide.

Something smashed into the back of Bert's skull like a ton of bricks, as a deep voice behind him growled, "Hold it right there, Krause."

As Bert's world went black, the last thing he heard was a gasp of "Legs' Smithson!"

The first thing Bert heard, out of the blackness, was a voice saying:

"—muscling in on our racket."

The blackness lightened to a gray haze.

Bert's eyes blinked open with a flutter of his eyelids.

"Look, boss, he's coming around," said a second voice.

As Bert managed to focus his eyes, the gray haze became a gray ceiling.

"Mr. Henderson?" the first voice called softly, "Can you hear me?"

Bert raised his head and saw a thin man with graying hair standing a few feet away. Behind and to both sides of the thin man was a younger, bigger man.

Aware of his vulnerable position, lying on the ground, Bert answered, "Yeah, I hear ya."

The older man said, "Please don't be moving too quickly. We don't want to have to be hurting you."

"Do tell. Was it one of your boys that put my lights out?" Bert asked. "Is one of you 'Legs' Smithson?"

"Please, do be calling me Lenny. Smithson works for another outfit, is not one of mine."

"So what's your angle, Lenny? Why am I here with such charming gents, if it was Smithson who clobbered me?" Bert's head still throbbed, but he was becoming more alert by the second.

“Perhaps, in case of, I help you, and you help me?” said Lenny.

“What makes you think I need any help?”

Lenny’s face hardened. “Paulie Wilson was good man. You find killer, I rest easier at night.”

Bert rose to a sitting position and eyed Lenny. “How’d you know I was on the Wilson case?”

“Moon is *my* town!” Lenny gestured with a raised finger. “I know what goes on in *my* town.

“Such as fact Smithson was paired with other man in East Barracks Tunnel. Second man hit you, not Smithson,” volunteered Lenny. “If Smithson hit you in head, you would be dead maybe. Always breaks bones, that one.”

“What would Smithson want with Alan Krause?” asked Bert, “and who *did* slug me?”

“Krause owe money back on Earth. Big money. Maybe Smithson sent to collect?” suggested Lenny. “Had man tailing Smithson; he said second man was Krause’s friend, Clyde Foster.”

“Foster!” Bert barely kept his balance as he stood up, and his feet ended up six inches off the floor before he knew it.

“Easy, friend,” reminded Lenny, “the boys might get excited.”

One of the bruisers had positioned himself in front of the older man, his hands balled into fists at the ready.

Bert clumsily landed back on his feet. “Sorry, pal. But Foster! I’ve got a score to settle with him. Where’d he get to?”

Lenny motioned to the bruiser, who resumed his previous position. “Foster, Smithson, and Krause seem to have, how you say, pulled a vanishing act.”

Bert let out a sigh.

“You look terrible, Mr. Henderson,” Lenny said, “Perhaps you should get some rest? My men, they keep eyes open for those three.”

Bert looked around, spotted his hat on the gray floor, then smoothed his jacket. He felt the reassuring bulge of his M-Gun still in place.

“I must go now, Mr. Henderson. Other business to attend to,” said Lenny as he motioned to his boys. “Please wait at least two minutes before leaving room, for own safety.”

As Bert glanced at his wristwatch, one bruiser opened a door behind him, then the three men marched out.

Then the door swung shut, and Bert was left alone with his thoughts.

At 0715, Bert left the room he had been assigned and headed for his rendezvous with Marge and her father.

As he walked through the various tunnels on his way to the ship-lock, Bert ran down what pieces he had.

Wilson, Krause, and Foster had been sent out to do some survey work at the observatory construction site. Krause and Foster had come back separately at shift-end, but Wilson had not returned.

All the workers in the construction gang had searched for Wilson, but it was Krause and Foster that found the body. Coincidence? Or had one or both of them known where the body was all along? Was one of them the killer?

On top of that, what was this business between Smithson, Foster, and Krause? Krause had looked frightened just before Bert had been knocked out, supposedly by Foster. So was it Smithson and Foster against Krause?

Then there was Lenny. Bert had him figured as the local crime boss. Wherever enough men gathered, there would be crime, and it

seemed the Moon was no exception. Was Lenny trying to get Bert involved in some feud between gangsters?

Before he knew it, Bert was at the ship-lock, where he had entered Roosevelt the previous day. He walked over to the inspection station where people entering and leaving the Moon were processed.

“Excuse me,” he said to the man at the counter, “could you point me in the direction of the rocket-bus to the observatory?”

“Rocket-bus already left about ten minutes ago.”

Bert looked at his watch; it showed 0727. “You sure? I was told to meet Dr. Oswald at 0730 to get a pressure-suit for an 0800 departure.”

“Sorry, pal, but the pilot requested an early takeoff.”

“Were the Oswalds aboard yet?” Bert asked. “One older man and a younger woman?”

“Gimme a minute to check.” The man at the inspection counter flicked a toggle switch and lifted a microphone to his face.

“Rudy?”

A few second later, a voice responded through a wall-mounted speaker, “Yeah. Who’s this?”

“George at inspection. Got a question for you.”

“Yeah? But make it quick so’s I can finish reeling up this fuel line.”

“Did you happen to see how many passengers got on the rocket-bus?” George asked.

“Well,” Rudy said, “it looked like the pilot and passengers all got on at the same time. Three people in all.”

“Thanks, Rudy.”

“George? They didn’t wait for the cargo.”

George raised the microphone he had been about to put back on its hook. "How's that again?"

"All three of them got on, then ten minutes later the bus took off. Then a cargo container showed up, but it was too late since the bus was gone."

Bert leaned close to George. "That strike you as odd?"

"Okay, Rudy. Thanks again." George switched off the microphone.

"Something fishy is going on here," said Bert. "Is there a way to radio that rocket-bus?"

"Look, pal, whoever you are—"

Bert yanked out his card and pressed it into George's face. "Bert Henderson. I'm from Phillips Atomics, working a murder case, and I need to talk to that pilot."

George retreated a step. "Well, maybe we should call the SP's..."

"Great idea. Call Chief McCreedy," said Bert as he moved around the end of the counter and grabbed for the microphone. "Which switch for that circuit?"

George extended a finger and pointed.

Bert flipped the switch and spoke into the microphone. "Space Police?"

"Space Police, Constable Hawkins, here," came out of the speaker.

"Charlie?" asked Bert. "This is Bert Henderson over at the ship-lock. Is your chief in?"

"He's just got here, Mr. Henderson. Can I take a message?"

"Yeah. Tell him both my suspects in the Wilson case have disappeared, there's a mob enforcer from Earth involved, and the rocket-bus left for the Far Side in an awful hurry just a little while ago."



“Hold on, I’ll get him on the line,” said Charlie.

Bert turned back to George. “Can you get through to the radio room from here?”

George nodded, then pointed to another microphone.

“Then call ’em up while I talk to McCreedy. Ask if they’ve heard anything from the bus.”

“Chief McCreedy here,” announced the speaker. “What the dickens is going on, Mr. Henderson?”

“There’s a mob heavy called ‘Legs’ Smithson on the Moon. He’s working with Clyde Foster, and the two of them snatched Alan Krause from right in front of me last night. All three of them have vanished.”

“You witnessed a kidnapping last night? Why didn’t you report it then?” asked McCreedy.

“One of them hit me over the head, and when I woke up I had a chat with a gent called Lenny and his two muscular associates,” Bert rubbed the back of his skull with his free hand.

“Horowitz,” muttered McCreedy. “He wouldn’t be involved in a kidnapping. Just runs some gambling and hard liquor, is all.”

“I don’t think he is involved, except that he seems afraid of this man Smithson and wants me to find Wilson’s killer. Which I’d bet a sawbuck is either Foster or Krause.”

“Mr. Henderson,” interrupted George with a wave of his hand.

“One moment, Chief,” said Bert as he turned his attention to George.

“Mr. Henderson, the radio room. They can’t get voice contact with the bus, but did get some clicking they think is Morse code. ‘S-O-S S-O-S G-U-N-M-E-N G-U-N’ then it just stopped.”

Bert felt a lead weight in his gut as his brain assembled the letters. Marge! On the bus with those goons!

“Chief, just got word of an SOS about gunmen from the rocket-bus,” Bert spoke into the microphone he was clutching. “Dr. Oswald and his daughter are also aboard.”

“Henderson, you stay put. I’ll be down to the ship-lock in a few minutes. Charlie!” bellowed the chief’s voice from the speaker, “Call and get somebody to ready a rocket-sled for me. Hold the fort while I’m gone.”

Bert slipped the microphone back on its hook and turned back to George. “Call somebody who can fit me with a pressure-suit, and tell them to make it snappy.”

“Can’t this crate go any faster?” Bert growled into his helmet radio.

“Need the rest of the fuel to slow down for landing. Won’t do those folks any good if we crash and get ourselves killed,” answered McCreedy.

“Won’t do them any good if those goons ventilate them, either,” Bert snapped back.

Strapped into the back seat of McCreedy’s rocket-sled, there was nothing for Bert to do but gaze down at the surface of the Moon far below. Better that than the sky; that sea of blackness reminded Bert of the dark times in his life. Before Richard Phillips had given him a new start.

Not that staring at the Moon was that much of an improvement. Endless plains of gray dust punctuated with countless gray craters. A dull sameness everywhere.

The only spark of life Bert had seen in his two days here had been Marge Oswald. Unlike the bleak gray walls of Roosevelt and the men grown pale and sickly-looking from living underground, she was a breath of fresh air and sunlight.

Ahead, Bert could see the dividing line between the light and the dark on the surface. The Far Side was just entering its night as the shadow swept towards the observatory site.

Towards Marge and the rocket-bus.

Bert spotted two specks of green below just as the rocket-sled began tilting. “Those people down there?” he asked McCreedy through his radio.

“Brace for rocket firing,” said McCreedy.

Bert felt a shudder run through the tiny craft, and he lost sight of the green specks as the sled leveled out.

The shuddering stopped.

“What was that, Henderson?” radioed McCreedy.

“I thought I saw two bright green spots down there just as you flipped this thing,” answered Bert. “Could they be people?”

“Most of the surface work-gangs wear green pressure-suits. Probably.”

Bert glanced at the bright blue of McCreedy’s suit and the yellow of his own sleeve.

“Brace for landing,” advised McCreedy.

The rocket motor underneath the sled fired again, and Bert felt a sensation of weight returning.

The vibrations stopped with a thump as the craft touched down on the smoothed field midway between the observatory dome and the atomic power plant a half-mile away.

McCreedy flipped some switches and began unstrapping himself. “Whereabouts did you spot them?”

Bert unhooked his safety harness and clambered off the rocket-sled. “I think it was over past the shiny dome with all the lights on it,” he said.

McCreedy hopped down to the ground. “The dome is the current observatory, and that-away is the construction site for the new one,”

he pointed to indicate direction.

About fifty yards away from the rocket-sled was a much larger craft with a boxy rectangular shape on top.

“That the rocket-bus?” asked Bert.

“Yep,” confirmed McCreedy as he unclipped an M-Gun carbine from the sled and slung it over his shoulder.

Bert patted the pocket on his upper right leg where he had stowed his own M-Gun pistol.

Bert tried to figure the odds. The message had said “gunmen” so more than one must’ve been aboard the bus. Smithson and Krause?

He’d seen the two figures out near the construction site, so was the bus safe to approach? If Krause were still alive, surely he’d be unarmed if Smithson and Foster were his enemies?

Would Marge and Oswald be on the bus, or maybe in the observatory? Plus, the pilot had to be accounted for. Had the sudden interruption of the message meant he’d been caught in the act of sending it?

“Do you think the men on the surface spotted us coming in?” Bert asked.

“Unless they were staring at their toes, almost certainly. Can’t hide a rocket-blast,” said McCreedy.

“I think we’d best go see what they’re up to first, while they’re away from the Oswalds and the pilot,” suggested Bert.

“Good enough. At least they can’t be sneaking up on us that way.”

McCreedy motioned for Bert to follow, and started walking across the landing field in the direction of the construction site.

Bert found the going easy at first, while they were on the flat, atom-blasted surface of the field, but slowed when he reached the dusty plains beyond.

“McCreedy?” Bert radioed. “Any truth to the rumors of sinkholes under the moon dust?”

“Once in a while you might come across a spot where the dust has covered over a small crater, but usually it’s only a foot or two deep. Not dangerous unless you fall face-first into a rock and crack your helmet.”

McCreedy moved a lot more confidently than Bert did. Bert practically walked in the other man’s footprints.

After a few more minutes, they passed the bright dome of the observatory and into rougher terrain. The crater ridges were higher here, and in places there stood boulders and rock outcroppings taller than a man.

“Figured this would give us some cover, so’s they might not see us coming,” McCreedy said. “We don’t know what they’re armed with, and regular guns will shoot farther than an M-Gun beam.”

“I’d have thought that a regular gun wouldn’t fire without any air in space,” said Bert.

“Seems there’s just enough oxygen in the powder to make it work, but the moon dust gets into a gun pretty quick and fouls it up out here. Still, even one bullet can ruin your day if it’s got your number on it.”

Bert thought about some of the men in his unit when they had been dropped into Normandy. Some of their numbers had come up even before they had hit the ground. Or when they had hit too hard.

McCreedy walked out into the field of ridges and boulders, and Bert followed.

A few hundred yards further on, McCreedy raised his arm and came to a halt behind a large rock.

“Hold up, I’m going to try some other radio channels to see if I can hear them,” said McCreedy.

McCreedy fiddled with the knobs on the outside of his blue helmet while Bert waited in silence.

After a minute or so, McCreedy radioed Bert. "There's a lot of static, but I think I heard a faint voice. All these rocks must be messing with the signal."

Bert patted the pocket with his M-Gun in it. "They can't be too much farther ahead, can they?"

"Wilson's body was found just a little past here," McCreedy said. "You suppose the killer is going back there?"

"Just like in a dime-novel?" said Bert. "You'd think a real crook would be smarter than that."

"When you've been in this business as long as me, you realize that most crooks, even the ones that think they're smart, like to brag about what they've done. They think it makes them seem like tough cookies."

Bert pulled his M-Gun from the leg pocket. "So, we going to peek around this rock and see what's what?"

McCreedy unslung the carbine from his shoulder and readied it. "Guess it's about that time. You take the right side, and I'll take the left."

Bert shuffled a little closer to the edge of the boulder, snaked his gun-arm around, and eased his helmet over just enough to see past the edge.

About ten yards away stood one of the green-suited figures, holding a large metal tube-like thing pointed at another man. The second figure was just rising from a kneeling position in front of a narrow rock outcrop nearly twice the height of the standing man.

Must be trying to pick something up, Bert thought, as he watched the second man get to his feet without using his hands.

"That's a drill-cutter he's pointing," McCreedy said. "Only reaches a few feet but'll melt through anything almost instantly."

The other green-suited man finished getting up. His arms were cupped in front of his chest like the thing he was holding was heavy, even in the Moon's low gravity.

"Drop it!" McCreedy's voice boomed through Bert's helmet. "This is the Space Police, and we've got you covered!"

The fellow with the drill-cutter turned suddenly, as if looking all about.

The second man suddenly took off, lumbering past the tall spire of rock, clouds of moon dust trailing behind his feet.

"Drop it," repeated McCreedy, "or I'll burn you where you stand!"

The goon didn't drop it. Instead, he tried to step over to the tall rock.

McCreedy took one step to the left and squeezed the trigger of his M-Gun.

Static filled Bert's helmet as the invisible compressed radio-waves sprayed out from the barrel of the constable's gun.

Bert watched as the goon's arms and legs suddenly flung out in all directions. The drill-cutter went flying as the man himself sailed a couple of feet off the surface and went tumbling onto the ground in a storm of dust.

The buzzing in Bert's ears stopped. "Get that drill-cutter," sent McCreedy, "I'll keep him covered."

Bert stepped out from behind the boulder and moved towards the fallen atomic tool. The fella on the ground had stopped thrashing around and just lay there amid the haze.

"Buster, if ya know what's good for ya, stay down," McCreedy transmitted as he took three steps towards the fallen man, M-Gun trained in the goon's direction.

Bert reached down with his free hand and picked up the drill-cutter. It was bulky and clearly meant to be used with two hands.

Bert dragged it a few more feet away, then let it settle back to the surface.

“What about the other one?” asked Bert.

“I can go faster than you can out here. I’ll get him and bring him back,” McCreedy said. “You just keep your eye on this one. If he gives you any trouble, give him a short beam to educate him some more.”

Bert sat down on a nearby rock and pointed his own M-Gun at the goon, as the constable headed off past the tall outcrop.

After a couple of minutes, the man on the ground started stirring.

“Take it easy, pal,” radioed Bert.

The man sat up and looked around.

Bert looked at the face in the helmet and didn’t recognize it. Not Foster or Krause, he thought. Must be Smithson.

“You’re no cop,” said Smithson.

“How would you know?”

“The cops up here all wear blue. Your suit’s yellow. Just like you.”

Bert felt his blood starting to boil. He’s calling me yellow?

“Watch your mouth, mister,” Bert growled. “I’m the one holding the gun here.”

“You call that toy a gun? Bet your mama bought it at the five-and-ten.”

Bert stood up and glanced at his pistol. This was a prototype M-Gun. Nobody apart from Phillips employees and Chief McCreedy had ever seen it before.

Smithson got his legs under him in a squatting position.

Bert pointed the M-Gun at Smithson. “No funny stuff, or you’ll get burned again.”



“You know, Mac, this is no business of yours. You’ve just stumbled into it,” Smithson said. “Why can’t we each just go our own way here?”

“What would you know about what’s my business or not? People get murdered and kidnapped here, it becomes my business.”

“I haven’t killed anybody here,” said Smithson, “just came to have a little chat with somebody, is all.”

“What did you do with Krause?” Bert asked, “If he’s not dead, then where—”

Smithson launched himself straight at Bert, arms flung out wide.

Bert stepped back in surprise and squeezed the trigger. Static filled his ears.

Smithson’s face twitched with agony, but his body kept coming and landed on Bert in a tangle of arms and legs.

Somehow, Bert managed to keep hold of his gun, but it was no longer aimed at the goon. He tried to bend his gun-arm, but Smithson had grabbed it above the wrist and was squeezing with impressive force.

The two of them rolled over and all around as they struggled for possession of the M-Gun. Bert was afraid his arm might break if this went on much longer.

Bert felt his left hand brush against something on the ground. A rock! He gripped it and swung at Smithson’s helmet.

Both the goon’s hands flew to his green helmet. Bert threw Smithson off and crawled for cover behind the tall rock spire. Bert could barely see in the thick moon dust haze floating all around them.

Bert gasped for breath as he tried to stand up. He glanced at his gun-hand. The pistol was gone!

A bright orange glow came through the cloud of dust, as an atom-beam struck the edge of the rock outcrop. Smithson had the drill-cutter!

With every second, more of the rock was melted away into nothingness. Soon Bert's cover would be gone entirely.

The orange glow had cut through nearly half the width of the tall spire. Only one chance, thought Bert.

Bert took a step back, then leapt as high and hard as he could straight at the pillar of rock above his head.

As the atom-beam kept cutting away, Bert slammed into the rock.

The tall spire cracked and began to topple.

As Bert rode the falling rock into the swirling dust cloud, the orange glow went out.

A couple of minutes later, Bert crawled away from the wreckage of the collapse.

Smithson did not.

Half an hour later, Bert approached the observatory. Bruised and battered, he knew he needed a doc to look at him soon.

But first he had to find Marge.

Rounding the curve of the dome, he came to the airlock.

What am I gonna find in there? Bert asked himself silently. If there's still another goon, what am I gonna do without my gun?

Bert grabbed the wheel handle on the door and spun it, then pulled the door open. He stepped into the little chamber and worked the door closed behind him.

There was a lever with a little sign, PRESSURE, next to it, so he threw the lever. Bert turned around and saw another hatch in front of him. He stepped up and grabbed the wheel.

His muscles tensed as he waited for the air to fill up the chamber. A light bulb came on over a sign saying SAFE.

Here goes, thought Bert as he spun the wheel and tugged the hatch open.

The first thing he saw was the green-suited figure turning towards him. The man had no helmet. His arm was raised. A gun!

Bert threw himself out of the airlock into the room as a shot echoed through his own helmet.

The goon flinched and staggered towards Bert. Bert sprang and landed an uppercut on his jaw. The gun went flying.

As the man toppled over, Bert quickly looked around the room.

A woman in a bright green outfit stood a few yards away. Wisps of smoke rose from the small gun in her hands.

Marge!

Behind her stood her father, and lying on a bench nearby was a limp man in an orange pressure-suit. Must be the pilot, thought Bert.

Bert looked himself over and found no bullet hole. He took off his helmet as he walked towards Marge.

“Mr. Henderson, what the devil is this all about?” she said.

She still had the gun out, pointed in Bert’s general direction. Bert froze.

Bert glanced down at the fallen man’s face. Foster. Then the other one out there with McCreedy must be Krause.

“Either this fella Foster here, or another man named Krause, killed Wilson,” Bert said. “The third man with them was a mob heavy from Earth called Smithson. I took care of him outside.”

“What’s this got to do with me and my father?” Marge asked.

“I figure they needed to come back to the crime scene for some reason. Guess they needed your ride out here.”

A speaker blared through the room. “Ahoy, the observatory. This is the Space Police. Somebody secure the airlock so we can come in.”

“That’d be Chief McCreedy. He was after Krause,” said Bert.

“Well, hadn’t you best let him in?” Marge said as she lowered her gun.

A couple of minutes later McCreedy marched Krause into the room at gunpoint.

“Everybody all right in here?” McCreedy asked.

“That’s Foster down on the floor, he’s been shot, and I socked him in the jaw. He’s still breathing,” Bert said.

“They hit the pilot over the head,” said Marge as she pointed to the man on the bench. “He’s alive but won’t wake up.”

“Henderson, you look terrible. What happened to the other one?” asked McCreedy.

“We had a bit of an educational dispute,” said Bert, “had to expel him from school.”

Bert saw that Krause was still carrying something cupped in front of him.

“What’s that he’s got there?” asked Bert.

McCreedy waved his M-Gun at Krause. “Put it down over on that table right there.”

The object was a small block about the size of a brick. As Krause put it down some of the moon dust streaked on it fell off. The lights in the room reflected a shiny glimmer.

“Gold?” said Bert. “That what this whole thing has been about?”

“There’s plenty more,” said Krause, “but I’m the only one knows where it’s at.” He swiveled his head towards McCreedy. “You getting close to retirement, Chief? Be a lot more comfortable if you had a bit socked away.”

“You killed Wilson over the gold, then,” Bert said. “You must have wanted all of it to pay off Smithson and whoever sent him after you.”

McCreedy turned towards Marge. “Miss Oswald, would you mind covering our friend Mr. Krause a few seconds while I get my helmet off?”

Marge raised her pistol.

Once McCreedy had his helmet off, he turned back to the table upon which the gold bar rested. “Sure is pretty,” he sighed.

“It’s yours if you just get me back to Roosevelt,” said Krause. “You can pin Wilson’s death on Foster there, I come back later for the rest, and we both live happily ever after.”

The constable reached out his hand towards the gold.

“You’re not going to let him go?” Marge said. “After what he did to Paulie?” She still had her gun out.

She called him Paulie? thought Bert.

“Now, look here, missy, just let us men sort things out here,” said McCreedy.

Bert saw that Marge’s eyes went wide, as she gripped the pistol tighter.

“Just wait a minute, both of you,” Bert said. He stepped over to the table and put his hand on the glimmering bar. He turned the bar over to examine it.

As the rest of the dust fell off, Bert saw the bottom of the bar. Stamped into it was something he had not seen since the war. An eagle with wings spread, over a twisted bent cross.

“You see what this is, McCreedy? You know what it means, where it must’ve come from?” Bert said, his voice rising in anger.

McCreedy let out a long sigh. He turned and raised his carbine at Krause. “Alan Krause, you’re under arrest for the murder of Paul Wilson.”

There was a thump behind Marge. Bert shifted his gaze.

Dr. Oswald had fallen to the floor.

Marge turned her head, dropped her gun, and rushed to his side. “He’s fainted,” she said.

“Chief, if you loan me your M-Gun, I’ll watch Krause,” Bert said. “We’ve got some folks here need some docs pretty soon, and somebody needs to radio Roosevelt.”

“Bert?” Marge turned her head in his direction.

“Yes?”

“You going to need any help getting out of that pressure-suit?” Her hazel eyes glittered as much as the gold.

“You know, I just might, at that.”

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*Spencer E. Hart became an SF & comic book nerd when he was knee-high to a Thark. He lives in the Hudson Valley region of NY State, and can be contacted via his blog at*

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# The Battlefield of Keres

By JIM BREYFOGLE

***An ill-conceived bet brings Mangos and his new companion Kat to a vast no man's land full of relics and magical anomalies in search of a fabled helm! Can Mangos and Kat retrieve Gorman's helm or will they perish in the haunted wilds of Keres!?***

It was, Mangos thought, the stupidest bet he had ever made. Not that it should surprise him; he had been winning all evening. Arm wrestling, bar bending, handstands, and a dozen other tests of strength and agility had seen him victorious – each victory bringing another tankard of ale. Small wonder his pride was high and judgment low.

Now he sat, head down, the morning sun angling through the inn's window to illuminate the table before him. His head hurt, his stomach wouldn't sit quietly, and worst of all—"I don't even know who Gorman is," he muttered to himself.

"He fought for the Duke of Endgras."

Mangos lifted his head. A young woman sat across and further down the long table, her back to the fire. Mangos savaged his memory, trying to remember her. Dark hair, torn clothes, yes, she had been playing dice last night – and winning.

"He's dead then?" he asked.

"It's hard to say anything for certain, where Keres is concerned, but I think it safe to assume he's dead." Her tone was dry, lightly mocking, as though this should be common knowledge.

Keres—that name *did* have meaning. The Duke of Endgras, Keres—he mulled the names and came up blank. He wasn't in the mood for ignorance. Glaring at the woman, he wondered if she was setting him up. What could a ragged, dirty, bruised little bit of a girl know?

The woman laughed softly, as if his frustration amused her. "What do you know of Gorman?" he challenged.

"You don't care about Gorman," she said. "You just need his helm."

"So tell me of his helm."

"A tough find," she said. "It would be easier if you just admitted defeat and paid for the tankard of ale."

"No," Mangos answered, not even needing to think about it. He would not give Thierry the satisfaction.

"Then listen," she said. "Gorman served the Duke of Endgras. He was stationed near the center during the battle of Keres, but sometime during the battle he was lost. Had his body been plundered, news of his helm would be known, but it's not." She leaned forward, her green eyes clear and piercing. "Gorman's helm remains in Keres."

"Keres, battlefield," Mangos said. "I can go there." Life, since he had left Arnelon, had been less adventurous than he expected. This might be fun.

The woman cocked her head, "I don't think you have a proper appreciation of Keres."

The door opened, and the adventurer Thierry came in, all scars and swagger. Spying Mangos he shouted, "Mangos! My friend! Do you have the helm? No?" He shook his head in mock sorrow. "The way you spoke last night, I felt sure you would have it already."

Mangos winced as Thierry's shout knifed through his head. "I'll get it," he growled.

"How long? I'm thirsty now!" Thierry roared with laughter. "Maybe you want a drink, too?"

The thought made Mangos queasy. "No."

"Good! Because there's no ale for you until you bring the helm of Gorman." He towered over Mangos as he said, more seriously, "Your



tricks didn't impress me last night, and I'm not impressed now. You want to make a name for yourself—pfah!" He sauntered across the room and shouted for the barmaid.

Mangos ground his teeth, knowing Thierry shouted on purpose. Mangos knew he was stronger and faster, and Thierry chose this bet to embarrass him. He wished he had realized it last night. "I will not lose that easily."

He leaned toward the woman; he spoke low so Thierry couldn't hear, "Do you know where Keres is?"

She nodded.

He'd be damned if he let Thierry get the better of him, even if it meant asking this woman for help. "Will you help me?"

She didn't answer, just looked at him, sizing him up. Perhaps she was stupid or indecisive, but watching her face, he got the feeling she saw deeper into his question than he did. If she thought to rob him in the wilds, she would get a nasty surprise.

"Yes," she said finally. "I will help you."

"Good. What's your name?"

"Kat."

"How soon can you be ready to leave?"

"Gorman's helm hasn't moved in sixty years," Kat said. "I'll take a few minutes to clean up. One should look one's best when beginning a project."

Mangos sighed. "I'll wait outside."

He blinked when Kat joined him a short time later. She had washed her body and hair. He looked at her closely for the first time and realized she was pretty. No, he corrected himself, if you ignored the bruises and torn clothes, she was *beautiful*. It was like turning around and finding your sister all grown up.

His headache had subsided, and he felt foolish standing in the middle of the road, ready to drag this woman on his quest to find the helm of a fallen hero. Perhaps it was the ridiculously small stakes involved.

“If you give me directions, I can find it,” he said.

Kat rearranged the small pack she carried. “If it were that easy, somebody else would have found it. We’ll need to stop in Endgras. I want to search their archives.” She started down the road.

With two long strides, Mangos caught up with her. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll—”

“Give me half your winnings?”

Mangos felt his face turn red. “No, that wasn’t what I meant. I’ll...” he fumbled for words because he didn’t know what would be fair payment. He gathered his dignity and said, “I am a great adventurer.”

“If you were, you wouldn’t need to say it,” Kat said. “Although,” she added before he could protest, “you showed good skill, if not judgment, last night.”

Who was she to judge his skill? Mangos wondered. He had thought she might be an escaped slave, but she sounded too confident. A gladiatrix maybe?

He kept wondering as they travelled in easy silence. Kat looked completely comfortable. She kept a good pace and didn’t stop or complain. She seemed content in her knowledge of him—which made him wonder if he had said things last night he couldn’t remember. Maybe she was a good judge of character. Maybe she didn’t care.

But he liked her company, and he was glad she was there, even if he knew so little about her.

After passing through a couple of small towns, Kat looked completely different than when he first met her. She bought new clothes, plain and sturdy, and other gear she lacked. He was

surprised, given her apparent poverty, but she reminded him while he wagered ale, she only took money.

She bought a sword, as well—small, to suit her size, but the best available. Mangos prided himself on knowing his steel, and she clearly did too. But when he asked her where she learned it, where she came from, or who she was, Kat answered with long silences. Since he didn't want to risk his bet or her company, he didn't press. Instead, he asked of Keres, and she told him what she knew.

"You said Keres was big," Mangos said as he chewed on a duck leg. If it didn't have wings, Mangos might have thought this tavern served rats. He had entered Endgras hungry, and waiting while Kat stopped at the archives only made it worse. "But really, how big can a battlefield be?"

"You could ride two days east to west and not cross it," said Kat. "And it stretched from the Karris Mountains in the north to the Balmis swamp in the south." She looked up from her scroll. "That's fifty miles." More scrolls curled on the table beside her. An extra candle sat next to her, illuminating her face, the scroll, and the plate of fried duck that sat between them.

Mangos grunted, reluctantly impressed. "I'm surprised they let you take the scrolls."

Kat returned to reading. "They don't know I have them."

"Ah, that explains it." Mangos picked up his cup as he thought of the crumbling city surrounding them. At one time it was one of the largest cities on the eastern continent. Its lands had stretched far in every direction—rich, prosperous, and powerful.

Now it was a shell, its strength destroyed in the Keres, ruled by others while its eastern lands lay cursed by the battle. Of the tens of thousands who once lived here, only a few thousand remained; bone pickers, scavengers mostly, who sifted through the ruins of the city for old caches of wealth.

Mangos leaned over the table trying to see what she read. "What have you found?"

"Not much I didn't know," Kat admitted. "By the end of the first week of battle, things were so confused that nobody knew what was happening. The battle lines had long since broken down. Messengers disappeared." She shrugged.

"But it is known that Gorman was near the center."

"That's where he was when the battle started," Kat said.

Mangos didn't feel reassured. If they couldn't find Gorman, he would lose his bet. "We have time to look," he said.

"The Keres still claims victims."

The voice came right beside them, and Mangos jumped. Wine sloshed out of his cup. Without looking up, Kat swept her scrolls away just before the wine splashed them.

Mangos glared at the man who seemed to have appeared next to them. He looked...worn, if a person can look so. He had a long face, his mouth turning down in the corners. His skin and hair were pale. His clothes looked to be of better quality but faded. For a brief second, his lips turned up in what Mangos took to be an apology.

"Why do you say that?" Mangos asked.

"Adventurers go to the old battlefield looking for weapons, or armor, or magic. Often, all they find is death. They told me you visited the archives." He flicked his gaze around the table. "I see you took some of it with you. You're from the north," he said to Kat. "You're not," he told Mangos.

"Arnelon, I'm from Arnelon," Mangos said. He glanced at Kat. From the north? Maybe, she did have a little of the look.

Kat neither hid nor apologized for the documents. "Why did you seek us?"

The man bobbed his head around. "Boredom, maybe. Normally I take some small pleasure in the thought of grave robbers dying amongst those old perils. But you, my dear, are too pretty, and it sorrows me that you should perish."

She smiled. "Life is full of sorrow."

"True. Sadly true." He pressed his palms together and bowed his head. "But what do you seek on the field of Keres?"

"Gorman's Helm," said Mangos wincing as Kat kicked him under the table, "would be nice to find," he added hastily. "But we're after Alazar's Crystal of Sight." Kat might have mentioned it sometime as they travelled. It sounded familiar.

"You won't find both together," said the man. "Alazar fought for Balmis at the north end of the field. Gorman, of course, held the center for Endgras, a dangerous position.

"Do you know," said the man, "artifact hunting is a very dangerous pursuit?" A kind of mad glitter came into his eyes as if the idea excited him, though otherwise his expression did not change.

Mangos did not answer, and neither did Kat.

The man stood motionless. After a long silence, he said, "I buy antiquities and artifacts from Keres. I buy them all."

Kat lifted her head from her scroll. "All of them? Nobody else buys any?"

"Nobody else employs street urchins with sharp knives and stealthy ways."

Mangos set down his duck leg. He frowned, but before he could do more Kat said, "I'm not sure if we're being warned, threatened, or just talking."

"Words are words," said the man, "and not to be confused with knives in the dark."

Mangos tried to puzzle this out. "Who are you?" he asked.

“Forgive me. I am Karl, dealer of historic artifacts.” He stopped talking, it seemed he had no more to say, but he stood looking at them.

Mangos waited for him to leave, but he remained standing. Finally, Mangos said, “Why don’t you hunt artifacts for yourself?”

“We all hunt them in different ways.”

Mangos had no answer and fell silent. Karl stood, watching.

Kat returned to reading.

Mangos picked up a piece of duck, toyed with it, held it up for Karl to see. “Want some?”

“Thank you, no.”

“Well then, off you go.” He made a shooing motion with his hands.

“Karl. Dealer of artifacts and curiosities. Do not forget.” He seemed to glide from the room. “Anything I said,” drifted back to them.

“An odd man,” Mangos said.

Kat stared at the door. “Odd,” she agreed after a moment.

“How far is it to Keres?” he asked.

“If we leave in the morning, we’ll arrive early the next day. It would be best to spend as few nights on Keres as possible.”

Mangos picked up the cold, greasy duck. “I’m not afraid.” His gaze drifted to the door of the tavern. “And I’m not afraid of Karl.”

“No,” Kat said. “You shouldn’t be afraid of Karl.” Whether or not he should fear Keres, she left unsaid.

The road passed out of silent, crumbling Endgras city into the silent, desolate country. The fields were a jumble of brambles and stunted trees. Here and there, a homestead anchored a small farm. Grey clouds cast an ominous pall over the land, but it did not rain.

Stone pillars that rose waist-high marked their way. At first, Mangos thought them marking stones, but closer inspection revealed some still had rusted mountings and occasionally the remains of gears and chains attached to the top.

“A polybolos,” said Kat, “protecting the supply lines and big enough to handle a dragon.”

Mangos shook his head. “How do you know this?” He had never been one to worry about what he didn’t know, but he couldn’t help wondering again about her. Her knowledge was starting to scare him.

“It helps to know things.”

He couldn’t argue that.

“The Duke’s command fortress is at the western edge of Keres,” Kat said.

When they reached it the next morning, the fortress was unlike any Mangos had ever seen. It didn’t look like a fortress, in spite of straddling the road. It had doors large enough to drive a cart through and windows to light the interior.

“Customs house,” said Kat, and once she said it, he could tell. The road passed through a half-barrel tunnel, heavy gates rusting to nothing at either end. Rooms for confiscated goods crumbled to either side of the main building. “They used it as an administrative post when the war started.”

Mangos walked to the nearest door and stuck his head inside. Night’s cold still lingered within the building, and a bit of its darkness too. Once his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he could see it was empty except for rubble and a thick layer of dust.

Just as he turned to leave, some words caught his eye. Scratched into the wall by a manacle above a jumble of bones was “Madness saved me.” Whether written by or written to mock the prisoner, Mangos could not tell.

Wind whispered through the building, stirring the cold air and raising bumps on Mangos' arms.

"This says what I've been trying to tell you," Kat called. Mangos found her in the tunnel, pointing to the wall. Graffiti covered the walls, words of men long dead. Time wore away the scratching, so little could be read from the soldiers who only once passed this way.

Kat pointed at some doggerel that survived:

*Should you venture past this gate,  
Gird your weapon and hope forsake.  
For Keres demands blood and gore,  
And death shall feed it evermore.*

"Keres sounds like a beast, not a battle," said Mangos.

"Now," Kat said, "you're beginning to understand."

Walking to the end of the tunnel, Mangos looked out over Keres, trying to imagine what it must have been like during the battle. A seething mass of soldiers, fighting as far as you could see, punctuated by fire and magic, so different from the quiet, undulating land before him. It would have been mud and stone instead of grass and scrub brush.

"Death shall feed it evermore." Mangos snorted. "Superstition."

"Which is undoubtedly what is still killing people."

"What do you think is killing people?"

"Traps, stray magic, restless spirits, unbanished demons," Kat said, "and artifact hunters."

"A carnival of death," Mangos said. He tried to laugh, but a shiver ran up his spine. "What happened to the Duke of Endgras?"



“He took the last of his men and rode into Keres.”

“What? He didn’t come back? Balmis didn’t send his head home?”

Kat didn’t answer, and Mangos didn’t need one. Together they walked out of the tunnel and into Keres.

In spite of the sun, Mangos sometimes shivered, as if passing through pockets of cold air. The feelings came and went, and trying to discover the cause proved pointless.

They travelled east, searching amongst the quiet, grassy fields and ravines. Artifacts—helms, shields, and rotting timbers of war engines—littered their path. Sometimes, rarely, they passed a cairn, something that said in the midst of all the death somebody remembered their humanity and honored a fallen comrade. But these were invariably pulled apart, their contents plundered.

Noon came and went without any clue to Gorman’s helm. They probed deeper, sometimes stopping to scrape the thin soil away from an oddity only to move on when it wasn’t what they sought.

Later, Mangos saw the sun atop the rim of the ravine they climbed and noticed night gathered in the shadows below them. It would not be long before it crept out to cover the entire land. They should find a safe place to spend the night.

Movement caught his eye. “By the gods of Eastwarn, look at the size of that beast.” A wolf, tall as a deer, stood on an outcropping.

“The wolves grew large on the dead,” Kat said.

Mangos drew his sword. “We are not dinner.” It may have been the wolf understood him, for it gave a growling bark. Another wolf appeared, slightly smaller than the first. More followed until seven huge wolves faced them.

“I’m not sure you should have mentioned dinner,” Kat said.

Mangos swung his sword one-handed as he pulled out his dagger. "Come, beast, we'll see who's dinner."

One of the smaller wolves darted in, head down, and snapped at his leg. Mangos slashed its head, but its thick skull turned his blade. The wolf retreated, bone visible atop its grey head and blood pouring through its fur.

Two more dashed in, one from each side. Mangos thrust at one, while Kat lunged forward to stab the other. The rest of the pack swarmed over them, snarling and biting. Mangos buried his dagger hilt deep into one, but its body still knocked him over and tore the weapon from his hand. He gripped his sword with both hands and rolled back and forth, trying to avoid snapping teeth.

Next to him Kat curled, the wolf on her back all grey fur and gnashing teeth. He caught intermittent glimpses of her as she shook off the wolf and thrust, driving her sword straight into the wolf's mouth and out the back of its neck. She slashed another wolf's hind legs, making it collapse with a yelp.

Teeth and tongue filled his vision. He raised his sword—the wolf was too close to thrust or swing; he turned his weapon so the wolf bit down on the edges. It worried the blade, tearing itself badly before releasing the sword and backing away.

Mangos stood, glanced around. Kat stood next to him, resolute. Two wolves lay dead. Four others bled. The pack leader stood on the outcropping, watching.

"Care to go again?" Mangos asked.

The pack leader lowered its ears and bared its teeth, but gave a sharp bark. One of the wounded barked back, and the leader growled. The wounded wolf gave a little whine.

A chorus of tiny yips and howls burst from the cluster of rocks where the wolf had first appeared. A litter of pups followed, tumbling over each other. The wounded gathered around them, guided them up the ravine, nipping and growling to keep the pups moving. The

pack leader snarled, pacing until the rest were gone, then vanished after them.

“How’s your back?” Mangos asked.

“Fine,” said Kat. “I think it just tore my jacket.” Mangos looked, nodded.

“That went—surprisingly well,” he said. “You—” He stopped himself from saying, “didn’t do anything stupid,” and substituted, “fought very well.” They *had* fought well together.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Let’s find someplace to rest that doesn’t have wolves,” he said. “And we can look for Gorman’s helm in the morning.”

By the time Mangos reached the ridge, the sun had just dropped below the horizon. It lit the western sky, but to the north, another glow, previously drowned by the sunlight, backlit a higher ridge.

Mangos pointed it out to Kat. “Maybe it’s a conference of spooks.”

She snorted her disbelief. “I wonder what it is.”

He grinned. “Let’s find out.”

Except for the strange glow, it was fully dark when Kat led the way to the top of the ridge.

“What is it?” Mangos said as he hurried to catch up.

“Not spooks,” she said.

Several miles away, a column of fire rose to the sky. Flames spiraled up to where the clouds took an orange glow.

“A tornado of fire,” Mangos said. “A firenado, but it isn’t moving.”

“Unbelievable.” Awe tinged Kat’s voice. She shook her head slowly. “The records didn’t mention *that*.”

Mangos nodded. “Most magic is tricks and sleight of hand. This is incredible.”

“Dicing is sleight of hand,” Kat corrected him. “Magic is something else entirely.”

“That should keep the wolves away,” he said. “Let’s go warm our hands.”

It took longer than Mangos expected to climb the series of ridges and trudge through the valleys. Finally, the firenado glowed above the last ridge, and he heard its crackling roar. The air grew dry.

Mangos wiped his brow, drew a deep breath. Kat caught his eye, smiled and pressed ahead.

“It’ll keep the wolves away, I’ll grant you that,” she said.

The heat hit Mangos as he climbed onto the ridge, making it difficult to breathe. Wind rushed past him, drying his sweat, but not cooling him.

The firenado roared on the opposite ridge and bathed the whole valley in orange light. The ground reflected the glow back. Hundreds, maybe thousands of bodies still lay where they fell, mummified. Their armor had been burnished by the heat and wind. Nothing grew, for the firenado carried away all the dust, leaving only stone and hard, baked earth.

Mangos licked his lips. “If the Helm is down there, I’ll for sure need a drink.”

Kat drew her hair back. “I don’t—” her voice cracked. She swallowed. “I don’t think it is. The center is further south.”

Mangos shaded his eyes. “What does it burn?”

“Nothing, it’s magic.”

“It must burn something.”

“That is a major magical disaster,” she said, still staring at the firenado. “An accident.” She paused. “Maybe not an accident, but

magic done beyond the boundary of control.”

“It must burn something,” Mangos insisted. “Ah! It must draw its fire from another dimension. Somewhere in another universe is a whirling vortex of cold.”

Kat looked at him, something like surprise on her face. He couldn't tell if she thought him brilliant or ridiculous. “Perhaps,” she said thoughtfully. She turned to leave, but Mangos stayed.

“There!” said Mangos, the word scratching his dry throat as it came out. A pile of bodies lay near the bottom of the valley. Men had died by the dozen there, and that meant a hero. “That mound of bodies—who is that?”

Kat came back beside him. “We're too far north,” she said. “It can't be Gorman.”

“How can you be sure? I'm going to look.”

Kat did not answer, nor did she follow. She stood, her face orange from the firenado as he turned to investigate the bodies.

The wind pushed him forward. The heat radiated so strongly he thought he could feel his skin redden. He stepped, with exaggerated care, over desiccated corpses. Everything he did slowly, deliberately.

He thought he heard words, but over the wind and the dull roar of the firenado, he couldn't be certain. It didn't matter anyway, he told himself, for the mound of bodies was ... still far away. He didn't know if he should trust his eyes, for the hot air might distort distances.

He stumbled, and a few steps later stumbled again. The body in front of him grinned through shriveled lips. Its eyes had been vaporized. Mangos wondered if enemies had killed the man. Or had the firenado?

He blinked, and his eyelids scraped across his eyes like sandpaper. He couldn't think clearly. Why was he here? How had he come to be kneeling next to a dead man? What was Kat saying?

Kat's hair whipped past her, and she held up a fold of her cloak as protection against the heat. Mangos wanted to say something, but as he opened his mouth she lifted her other hand and squirted water from her flask. It went into his mouth and over his face, stinging his eyes.

She yanked him up, dragging him toward the ridge, only pausing to give him more water. He stumbled often, his legs weak, but she did not let him fall. Once at the top, she threw herself down the other side, protected from the heat and wind.

Mangos collapsed next to her and drank deeply of both cooler air and water.

"That's," said Kat, her words spaced by deep breaths, "not Gorman."

Mangos nodded and closed his eyes. He could almost feel them absorbing moisture. "Good."

For two days they worked their way south and east. Mangos complained of troubled dreams, the feeling of other beings crowding into his head at night. Kat admitted having the same feeling.

During the day, Mangos often saw things at the edge of his vision, but they vanished when he turned his head. He did not mention them because he didn't want Kat to think him foolish. They saw and avoided many hazards but did not find Gorman's helm.

"Here," said Mangos. "We must be near the center. This is where Gorman would be."

The ground was flat but riven with cracks. At places they could see hints of the old road, at one point even the foundations of a bridge, but only grass grew for miles around.

In spite of being flat, the ground was lumpy and uneven, treacherous to walk on. When Mangos rubbed his foot across the grass, it pulled away. The soil was thin over a rusted breastplate. He

took a step and felt something crunch as he put his weight down. Armor or bones, he could not tell.

“Heroes do not die common deaths,” said Kat. “Look for something more than this.”

Mangos nodded, walking forward, sometimes slipping when the grass slid off an old skull, sometimes crunching through rusted armor or weakened ribs. He stepped on someone everywhere he placed his feet.

“Who’s that?” Kat said.

Mangos looked up in time to see two men, unnoticed earlier, disappear in a crevasse.

“Thierry!” said Mangos. “He wants to claim the Helm before us! The scoundrel! He’s too cheap to buy drinks, so he has to steal our treasure!” Mangos began to run, not minding his footing. He heard Kat’s light footsteps behind him.

Mangos reached a valley, somewhat deep, rather short, but well lit by the overhead sun. Thierry picked his way down the wall, his face obscured by a large shield strapped to his back. He was half way down, his companion followed.

“Stop, you thief!” shouted Mangos, only to be answered by laughter.

“Look!” said Kat. She pointed to the far side of the valley. “Gorman!”

A body in white armor lay under an overhang. It lay as though placed there, on its back, gauntleted hands folded over its chest, helm placed carefully next to its head.

“You thief!” shouted Mangos as he threw himself down the wall, scrambling to catch up with his former drinking companion. He took chances and moved quickly, but it was apparent Thierry had too much of a lead.

Thierry reached the valley floor. “You should be buying the drinks for me!” he called up.

“That wasn’t the bet! We bet whether *I* could return with Gorman’s Helm!”

“Well, you can’t because the Helm is mine,” Thierry shouted.

“A cheater and a thief!” Mangos barely noticed the small cuts on his hands from the rocks as he hurried to catch up.

Thierry reached Gorman’s body just as his henchman and Mangos both reached the valley floor. Only then did they all notice the creature, an imp really, who sat behind Gorman.

It had dark red, mottled skin, short but wicked horns curling from its head, and claws that shone ivory on one hand. As it climbed over the body they noticed the other arm was truncated above the wrist, and scars crisscrossed its muscular body. It stood less than waist high.

Thierry laughed, and his thoughts were clear. It might have been threatening if it weren’t so...*small*. The imp regarded Thierry warily as he approached, but did not run. Suddenly, Thierry swung his fist, catching the imp squarely and lifting it, slamming it into a boulder. It landed, lifted itself on its hand and stump, and shook its head slowly.

Thierry reached for the Helm.

“No!” shouted Mangos. He leapt over a stone and charged Thierry. Thierry spun, shrugged his shield over his shoulder and drew his sword. He swung as Mangos neared.

Mangos drew in his breath, felt the sword tear the air in front of him. He drew his own sword.

Thierry attacked again, shouting for his companion. Mangos parried.

Mangos swung, but Thierry lifted his shield in time. “You’re a fool,” said Thierry. “Lucky to get this far.”



“I,” said Mangos, “will be the greatest swordsman the world has ever known.”

“Oh, stop boasting,” said Thierry as he turned aside another slash.

Steel clashed on steel behind him, but Mangos didn’t turn. The sound did not stop, but continued rhythmically, with Mangos’ attacks adding dissonant sounds.

Thierry sucked in his breath. “You’ll never even be as good as *she* is.”

With a twist of his wrist, Mangos caught Thierry’s sword with his own and slid it down to bind in his cross-guard. He yanked, pulling Thierry forward. With another twist he bent Thierry’s sword and freed his own, swung up, catching Thierry’s shield and throwing it upwards. He swung under the upraised shield, cutting through Thierry’s side, cleaving his gut, and out near his far hip.

Thierry straightened, but his torso kept falling back while his legs stayed in place. His guts cascaded out onto the ground before he fell over entirely.

Mangos turned to check on Kat. She sat on one of the rocks, legs crossed, elbow on one knee, head on her hand, looking bored. Thierry’s henchman lay face down and clearly dead.

“That dratted thief!” Mangos said. “Now there’s no one to buy my drinks.”

The imp had crept back in front of Gorman. It hissed and stood a little straighter as Mangos approached.

“Step aside, little beast,” Mangos said.

“He’s guarding it,” Kat said.

“Surely he is, and he can guard all but the Helm when we leave.”

“Suit yourself, but I’d leave it there.”

Mangos laughed. “After coming all this way? Who would believe us if we didn’t have the Helm?” He stretched out his hand.

The little imp hissed, sounding like a cat, and took a deep breath. It expanded, kept expanding, growing taller and wider; skin stretched taut over massive muscles. It had teeth like knives, claws like scimitars. Sparks crackled between its horns, and a tongue of fire licked from its mouth. No longer an imp, a demon towered above them. Now it sounded like the roaring of a lion.

“Hey!” Mangos shouted as he jumped back.

With its one hand, the demon picked up a large rock. It held up the rock and crumbled it like a piece of dry cheese.

“I can take strong,” Mangos said.

The demon blew fire just far enough to make Mangos move back.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” he exclaimed. The heat reminded him of the firenado, and his mouth went suddenly dry.

“That,” said Kat, “is a good reason to leave the Helm behind.” The demon rumbled agreement. “It’s guarding Gorman,” Kat continued. “It won’t bother you if you don’t touch the helm.”

“Not the helm,” Mangos said. “Maybe the gauntlets?”

The demon held up its hand and snapped his claws together.

“Not the gauntlets either.” He sighed. He brightened up with a thought. “Well, Thierry wasn’t going to buy drinks anyway.” He sheathed his sword and backed further away.

As Mangos backed away, the demon seemed to relax. It tore off Thierry’s head, tossed it into the air and caught it in its mouth on the way down.

Mangos turned away and started to climb out of the valley, trying to ignore the rending and crunching sounds. He felt very good about not taking the helm.

“You knew it could transform,” he said.

“I would stay to ask how the demon got here,” Kat said, not admitting anything as she climbed next to him, “but I don’t want to

disturb its lunch.” The crunching sounds began again. She smiled. “You can’t win every bet.”

“No point going back now. Thierry is dead, and I didn’t get the helm.”

“There’s always treasure,” Kat said. “Always adventure.”

“We didn’t even get the helm,” he repeated.

“Our first time,” she said. “We’ll get better.”

He paused, thought of the travel, the danger, and the lure of treasure. “Did you have anything in mind?”

“A jewel that was lost?” She laughed, shook her head. “Why ruin the pursuit with the goal? Sooner or later, we all come to the treasure we most covet.”

Mangos grinned. “Then let us pursue without asking what we chase, and when we catch it, let us chase again!”

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*Jim Breyfogle currently resides in Pennsylvania. When he isn't writing he is gathering an army of terra-cotta warriors with which to aggravate his English Mastiff—thus far, the dog still wins.*

# Othan, Vandal

By KURT MAGNUS

***Stealing an ugly little idol from dangerous savages such as the Yapwe should be just another payday for a sword-for-hire like Othan.... But this time, an unfortunate curse and an overly determined shaman have Othan reconsidering his line of work!***

Othan tingled with excitement, for just beyond a thin screen of palm fronds was the village of the elusive Yapwe tribe. For two moons Othan had traveled southward, ever southward, off the very edge of the map to find them. If the legends were true, they possessed a talisman of great healing power, worth a fortune to whoever could bring it back to the City of Dix for the sickly old merchant, Gyhan of Joluum.

Othan flicked a thumb-sized midge off of his arm. He was tall and lean, with sandy hair and a darker brown beard, now fully grown in. Despite a thick layer of gray-green clay smeared over his skin, the mosquitoes continued their unabated assault. In all of his twenty-six summers, Othan had never been to such a disagreeable place – hot, rainy, and crawling with spiky creepers, biting creatures and noxious blooms. Worse than the dusty wastes of the Doldrums. Even worse than the swamps of Lahurn.

From his bushy hideout, he could see eight or so huts of mud and thatch, and a single, lofty longhouse. The short and stocky villagers, with skin like amber, casually went about their midday chores. Some labored at crafts or chased pot-bellied children, while others squatted in the dirt, smoking short clay pipes. Most were clothed from the waist down only, and both men and women braided their dark hair in complex patterns, like the spiked helmets of the Serm.

Before the longhouse, just a dozen paces away, was a squat dais of massive flat stones, each carved with a crude, mossy face. Atop

the dais, in a viney cradle of bamboo, rested what must be the sacred talisman. Othan was excited and repulsed. It looked like a leathery doll the size of a piglet made of wax or some other strange jungle gloop.

If he could bring it back to Gyhan, there would be wine and women—and Stromini brandy, of course—but more importantly, he would finally pay off some dangerously long-standing debts. Though the fruits of his adventures usually kept his rent paid and his larder stocked, Othan never seemed to have enough silver dnarl to get along properly, or at least as well as he thought he deserved for all of his hard and—he flicked off another fly—bothersome work.

Two Yapwe warriors guarded the platform, leaning like underpaid Constables. Their armor looked flimsy, their bamboo spears like decorations. Othan considered just marching in and taking it, as the Yapwe seemed like a peaceful bunch. Their wooden weapons were no threat against his steel short sword. But Othan was from the great city of Dix, where they were taught young to be extra wary on an easy road. Spears could harbor paralytic poisons. The talisman's viney cradle could conceal a venomous beast. Worst of all, it could be guarded by malicious spirits, which he feared far more than any weapon held by mortal men.

Othan's planning was interrupted by a noisy group of tribesmen marching toward the longhouse. Two solemn warriors dressed in boar-head helmets led the way, with three women playing flutes that looked like human bones. The young man who came next walked with the fearless manner and arrogant gait of a prince. His body was painted with broad, diagonal stripes of aquamarine. Fat opal disks dangled from his ears, and beaded necklaces lay in a heap about his chest. A clump of villagers clad in grey smocks followed meekly behind, with awe and fear in their servile postures.

The cacophony of flutes died as the painted man stepped before the dais that held the talisman. Muttering to himself, he waved his hands over a smoldering stone brazier, as if warming them, despite the oppressive heat. Suddenly blue flames erupted skyward. The

smell of burnt sugar and sandalwood wafted all the way out to Othan's bushy hideaway.

The crowd of grey-clad villagers murmured some unrecognizable words with savage emotion. They pushed forth a young girl who cried out in pain, her eyes rolling about madly. The boar-headed warriors grabbed her tightly by each skinny arm and dragged her before the talisman. All the while, the painted man wailed like a chorus of out-of-tune lyres.

Othan cringed, not at the discordant sound, but at the sight of this primitive, but potentially dangerous shaman. Could he ever have a normal, easy burglary for once in his life?

The young shaman consulted the talisman in his strange song-like tongue while the crowd of villagers chanted along like a timid echo. The girl before the talisman shook all over, as if in a seizure. Suddenly, she screamed. A grey, smoky cloud billowed forth from her bony ribs then coalesced into the shape of a slowly writhing serpent. Singing and dancing with conviction, the painted man drew the grey serpent out like a Stromini drake wrangler. His unintelligible song built up to a high pitched crescendo then suddenly stopped. The vaporous snake had poured into the talisman and disappeared.

The boar-headed guards hauled the limp young girl away like a wet carpet. The shaman extinguished the blue flame with a lazy wave then swaggered toward the longhouse. The crowd cleared away dully, as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

Othan's eyes burned when he finally blinked. With shaking hands, he took a sip from his waterskin, wishing it was something stronger. He fumbled for his Dayala charm, a bracelet of holy beads and dyed cloth tied tightly around his right ankle. Though it was meant to protect against sorcery, it brought little comfort. In the streets of Dix, the Dayala sold them to tourists by the hundreds.

The Yapwe guards stood stubbornly beside their ugly talisman all night, through two brief but heavy downpours. By the first light of

dawn, Othan was itching to snatch away the talisman and run, if only to get out of the damp and prickly bush.

Now was as good a time as ever, while the rest of the village slept. His plan was classic—cause a distraction, snatch it, run. He mentally catalogued each stage of his escape route again, just to make sure. Hopefully, his mule was still munching ferns on the ridge to the north.

Othan traveled with a host of incendiary stuff for just this type of contingency. He uncorked a gourd of strong sugarcane liquor and dropped in resin from the dogat bush, which was used back home to make a formidable glue. Once it dissolved, he stuffed half of the rag into the top of the gourd. Othan circled the village to find his ideal target: the largest and most impressive hut. By the look of the decorations—pig skulls and skewered lizards—it just might belong to the young shaman himself. With a strike of his flint, he set the cloth aflame and tossed it toward the rear of the hut. Smiling, he crawled back to his old hiding spot among the ferns.

After an interminable wait, there came an evil hiss, followed by a chorus of cries. Birds and monkeys shouted back in a high-pitched cacophony. A bright streak of yellow flame licked upward toward the green ceiling of the canopy. Just as Othan hoped, the Yapwe scurried about, screaming, arms waving above their spiky heads. As soon as the talisman guards left their post, Othan darted out of the bush, short sword in hand.

The talisman rested beneath a bamboo trellis draped with a verdant curtain of flowering vines and fly-traps. Up close, it looked even more repulsive: a standard of leathery hide stretched over a grid of bones, topped with the skull of a strange, rodent-like creature. The hide was tattooed with swirls of blue and purple inks, and pierced with bright feathers and bent nails. The thought of touching it made his spine shiver, but he knew he had little time before his plucky trespass was detected.

As he reached for the talisman, a thorny tendril shot out and wrapped about his outstretch wrist. He sucked in air to stifle a shout. Searing pain raced up his arm, as if a thousand fibrous needles

penetrated his very bones. Tendrils darted toward his neck and eyes, but Othan was ready with his short sword. He minced the writhing vines into salad then hacked his arm free.

The Talisman felt dry and warm, and surprisingly light as he dropped it into his pack. Othan turned to flee, but a warrior guard bearing an expression of rage stood between him and the forest. Howling, he charged, his feathered spear leveled. Othan easily knocked the spear tip away with a deft swipe of his short sword, then with both hands bashed the warrior in the nose with the hilt.

The other guard returned, and seeing Othan and his prostrate companion, he looked both ways for help but found none. Staying well out of reach, he jabbed nervously with his bamboo spear, eyes wide. Othan knocked the weapon from his hands with an overhead thrust. The guard fled with a yelp, but more Yapwe were swarming, men and women alike, brandishing spears, rakes, and staves.

Othan bounded down a jungle path, slashing through the green until he burst into a sun-filled clearing. He sprinted up the grassy stairs of a ruined temple, through a colonnade of broken stone pillars, limestone crumbling beneath his boots. He glanced back to find that the Yapwe pursuers had reached the shadowy edge of the forest, where, to Othan's great delight, they stopped. Pointing his way, they yelled some gibberish then retreated back into the verdigris gloom.

Othan secured the talisman in his pack and pressed onward to where a narrow, quick stream had dug a deep and steep-sided channel into the stone platform. From beneath a pile of dried palm fronds, Othan pulled out his make-shift bridge of tied saplings. He crossed the stream with patient care then kicked the bridge down into the rushing white water.

To his shock, Yapwe shouts echoed over the sound of rushing water. Only a stone's throw away downstream, they threw themselves onto the far bank in great sprawling leaps.

His heart pounding, Othan scrambled through the brush to the face of a nearly vertical stony cliff. At a place marked by a broken



palm bough, he plunged his hands into the underbrush and pulled his rope free. It was thin, but sturdy and well knotted, and tied to the top of the plateau high above. Hand over hand, he pulled himself skyward, taking the bottom of the rope with him and using his feet where he could on the red, flaky stone of the cliff. Halfway up, he dared a quick glance over his shoulder. To his chagrin, the painted shaman glared at him at the head of a knot of boar-head warriors. Othan hastened his already hasty ascent as the strange, inhuman voice started again. Just as Othan reached the lip of the slope, the shaman shouted. A warm miasma washed over him, like a draft from an open brick kiln.

His insides quivered, then his left flank clenched with a tight pain, as if a scorpion crawled about beneath his skin searching for a way out. His foot slipped on the crumbling stone, but his grip held true. Yelling to forget the pain, Othan reached the top and flopped onto the high plateau. Clutching his side, he hobbled off toward where he had tied up his mule. In its place was a writhing pile of black-ringed weasels, their pointy faces coated in blood.

Othan awoke in a panic. He feverishly groped his left flank, between his ribs and hip, but found nothing. He thrashed about his disordered bed chamber for a shard of mirror to examine himself again in the poor morning light. Still, no redness; still, no swelling. The pain, however, was certainly real.

In his vivid, lifelike dream, his torso bulged with a swollen cyst the size of a pomegranate. His dreamself, unalarmed, gently massaged and squeezed the pink lump like a favored pet. From the apex of the cyst bubbled out clear ichor, then, one-by-one, thin, eyeless pink worms that wriggled about like a fistful of fishing bait. Then he woke up.

Othan gulped a swallow of brandy to take his mind off of the dream which had, in one form or another, disturbed his rest since the jungle expedition. The journey back home to the city of Dix was a horror he would rather forget. The sale of the talisman, however, had

gone very well. Old Gyhan was pleased and paid immediately in silver dnarl. Othan was even promised a profitable role in a new smuggling scheme.

Othan paid off his debts with Twelfth House, an infamous financier of Dix's underground, and he even had enough left over for his rent, a half-cask of Stromini Brandy and a night in the pleasure gardens of the Palisades. But even with a crystal goblet of the finest drink in one of Dix's most luxurious lounges, Othan found no joy. Like an ulcer, his stomach reminded him of his crime against the Yapwe.

Bent forward in pain, Othan washed up and broke his fast on yesterday's lentil porridge. Since his return, he had scoured the city in search of relief, starting with the temple of the Dayala healing god. They sacrificed a Blackwink bird (at his expense) and dripped the blood liberally over his afflicted torso, to no effect. Next, he visited the brown-robed monks of the Beetle God, whose methods are unmentionable. His dreams returned ever more vividly, as if mocking his spiritual treatments. He even tried the foreign healers of the far-eastern Empire of Dorthanion. Without even lifting his shirt, the clerics of Thanus deemed him afflicted by witchcraft. Othan agreed, but they refused to treat him unless he renounced each of the city's Cults Major, a request that he (and most residents of Dix) found bothersome and unreasonable.

Othan dressed and hit the street, limping toward his favorite Chemogogue, a journeyman in city's secretive guild of alchemists. The office was west of the city's crumbling and obsolete walls, so he passed through the Stag Gate, a monument already ancient during the age of Forgotten Kings. The fortified tunnel was built of massive limestone blocks, worn with age and the touch of countless feet. The crenulated ramparts were chipped and gapped like an old crone's maw, and atop the parapet stood the melted statue of an unrecognizable defender of the holy city.

A knot of kneeling beggars, all professionals, crowded either side of the Gate's yawning mouth. Every morning they worked the endless horde of travelers and tourists that marched like ants through the city of Dix. As a local, Othan usually didn't give them a

second glance, but as he passed the prostrating mass of bearded men with skinny arms, he felt the tingle in his spine of covert watching eyes. Despite the gathering throng of pedestrians behind him, Othan slowed to look over the beggars. There, kneeling in the dust in the middle of the tunnel, was a man with the unmistakable spiky black hair and amber skin of the Yapwe!

Othan halted, struck with a sudden fear. It wasn't just any Yapwe, but the young shaman that chased him to the edge of the cliff. The shaman stared directly at him, his mumblings drowned out by the blabbering moans of the other beggars. The impatient crowd behind Othan began to shove. Like a salmon against the stream, he struggled against the traffic, but the growing mob was impenetrable, and inevitably pushed him through.

At an overturned stone dolmen Othan stopped to rest and gather his wits. The sight of the shaman rattled him to his innards. He hoped that it was only his nightly dreams affecting his wakeful vision, but he lacked the courage to go back and look. How did the jungle savage make it all the way to Dix? Certainly improbable. After a moment of thought, he judged it to be impossible.

Othan rubbed his deceitful eyes. Finished with holy men and Chemogogues, he decided to drive the spirits out the old fashioned way. Fortunately, his neighborhood, Tanner Row, offered dozens of seedy and whorish taverns to choose from. Today he opted for the very worst, The Empty Gourd, a saloon only visited by the brokest piss-foot workers of the local tanneries.

The Empty Gourd was hidden along a short, desolate alley flanked by an abandoned cooper and a graveyard for leaky vats. As usual, the three neighborhood drunks greeted him noisily. They considered Othan one of their peers—a feeling Othan didn't share.

The barkeep, a sadly disfigured but gentle beast, poured him his usual starter. Othan just looked into his bowl of barley ale for a moment then winced as his left flank reminded him of why he came. He drank half in one gulp.

The most outspoken of the drunks, Nusuf, slapped him on the back. He was an older man, with puffy mottled cheeks and bushy eyebrows. "What's bothering you, Othan?" he asked with an animated frown.

"Remember when I mentioned going to the jungle, way south, past the Doldrums?"

"No, I wasn't paying attention," Nusuf replied with a smile. The others laughed, but Othan stopped it with a grim expression.

"I'm serious. A savage tribe lived there, the Yapwe."

"I was tryyyyyying to forget!" Again, they erupted with mirth.

Othan shook his head and took another deep gulp of the ale. It was lousy, as usual, but strong. "Well, I just saw one of them here in Dix. Sitting with the beggars outside the Stag Gate."

Another spoke up. "I saw a tribe of savages myself the other day. Right here at the Empty Gourd!" Nusuf leaned so far that he nearly fell out of his stool. Othan didn't find it funny.

"You know what, forget it." Othan finished his ale and ordered another, along with a watered wine.

"Awww, come on Othan, we're listening. Honestly. So your jungle friend misses you and came to say hello?"

"No, you sot, I stole their sacred talisman!"

For a moment the tavern was silent, but for the drip of a leaky bung.

Nusuf apologized into his mug. "Well, you didn't tell us that before."

"You think I was sightseeing?" Othan finished off his ale. "Of course I stole something! What else would I do?"

Nusuf shrugged. "It looks like your choice of work is catching up with you again, Othan. Like with the Blue God's turquoise."

Another sot added, "And the greenies of the Rust Hills."

With a frown, Othan nodded slowly. Those ventures had indeed come back to haunt him in unexpected ways.

Nusuf added with a flourish, "You're cursed, Othan, simple as that."

"Yeah, yeah," Othan replied with a wave, though he knew it to be true. "Forget about it. Next one to bring it up is getting a mouthful of fist."

Nobody took him up on his offer. After three more rounds of drinks, his mind was light. With the memories of foul dreams banished, Othan felt better than ever.

He tossed the barkeep a handful of silver pennies and waved goodbye to the other drunks. He pushed open the door, but the sight before him paralyzed him with fright. Standing alone in the desolate alley was the Yapwe shaman. The dreams, the pain, and the thought of serpents hatching from his flank returned all at once.

"Staying for one more?" Nusuf said to Othan's back. Now that he was found even in this most meager sanctuary, confrontation was inevitable. He might as well do it now, with his bravery still bolstered by liquor.

He took a deep, beer-tasting breath, then stepped into the alleyway. The shaman turned and casually walked away from him, toward Tanner Street, which bustled with the crowds of the noontime market. Othan stumbled after on wobbly legs, nearly flattening a porter carrying a load of jute. When he caught up with his spiky-haired foe, Othan grabbed the shaman on the shoulder. What turned around instead was a common laborer of Dix, frightened and confused. The man spewed a barrage of curses, but Othan didn't even hear them in his despair. He stumbled away, suddenly far drunker than he remembered. The pain in his side flared up again, strong as the very first day on the plateau. Merchants and their marks looked up from their deals as Othan bellowed toward the clouds with all of his lungs.

Like Othan, the shaman must have crossed the Land of Light and Day for that ugly bag of bones. Othan considered buying it back from Gyhan, but even if he had the money, the old man probably wouldn't part with it. That left burglary. It was risky, but Othan figured that if stealing got him into this problem, stealing would get him out.

Gyhan of Joluum lived in a walled estate near The Fingers, the tall, thin towers of the merchant princes. A long-standing client, Gyhan gave Othan infrequent, but lucrative work: stealing documents, tailing maidens—the usual stuff. Othan clearly remembered the basic layout of his home, which was built of massive granite slabs and beams of hardwoods long extinct.

Constables rigorously patrolled the narrow, cobbled streets of The Fingers, but Othan paid them no mind. It was the private security squadrons that worried him, and Gyhan used one of Dix's most fearsome charters: Emn & Holt.

That night, Othan donned his finest garb, which he reserved for covert operations in the moneyed parts of the city, and staked out Gyhan's home. After a patrol of Constables had passed, he climbed to the top of Gyhan's outer wall. The courtyard grew thickly with therapeutic plants but seemed otherwise empty. Othan swung his legs over and lowered himself in, careful not to let his padded shoes slap. He landed on a bed of broken hazelnut shells planted with prickly tropical palms and ferns, not unlike the Yapwe's distant jungle. Through the foliage he could see a stone fountain and part of a flagstone path.

From his right, a patrolling guard strolled into view. Othan's blood turned to syrup. The guard was lean, with the dark, tight fitting clothes that identified her as an Emn & Holt enforcer. Like a sparrow her head jerked back, forth, up and down in precise surveillance. To Othan's relief, she completed her circuit and reentered the house.

Othan cursed his rash stupidity. He usually spent days preparing for an ordinary burglary. The Emn & Holt guard was clearly charged

up on drev, which heightens the senses. Even the slightest mistake could be his last.

Without so much as a tingling of warning his side spasmed painfully. Othan swallowed a hot scream. Bent double, he brushed a green palm frond that in turned brushed noisily against its neighbors.

The guard returned to the patio and drew a thin baton of dark metal. Othan held his breath. Suddenly she whistled and charged, closing the gap in three long strides.

Othan yelled, "Wait!" and held out his hands, but the guard evaded his outstretched limbs and clubbed him furiously about his head, back, and stomach. With unsettling ease, she pulled him out of the bush and onto the flagstone path.

Gyhan, seated in a small, squeaky chariot pulled by a mastiff, approached from the verandah. He was an old, corpulent, orange-skinned man with a horseshoe of curly white hair. In a very deep voice, he grumbled, "I can't believe it. After all the work I've given you, you violate my home. Don't I pay you enough?"

Othan spat out blood. "I came back for the talisman."

"The talisman!" Gyhan coughed loudly, the bronze wheels squeaking under his massive body. "Uhhhgh. Did the mottled lung finally catch up with you? Ruddy fever?" He coughed again, and this time it sounded productive. "As you can clearly see, the talisman is a sham. It does nothing." Then to the guard, he muttered, "Let him go, he's not dangerous."

Othan straightened out his shirt and rubbed his bruised forearm. Without looking up he said, "It's not about money, Gyhan, but I need that talisman. My reasons are my own."

Gyhan rolled closer. "I can see that, and I will let you have it. But considering your unfortunate lack of bargaining power, the price has risen to eight stacks of dnarl."

"What?" Othan rolled his eyes. It was double what Gyhan had paid him to fetch it from the distant jungle.

"Eight stacks, and you can walk out with the bag of dusty bones tonight. Right out the door you so ungraciously failed to use on your way in."

Othan was crestfallen. "I don't have it. I used what you gave me to pay off Kalter at Twelfth House."

"Fortunately for you, I will be seeing him tomorrow at the Blue God Temple and will personally let him know. He knows where to find you, right?"

Othan felt sick. You couldn't go to the outhouse without Twelfth House knowing about it. He was only out of debt for three days, and now he was right back in, deeper than ever.

"What other options do I have?"

"The dungeon."

Othan's left eyebrow raised. He knew a lot of people at the Burgomaster's jailhouse, both inmates and sentries. He'd be out in no time.

"The dungeon in the East Bank, you rogue," Gyhan added, "where you can't slime your way out."

Othan's head dropped. His side jolted him again, as if his rib tried to separate from his spine. Othan shouted out in pain.

"Eight." he spat, gasping for air. "Tell Kalter eight."

At sunup, Othan dug around in a dusty pile of worn out travel gear and found the harness he used to transport the talisman. With the ugly fetish wrapped up like a Jessan babe, Othan set out in search of the shaman. But the man who had invaded every street and plaza just a day ago was nowhere to be found.

Tired and aching from his one-sided battle with the Emn & Holt guard, Othan slowly made his way to the Stag Gate. Too early even for the beggars, the tunnel was silent, but not empty. The shaman squatted over a small fire of what looked like twigs and garbage.



Even with the talisman on his back, Othan's panic returned. He approached slowly, hands open, while the shaman watched in confident expectation. Othan laid the talisman gently at his feet, then backed away. But before he left the shadow of the tunnel, the shaman whistled. Othan stopped, though every fiber of his legs strained for flight.

The shaman waved his arm over the small fire between his legs. The flame glowed blue. Odors of sandalwood and sugar wafted forth, and Othan knew what was coming next. The shaman began his wavering, discordant chant. Othan felt a quivering in his belly, then a damp heat. Suddenly his whole body flushed as if in fever. Sweat leaked from every pore. His muscles twitched, then shook, until he fell to his knees.

The shaman's lips fluttered, but Othan could hear only a deep, undulating hiss, like the ocean lapping at a stony cove. He groaned, his insides churning. Then something deep in his belly seemed to burst. A diaphanous cloud, many-headed, like a hydra, slid out of his belly to hover in the air like before the talisman. Suddenly, the shaman howled, and all at once, the smoky serpent dove into the talisman and disappeared. Othan slumped forward to lay face down in the dust.

Othan awoke, his face comforted by the smooth, cool stone of the Stag Gage tunnel.

"Wake up!" A scrawny old man poked him in the ribs. "This is my spot!"

"All right," Othan mumbled. He sat up and looked for the shaman, but found only beggars competing for prime locations.

Othan stood up gingerly, expecting pain. None came. In fact, he felt refreshed. He relished his first deep breath in months without biting pain. He muttered a mantra of thanks to the Dayala, demigod of luck. Then he added a prayer for the shaman, wishing him a safe trip back to the jungle.

Despite his looming financial troubles, Othan smiled all the way home to Tanner Row. He got a hearty breakfast from one of the nicer eateries, then he got clean water from the fountain and washed up. He thought about stopping in the Empty Gourd, but didn't care to see Nusuf and the other drunks. Instead, he went straight to Kalter, before the Twelfth House enforcers found him.

In an abandoned leather shop near the edge of Tanner Row, he found Kalter, flanked by his normal duet of well-armed bruisers. He was an old, dried-up man and short as a child. He hunched over a table, examining pale green jades with an elaborate bronze and glass lens.

"What?" Kalter said curtly, not looking up from his jade figurines. "I thought we were through."

Othan was confused but intrigued. He waited a moment to choose his words carefully. "Did you talk to Gyhan?"

"Huh? No." He put down his lens and looked up to Othan, his eyes tiny black specks. "What are you talking about?"

"He didn't come see you?"

"You mean his ghost? He's dead, Othan. Choked on a lungful of glop in his sleep last night. What's this about?"

Othan's feet tingled. He had a hard time holding back a laugh. The old man never had a chance to tell Kalter about the compulsory loan.

"Oh, nothing. Just, um, he had a jewel he wanted you to see. That's all."

"You all right, Othan?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Look, I have to go." Othan could barely contain his joy as he ran out of Twelfth House.

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Chaos. *He lives in Chicago, with zero cats, where he works as an urban planner.*

# Temple of the Beast

By HAROLD R. THOMPSON

***Famed explorer Captain Anchor Brown is on the trail of the legendary Eldorak, the fearsome God-Beast of the Harmarg Hills! Can Brown fulfill his vow to capture the creature, or will the perils be more than even this seasoned adventurer can handle?!***

“So, you have seen the beast with your own eyes?” said Captain Anchor Brown.

“Many times,” replied his companion. “From distance. Always from distance.”

Brown sat back in his wrought-iron chair. A ray of sunlight from the window caught his sweep of brown hair, illuminating flecks of red, gold, and gray.

Brown raised his glass.

“Well, Mister Gorlak,” he said, “let’s hope you can find it again.”

He sipped his drink. The whisky here was surprisingly good, better than he would have expected from a foreign hotel tavern, though he supposed this establishment was more of what the Freilanders would call a café. It was bright, well lit by many windows, with little round tables for the patrons, each covered in yellow tablecloths. The folk of Breagh could be severe, but from that severity they had produced a society that was neat, tidy, efficient, and pleasant in appearance.

He took another sip of the amber liquid.

*“Whatever failures you face,”* he quoted, *“whatever tribulations, there is always whisky.”*

Gorlak, a hulking blond fellow like many of his countrymen, looked puzzled.

“This is saying in Artor?”

“A line from one of my favourite writers,” Brown explained.

Gorlak nodded.

“You, too, are writer,” the big fellow stated. “It was you who wrote of adventures in Kingdom of Shenha, where you claimed that Thenalassa River and Grimlor are same body of water.”

Brown grinned. “You’ve read it?”

“I... know of it,” said Gorlak. “And that you were soldier before that, of Imperial Artorian army.”

“Yes. I still am, in a sense. A soldier in the battle to discover the wonders of the world. In this capacity, I am acting for the Imperial Society which, as you may be aware, is based in Camalon, our capitol city in Artor, and dedicated to the advancement of scientific knowledge. If all goes well, I’ll present my findings and write another book. However, first we have to find this mythical Eldorak creature and prove its existence. With the help of a proper guide, of course, who knows those hills.”

Gorlak raised his left hand to his brow in the salute that was common here in northern part of the Breagh Republic.

“I am your man, Captain Brown,” he said, and his left shirt sleeve slid down a few inches, revealing a tattoo on his forearm, a circle formed from two bent arrows.

Brown recognized the tattoo as an ancient symbol for endless time, or long life.

“That mark on your arm,” he said. “Why do you wear it?”

Gorlak pulled down his sleeve and stared into his drink for a moment.

“It is of religious order,” he said, “to which I belong.”

Brown nodded. A matter of curiosity, and no more. It surely had no bearing on what mattered most, which was that Gorlak, a woodsman by trade, was known to the locals as the man who had encountered the beast more than anyone else.

“None of my business,” Brown said. “Religion is a private matter between a man and his god, in my view. I believe you are the fellow we need.”

“Good! I must warn, Captain Brown, that beast is elusive. We may see her, but to catch her? That, I cannot promise.”

“I understand,” Brown said with a sigh. His objectives were ambitious. There had been many attempts to find the legendary beast of the Harmarg Hills, and all had failed. Many people did not even believe that the beast existed.

Brown again raised his glass.

“There is always whisky,” he said. But as he drank, he knew that he was not being honest. Whisky would never suffice, and he was determined to find the beast and bring it back to Camalon, and so secure his reputation for all time.

The majority of the houses in the town of Luwok were fashioned from the massive trunks of ancient oak trees, hollowed out, added to with wings and gables and shingled roof tops, their branches trimmed, sash windows and doors fitted, steps built, and welcome mats laid out. The fabled forests of the Harmarg region of northern Breagh had been tamed, and yet the town, being the closest to the Hamarg Hills, had a reputation for savage danger stretching back to its very founding, centuries earlier—tales of the beast that resembled a large hairless horse, a prehistoric monster that sometimes went on four legs and sometimes two, and that occasionally descended from its mountain lair to feed on human flesh.

This was the creature known as Eldorak, “the ancient one.”

“It is my intention to capture the beast,” Brown told the members of his expedition as they gathered in the yard of the hotel, ready to load their baggage and equipment into two hired mail carts. “Nothing less.”

Gorlak stood with massive arms folded, nodding. With him were six attendants, four men and two women, who would serve as bearers and general workers under Brown’s command. They were all Breaghian natives, big-boned and fair-haired, with flat faces and flatter expressions. They brooked no nonsense, and Brown trusted them as he had trusted no hired hands ever before.

He slapped his leather gloves against a trouser leg. He had dressed for the occasion in forest green, good brown leather boots and leather gaiters, and wore a wide-brimmed hat. From his belt hung his old army sabre, and he also carried a gas pistol and gas rifle. The bearers were likewise armed with gas rifles, and carried twenty gas canisters and fifty brass bullets in leather pouches. Brown did not wish to kill the beast, but he would not place his people in needless danger.

“I am confident,” he continued, “that with our modern equipment, we will at last bring in Eldorak, and the terror that has gripped this town for so long will finally end.”

A key piece of that equipment was a kit containing three glass canisters that he carried next to his standard ammunition. Each canister was filled with a special distillation from the Freiland poppy, a powerful drug developed by an army veterinarian to induce sleep in heavy cavalry horses.

“Now we are just waiting for Miss Strang,” Brown continued. “Ah, here she is.”

The final member of the expedition emerged from the hotel. Anna Strang wore a walking-out ensemble that would have been appropriate for a stroll in Rand Park in Camalon, complete with corset and hooped skirts, her dress of deep green polished cotton, with tiny pearl buttons. A small tricorne hat was pinned to her piled

hair, and she wore small gold-rimmed spectacles. Three leather cases, each with a leather strap, hung from her shoulders.

“This is all you have?” Brown asked, indicating the cases as she approached the mail carts.

She gave him a level stare.

“My photogramme plates and lenses are quite compact,” she said. “I have no need for bulky stands or tripods. A bit revolutionary, if I do say so. Is that not why you hired my services?”

“Indeed,” Brown said. He had not intended to offend her with his question. She was very proud of her contraptions, and despite her impractical attire, seemed a serious engineer type more comfortable around machines than human beings. That made her a kindred spirit of sorts, more interested in advancing her chosen field and gaining credit for it than anything else.

*“I go now to lay down my life,”* he quoted, *“in the eternal quest for knowledge and understanding.”*

Strang frowned. “I’m afraid I can’t place the reference.”

“Rumsford. One of my mottoes.”

“Oh. Well, I approve.”

Brown chuckled.

“Shall we get started?” he said.

The mail carts, each drawn by a pair of the shaggy local draught horses, took the expedition almost to the end of the hill road. There they stopped.

“Here,” Gorlak said, pointing into the brooding forest, a wall of green and gray and brown, spruce and pine and oak and maple. “We find beast in here.”



After dismounting the carts, he led the way to a narrow trail-head that appeared well-traveled. Without a pause, he plunged into the forest, followed by Brown and the others in file, each bearing a heavy load, packs, weapons and ammunition, water bottles, and other sundry items, such as Brown's compass. About fifty yards in, they came to a break in the trees, revealing a wide forest meadow. In the meadow stood a large building made of rough gray stone, a rectangular structure with a tall square central tower. It appeared unfinished, the windows just empty gaps.

"An abandoned church in the wilderness?" Brown said. "The sort of thing we would call a folly?"

"It is temple of my order," Gorlak said. "It is no longer in use."

One of the bearers grunted a laugh. Gorlak scowled.

"It's lovely," said Strang. "I must take a picture!"

Before Brown could protest, she had opened two of her cases and begun to assemble one of her arrays.

"The photogramme plates are in this box," she explained as she worked. "I attach my lens assembly via these rods. Light is contained in these bellows between the lens and the plates. I then focus the lenses by means of this lever, and open the shutter with this switch."

She held the array in both hands, looking through a small hole in the back that allowed her to see through the lens itself. After a moment and several adjustments, she released the shutter. It made a loud click.

"How quickly can you make those adjustments?" Brown said. "Should we encounter the beast, that is?"

"Quickly enough, I trust."

She removed the plate from the back of her array and inserted a new one.

"Tell me, Captain Brown," she added, "what do you believe the beast to be? Surely not just a monster that now and then comes

down from the hills to steal a child or a dog?”

“A living fossil,” Brown said without hesitation. “An animal that should be extinct but has managed to escape the ravages of time.”

“Indeed,” Gorlak interjected. “Beast is timeless. Many people see it in this region. Hunters, woodcutters, children playing.”

“A creature out of time,” Strang mused.

Gorlak indicated the path.

“May we proceed?”

The march resumed. Strang kept her assembled array at the ready, carrying it in front of her as Gorlak led them off the trail and into the woods proper, cutting a swath through the undergrowth with his massive single-edged broadsword, what the Breaghians called a *maklauter*, a “man cleaver.” The air was warm and filled with buzzing insects. Strang paused several times to take pictures of objects of interest, trees and flowers, but Brown did not object. They needed these moments to pause and simply listen. They would hear the beast, Gorlak had promised, before they would see it.

By dark, they had encountered nothing unusual. Gorlak took them to a clearing filled with stumps and piles of trimmed logs, and there they established camp. Brown had a canvas bell tent to himself, as did Strang and Gorlak. The bearers made use of two tents, one for the women and one for all four men.

Supper was a quick affair of dry rations, after which Brown brewed tea over his small fire.

“I trust you don’t mind if I read?” Brown said to Strang after passing her a steaming cup.

Strang looked at the small boxwood crate of a dozen books Brown had brought with him.

“Do you always travel with books into the wilderness?” she asked.

“Always,” Brown said.

A high-pitched shriek, like the brakes of an overladen steam train, suddenly rent the evening air. Brown froze. When the shriek sounded again, he snatched his gas rifle, loading one of his drug canisters as he ran toward the disturbance. Strang was close behind him, photogramme array in her hands.

Gorlak was in the middle of the clearing, his great sword in hand.

“It came from there!” he shouted, pointing.

Something large and heavy was crashing through the undergrowth just outside the clearing, the sound receding.

Brown halted on the edge of the trees. He could see nothing.

“It’s no use,” he said. “It’s too dark to pursue.”

In the morning, they found footprints in the soft turf. Brown knelt to examine the best example, measuring it with a tape.

“Twenty-three inches long, at its extremity,” he said. “Fourteen at its widest. Reptilian? Or a large bird? Perhaps some combination.”

“We follow the trail!” Gorlak said, impatient. “Beast left trail and can’t be far.”

“Agreed, but we must make a cast of this imprint. Mix some plaster and fill the depression. We’ll leave it here to dry.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were moving into the bush. Gorlak led the way, closely followed by Brown and Strang. The bearers trailed behind, with orders to make as little noise as possible.

Brown held up a hand, the signal to stop.

“I’m hearing things to our left and right,” he whispered to Gorlak. “As if something is moving with us, on both sides.”

“Many beasts in woods,” Gorlak said, shrugging. “Not just this one.”

Brown was not satisfied with this explanation, but it would have to do. Their primary objective was ahead, at the end of a pathway of more footprints and broken saplings. Something large had indeed moved this way.

The sound of rushing water grew louder, and the trail led toward it.

They halted on the edge of another cleared area of long green grass. A wide brook or a small river flowed from their left to plunge over a waterfall to their right. Brown could not tell how far the water dropped, but that was not his chief concern. On the far side of the clearing, feeding on the carcass of a small deer, was the beast.

It truly was a cross between a bird and a reptile. Though it was more than fifty yards away, Brown guessed its size at about twice that of a heavy horse. Its long body was covered in a fine gray fur or feathers, with a ridge of feathers along its spine and long tapering tail. It had large hind legs with hooks or barbs on its heels and toes, and smaller forelegs like arms. Its fore-claws appeared to have opposable thumbs. Its head was large with a long jaw, terminating in a hooked beak. The beak was stained red with the deer's blood.

"Remarkable," Brown whispered.

Strang was sighting through her array.

"I can make a picture from here," she murmured, "but we really need to get closer."

Gorlak was shaking and muttering something in his own language.

"Has anyone gotten this close before?" Brown asked him.

Gorlak just jerked his head from side to side.

Brown noted that they were downwind of the beast. That was lucky. It had not noticed them.

Raising his gas rifle, Brown sighted along the long barrel. Fifty-five yards should be an easy shot.

He slowed his breathing, placed his finger on the trigger, and squeezed twice in rapid succession.

The beast rose up, shrieking as it had done the previous night. Swinging its long head around, it faced its unseen assailant. Brown held his rifle steady, still sighting as the beast took long strides, crossing the meadow toward him. Its bloodstained beak was open, revealing two rows of jagged teeth and a long gray tongue.

Brown fired again, and now his rifle was empty.

“Damn, damn!” Strang was saying. She had taken a picture and now was struggling to change the photogramme plate. “I’m missing this!”

Brown gripped his gas rifle in tight hands. He knew he had hit the thing. It should have dropped!

The beast suddenly reared on its hind legs, making a new sound, a mournful wailing. Toppling backwards, it sprawled in the grass, tail twitching and snapping for a few minutes before it went still.

Brown leapt up.

“Bearers!” he shouted.

There was no time to marvel at the beast’s size, no time to gaze at it in awe and wonder, no time to bless their luck in finding it. They had to secure their prize.

Brown had brought special ropes that had been woven partly from strands of the rubber tree of Tarra, ropes that would stretch a few feet but would not break. With these, he and the bearers secured the unconscious beast, binding its limbs and body and attaching the rope ends to long steel spikes that they drove into the ground. The ropes would allow the beast, when it woke, to move a little in any direction, but it would wear itself out trying to break free.

“How’s this for a closer picture, Miss Strang?” Brown said.

“Excellent,” Strang said. The shutter on her array clanged for the third time, and she quickly loaded a new plate.

The bearers finished their work and stood back in a line. As one, they gazed upon the beast. Brown smiled. They looked almost pleased.

Gorlak stood apart. He was pale and sweating, and held his broadsword in one hand and his gas pistol in the other.

“It’s quite safe,” Brown called to him.

Gorlak moved toward the line of bearers with slow steps.

“Can this be true?” he said.

He stopped and joined the others in staring at their prize.

“I knew you could bring it to us,” he said, looking at Brown. “Many have seen it, many, but it always runs, always runs!”

“Well,” Brown started to say, but he stopped. From out of the woods, men and women had emerged, coming from both sides of the clearing. Every one of them carried a *makluter*.

Gorlak raised his gas pistol and shot three of the bearers, one after the other.

“What the blazes?” Brown cried out in surprise and dismay. He dropped his rifle and fumbled to draw his pistol, realizing as he did that it too was unloaded.

Gorlak ignored him and hacked down the next two bearers with his sword, shooting the last as he turned to flee.

Two of the strange people who had come out of the woods were now converging on Brown. He managed to draw his sabre just in time to parry a blow from a *makluter*. To his right, he glimpsed Gorlak as he charged toward Strang. She turned and ran toward the river, halting on the very lip of the waterfall.

“No!” Brown shouted as Gorlak raised his booted foot and drove it into Strang’s back. Still clutching her array, she fell, disappearing over the edge of the rushing water.

Brown drove his sword into the belly of one of his assailants, spun to the side and withdrew the blade, parried another sword blow and cut the legs out from under a second opponent. But there were too many.

Slicing out the throat of a third with a well-aimed cut, he turned and crashed through the undergrowth and into the trees.

Brown did not run far, and for some reason his attackers did not pursue. Stopping to catch his breath, he loaded his gas pistol, regretting that he had dropped the rifle, and tried to make sense of what had happened.

Gorlak had betrayed him, had killed the other members of the expedition, and had been joined by a small army of companions. An image of the tattoo on Gorlak's arm came to mind, and of the empty temple. Had Gorlak arranged for other members of his sect to follow the expedition and then strike when the time was right? And if so, what for?

Brown was not sure what to do next, but his best option was to move. It would help him think. He still had his compass, so he took a bearing roughly northeast, which would allow him to circle right and come back to the clearing if he decided to. After a few minutes, he heard the roaring of the waterfall and knew he was on the right course.

Something was crashing through the brush ahead of him, and he dropped to one knee, sighting the gas pistol.

Anna Strang appeared from behind a stand of large ferns. She was soaked and dripping, her hat gone, the bottom of her dress torn, but she appeared unhurt and still wore her spectacles and carried her photogramme array. She looked surprised when she saw Brown, but had the discipline not to cry out.

Brown lowered his pistol and made his way toward her.

"I thought you must have been killed," he murmured.

She shook her head.

“The drop was not far,” she said, “and the falls had gouged a deep pool. I managed to retrieve my device, and it appears to be functioning.”

“That’s something, then,” said Brown. He was relieved to see her. That was one less death on his conscience, and he needed an ally.

“What now, Captain Brown?”

He considered their options. They could return to Luwok, fetch the local gendarmerie. But he had captured the beast. He did not know what Gorkak’s people were going to do with it, but he was not willing to give it up so easily.

He had captured Eldorak, and Eldorak was his.

“We go back. We observe. If the opportunity presents itself, we attack.”

They took cover about two yards from the edge of the clearing. Through a gap in the nearest pines, Brown could see Gorkak and his fellow cultists now arrayed in two curved lines, facing the captive beast. Gorkak was chanting something in his own language, and every now and then his companions repeated his words. Brown tried to count how many there were but was unable to get a clear view without moving closer. He thought there were about two dozen.

Gorkak raised both arms.

“Eldorak, awake!” he shouted now in Artorian. “Your people have come. Captain Brown brought you to us. We built you temple, but you did not come. We build you new temple here!”

Brown and Strang exchanged glances. So Orlak’s order worshiped Eldorak but had never been able to capture the beast themselves. That was why Gorkak had signed on as his guide. It was no doubt true that he knew the beast better than most, since he had been searching for years, but he had used Brown for his own purpose.



“You are beast that does not die,” Gorlak continued. “Grant us life forever, and we worship you for all time!”

The beast was stirring, the drugs wearing off. It shook its head, regarding Gorlak with groggy eyes, then tried to stand. When it discovered its rope bindings, it uttered one of its horrible shrieks and shook its massive body like a dog trying to shake water from its fur. The cultists edged back, all save Gorlak. The elastic ropes held.

Brown thought of a plan.

“Can you get some more pictures?” he whispered.

“If I work around left, get behind them,” Strang said, “I can get closer. However, if they discover me, I’ll have no way to defend myself.”

“I intend to create a distraction,” Brown told her.

She assented and moved off. Brown waited, giving her time, then drew his gas pistol. He had ten brass rounds loaded. It would have to do.

The cultists were chanting in their own language again, and the beast was more awake. It was tugging at the elastic lines, which yielded but did not break. This seemed to make it more and more agitated, its spine feathers standing on end.

Brown crawled on his belly to the very edge of the trees. The beast was about twenty yards distant, and he had a clear shot.

Bracing the pistol with both hands, he squeezed the trigger, once, twice, three times.

Two of the elastic lines parted, but the third round missed and struck Eldorak in the side. The beast howled and thrashed some more, the newly severed lines allowing it more movement, more leverage.

Brown fired again, and more lines parted. Eldorak shook himself free.

Gorlak had the sense to stand still, but the others scattered, shouting and wailing in fear and alarm. Eldorak, in its anger and frustration, was drawn by the sound and movement and charged. Brown saw two cultists, a man and a woman, flung twenty feet in the air to land somewhere in the trees. Another man stopped running and turned, raising his *maklouter*, but with one snap of its beak, the beast sliced the man in two.

Brown got to his feet.

Gorlak must have heard him, for he turned, hand going to the hilt of his broadsword.

Brown started toward him.

“Gorlak!” Brown shouted.

The big man drew his sword and advanced, bellowing in rage. Brown had lost count of how many rounds he had fired from his pistol, so also drew his sword just in time to parry his enemy’s first blows, steel ringing on steel.

“You betrayed my trust,” Brown said. “Used me for your own ends and killed my employees.”

“You were destined to bring beast to us,” Gorlak said.

“And so I take him away!”

Gorlak struck again, a great downward sweep of his man-cleaver. Brown met the blow, but his sabre was no match for the heavy *maklouter*, and the thin steel blade snapped. Brown fell back, dropped and rolled on his side. There on the ground was another *maklouter*, a discard from one of the cultists. Brown grabbed it, swung it backhanded, felt it bite, and heard Gorlak cry out in pain.

Brown saw that he had cut into Gorlak’s right leg. A stroke of luck. The big man was clutching at the wound, *maklouter* held in his right hand, the arm outstretched. Brown lost no time, but leapt forward, chopping at the big man’s forearm. Gorlak’s *maklouter*, and the hand that gripped it, fell in the grass.

Gorlak sank to his knees, blood spraying from the stump of his arm.

“You have killed me,” he said.

Brown was edging back. In the fury of battle, he had half-forgotten the beast. Now it was padding softly, silent on its massive hind feet, toward them.

“No,” Brown said.

Eldorak opened its beak, took Gorlak by the head and upper body, lifted him and shook him like a dog would shake a rat, and tossed him aside to land, a bloody heap, in the grass.

Brown did not move. The beast turned and looked at him. The feathers on its head rose and fell, and its eyes seemed to narrow to two dark points.

With a blast of air from its slitted nostrils, the beast turned, tramping away across the clearing to disappear into the far trees.

The main lecture theatre at the Imperial Society in Camalon was a fine big room of leather upholstered chairs, oak paneling, and polished oil lanterns, but it stank of sweat and smoke and was far too hot. Brown’s formal starched collar itched and seemed to be trying to strangle him as he told his story, aided by a plaster cast of the beast’s foot, several gray spine feathers, and a sequence of photogrammes presented by his colleague, Miss Anna Strang. Two of the photogrammes were very clear, but the creature they showed was far too distant. One member of the audience suggested it could have been a large member of the deer family.

The others images were smeared and incomplete.

“Unfortunately,” Strang told the audience, “the fall into the pool damaged the array and some of my exposed plates more than I had anticipated.”

The lecture concluded, there was polite applause, a few additional questions, mostly about the people of Breagh and their customs, their folk tales about Eldorak, and then the audience was filing out to lunch. As they passed, Brown overheard one say to his companion, "Another fancy of Anchor Brown's, like his imaginary excursion down the Grimlor River."

A moment later, Brown gazed at the empty rows of seats and felt nothing.

"Perhaps a second expedition could yield more proof," Strang said, adjusting her wire spectacles.

"Yes, maybe," Brown said. He started packing up his things. "That they dispute my word, I find most insulting and disheartening."

"We should not think of this now," Strang said. "The others have gone to lunch, and we should as well. It will do us good."

Brown nodded and suddenly laughed. He was not interested in food, but he could do with a drink.

"After all," he said as they left the theatre, "there is always whisky."

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*In addition to writing short science fiction, fantasy and horror, Harold R. Thompson is the author of the "Empire and Honor" series of historical adventure novels, which include Dudley's Fusiliers, Guns of Sevastopol and Sword of the Mogul.*

# Tear Down the Stars

By ADRIAN COLE

***Though lifetimes have passed since the liberation of Earth, the taint of evil lingers on the former prison planet! The secret legacy of a doomed love may be Voruum's best hope in combatting Daras Vorta's insurgents, unless they can find him first!***

Even in the depths of his sleep, Arrul Voruum felt the mind-probe. It had been a long, arduous journey to this remote place, and he'd been exhausted, falling further into sleep than was his custom. He'd set protective mental barriers up for both himself and his companion, the youth Kaspel, his squire, even though they were in the relative sanctuary of those Voruum had come to find. Nevertheless, something edged into his dormant mind and sifted what it could. He woke, motionless, and concentrated on identifying it.

It did not seem to be hostile. He suspected it to be controlled by the priests here, a small shrine near the foothills of the Forlorn Mountains and a potential gateway to the Sacred City, a place even now, a century after the last war, jealously sheltered from the bulk of humanity. It was to be expected, Voruum thought: its guardians would carefully test the motives of anyone arriving from the still-desolate wastes west of the mountains. He'd crossed the Necrossic Sea, formerly known as the Sea of Death, and passed through realms where the desecration of even older wars had left their immortal stains. Earth was healing very slowly.

Satisfied that the mind-probe was no threat, Voruum was about to turn over and sleep again, when Kaspel moaned and sat upright, eyes staring as though at something unspeakable, a menace shaped in darkness.

Voruum briefly shared the youth's mental vision: an array of blurred shapes, hostile, closing in on him, evil drifting around them like a cold

fog. Kaspel pulled a short sword from a scabbard beside him, and moonlight shafting in from the overhead window bathed it. The shapes dissolved at its touch.

“You saw them?” Kaspel asked.

Voruum nodded, puzzled. Whatever they had been, they were nothing to do with the priests.

“Where were they from?”

“Good question,” said Voruum. “Our presence here has not gone unnoticed by potential enemies.”

“They are here?”

“Yes, but not in force.” Voruum went to the ewer of water the priests had provided, pouring some into a bowl. It was cold but revived him fully. He’d not sleep again this night.

He’d been sent here by Kyron Morgath, on behalf of the Council in Karkesh, to investigate some unusual occurrences. A high-ranking official had disappeared, his death suspected, and for all their skills, the priests of the Sacred City had not been able to uncover a single trace of the man. They suspected the work of powerful agents, the kind they’d thought banished from the world. Voruum already knew that such beliefs were founded on sand: he’d clashed with unexpected dark agents before.

At dawn the priests came for them. Tannol, their spokesman, bowed with the same deep respect he had shown them when they’d arrived from the desert. He and his fellows wore simple robes, with light hoods to protect them from the escalating heat.

“I am to escort you to the Upper City. Could we ask that you leave all weapons here at the shrine?”

Voruum shook his head. “Your masters have asked for assistance, which is why I’m here. My weapons are part of the tools I use. I am a protector of the faith.” *Or, as you would call me,* he thought, *a*

*witchfinder*. To some, it was an unclean word and undoubtedly an unsavoury profession.

Tannol's face did not betray his unease, though Voruum read it in his mind. It was a common enough reaction, especially from men of peace.

They rode on hardy mountain ponies up the narrow trail that led into the heart of the mountains and through a gorge which took them ever higher. A tall waterfall plummeted from above, the wall behind it seemingly impassable, but there was an opening. Through the bowels of the mountain they went, emerging on a soaring ridge that wound precariously around dizzy bends and narrow perches until they saw a huge column of rock rising from the valley floor, its city crowning it. It took another heart-pounding journey along a path cut from the bare rock to bring them to the upper reaches of the huge crag. There could be no other city as remote from the world as this, Voruum thought, far from the eyes—and minds?—of its enemies, at least, theoretically.

Tannol spoke to the guards at the tall gateway to the heart of the citadel, and Voruum and Kaspel were admitted, dismounting and climbing endless steps to the upper pinnacles of the remarkable city. Kaspel openly marvelled at its architectural wonders, never having seen anything remotely as spectacular, but Voruum noticed the hint of decline in the buildings, marks of deterioration. There were few inhabitants, as though this were little more than an abandoned monastery, its isolated priests the last generation of its servants. Perhaps the Sacred City had served its purpose as the focal point for rebellion against the old Empire it had brought down.

Inside the vast, echoing halls, Voruum again had the feeling that he was witnessing the last days of an era, a century in the past when the legendary Galad Sarian and Annulian, the Warlord, had brought about the war that overthrew the Zurjahn Empire and smashed its resistance at the Black City, Karkesh. At the summit, there was a wide chamber, with a view overlooking the soaring peaks and valleys, as stunning as anything Voruum, or the overwhelmed Kaspel, had ever seen. A huge disc rose up at the apex of the chamber, catching

the fire of the sun, too dazzling to look upon. From here Annulian, the Annihilator, had ruled his armies. It seemed to be the last relic of a distant time.

“Arrul Voruum,” said a priest, emerging from one of the thick columns. He was a man of considerable age and yet he seemed remarkably healthy. “I am Nerrester, the senior priest here. It was I who contacted Kyron Morgath.” He led the way to stone benches, and they sat. Nerrester glanced at Kaspel but said nothing to him.

“This is a remarkable sanctuary,” said Voruum. “Unusual, I would think, for an enemy to take action against it.”

“Because of our isolation? You think us unnecessary in a peaceful world?”

“Not at all. Impregnable, though.”

“Apparently not. How much do you know?”

“Assume nothing.”

“Very well. The Sacred City serves a number of functions. It is a haven, a hospital and a place of learning. Many of the records of Earth’s history are here in our library. It is also where many of our young noblemen come to be trained for office in the new Councils and governments of the growing world. We pride ourselves on bringing together the sons and daughters of adverse cultures and inculcating in them the benefits of harmonious rule, as championed by Galad Sarian, who brought about the fall of dark powers so long ago.

“There are always students here, though never great numbers. Indeed, our own numbers are small, perhaps a hundred priests and servants at any one time in the citadel. We have sufficient soldiery in the city to protect us, should we need it. Which makes recent events doubly disturbing.”

“You have defences other than soldiers?” said Voruum.

“Of course. We, as priests, have all developed mental skills beyond those of normal men. It is a gift that came from the original Dream



Lord lines. In my lifetime here, we have never had cause to use them to defend ourselves.”

“Until now?”

Nerrester frowned. “Quite so. Whatever it was that visited us had its own power.”

“Sorcery? I have come across it more than once here on your world.”

“There have been incidents,” Nerrester went on. “Minor affairs we have dealt with quickly. This, however, appears to be something more sinister. The situation has been exacerbated by the involvement of our own priests, three of which, at least, were key to the incident which has brought you here.”

“The disappearance of the official,” said Voruum.

Nerrester’s face clouded. “A mild deception. Not an official, but a student. In fact, two. Normally we would have had the resources to deal with the matter, but this is far more serious.”

Voruum felt the stillness of the air around them, a tightening of the atmosphere, the mind-spell cast to shield them from any intrusion very powerful. Nerrester and his priests were using all their energy to sustain it.

“The two young men, probably the same age as your companion,” said the priest, looking calmly at Kaspel, whose embarrassment was clear. “One of them is Gildar Sarian, descended from the royal line.”

Voruum let out a soft but audible gasp. The priests had kept that well-hidden. Sarian! The youth would be potentially one of the most powerful people on the planet, groomed for succession to the highest office.

“The other youth is Dynaster, ostensibly the son of a local nobleman, from a line that stretches back to the time of Galad Sarian. His true birthright is known to only a few of us. Even the boy is not aware of it.”

“You think it significant?”

“We must assume the abductors knew. Both youths had mental powers, Gildar in particular. And yet whatever took them was a greater force.”

“Where were the youths last seen?”

Nerrester took Voruum and Kaspel to a section of the citadel that overlooked the immense drop down, filled now with clouds that shielded the distant view. The only way off this remote place would have been via an extraordinarily difficult climb or by air. Voruum studied the length of the low wall, his senses as attuned to the air as a cat's. He felt something, as though the air had been scorched, tainted. No sky raft would have been able to enter this rocky region and navigate its treacherous walls.

“The youths were known to be up here,” said Nerrester. “It is a very private place. My colleagues were stationed nearby, out of sight, respecting the privacy of the youths.”

“Were they lovers?”

Nerrester seemed unmoved by the question. “No. Such liaisons do occur among our students from time to time. But these two spend hours discussing military history. Dynaster in particular is deeply fascinated by it. It is part of his inheritance.”

“I need to know everything if I am to solve this mystery,” said Voruum, aware of the turmoil in Nerrester's mind. There were things he was not eager to share.

“Dynaster is directly descended from Annulian, the former Warlord. Annulian had a son by his betrothed, although Annulian was killed before he could marry her and legitimise the birth. To honour the Warlord, the line has been respected. Dynaster is the descendant and his place as Protector awaits him when he's completed his studies. For both youths to have been abducted suggests these secrets are known outside the citadel.”

Voruum nodded. “There’s no hint of a fight here. Nothing to suggest they had an accident. I do detect something else.”

“I confess my own fears,” said Nerrester, staring out at the stark landscape. “This is something from the past.”

“You know of the Brotherhood of the Goat?”

Nerrester looked horrified, closing his eyes as if to shut out the images conjured by Voruum’s question. “Is it that? Can you be sure?”

“Not yet. But it is active. I’ve fought its acolytes in the east and at Karkesh. As has Kaspel.”

“Then – have they used their dark arts to abduct the youths?”

“What creatures live in the higher mountains? Aerial beasts? If such things exist there, the Brotherhood would make use of them. They could have snatched the youths. And they would have masked their activity.”

Nerrester nodded. “Such creatures do exist. The youths would normally have been strong enough to defy any attack. But if the *Brotherhood* is behind this, it would explain much.”

Later, Voruum and Kaspel, alone on the high balcony, prepared for a mind search of the upper crags. Kaspel held Voruum’s star lance, the glowing weapon that acted as a powerful deterrent against the darker forces of the world. Once terrified of the weapon, Kaspel had become a little hardened, himself tested more than once by the grim work of his master. He waited stoically while Voruum closed his eyes and drew on other powers deep within him.

In Karkesh he had bested the acolytes of darkness and in so doing rescued the last vestiges of two other agents, Murrath and Vormich, his precursors who had died physically but whose minds had become linked into his own, surviving as shadows somewhere inside his head. He summoned them silently now and mentally gave them instructions which they were quick to obey, glad to be of service. Voruum sent them far up into the crags, where they drifted like wraiths among the inhospitable terrain.

It was not long before their thoughts came back to Voruum.

*Several winged creatures flew down to the balcony, said the mind-voice of Murrath. There was no conflict. Dynaster controlled them. He brought them there. The creatures allowed both youths to alight and then came up here into the high peaks.*

“Where are the youths now?”

*We are following their aerial trail. There are signs here that people pass along the ancient paths. A tribe not associated with the Sacred City.*

Voruum weighed this carefully. This didn't sound like abduction. The youths had gone willingly. But who were these people? What was their purpose?

“How may I reach those paths?”

*We'll each attempt to control one of the creatures, and bring it to you.*

Voruum turned to Kaspel, who had been studying the evening shadows fiercely, as though every one of them portended hostility. Voruum explained what must be done, and the youth grimaced but steeled himself.

They waited.

The sun had long since slipped away into the west, leaving a hint of colour above the tall crags. Eventually, two large shapes came gliding out of those shadows, dark and ill-defined, as though formed from the substance of the night itself. They hovered briefly above the two figures and then dropped onto the narrow wall, far larger than any eagle.

Kaspel drew back, shocked by their appearance. They seemed made of smoke, and yet they had powerful talons that gripped the stone as though capable of pulverising it. Their heads were long and sleek, ears flattened, eyes coal-black, mesmeric. Kaspel avoided their gaze. He felt like prey.

*They'll take you into the high peaks. Show no fear, otherwise they'll turn upon you. We'll hold back their wildness and shield us from other eyes.*

Voruum guessed what that meant. His enemies were indeed here. For certain it was another enclave of the followers of Shaitan, the darkest of gods. If they held the two youths from the City, it could only mean a new attempt to seize power, to weaken the authority in Karkesh.

Voruum and Kaspel climbed down from the backs of the two aerial creatures and took shelter in the splintered rocks. The creatures flew soundlessly back across the void between mountains, quickly lost to sight. Overhead an almost full moon poured light into the jagged terrain, barely outlining the buildings of another citadel. It seemed to have been cut from the rocks, balanced precariously over a measureless drop.

*The youths are in that place, said Murrath. Clearly not prisoners.*

Voruum weighed this. "Are they drugged?"

*No. Dynaster appears to be in command of the entire enclave. They are his servants.*

"Then Gildar Sarian is the victim!"

*No. He is perfectly at ease with them. There is something else. Many of these men bear arms, talismans and markings on their skin that set them apart as servants of the Brotherhood of the Goat. Should we reach into Dynaster's mind to learn more?*

"No!" snapped Voruum, and Kaspel beside him looked startled. "No," he went on, more softly. "We must remain undetected." He turned to the youth. "I will shield us, but we must get closer. There's a deep mystery here, and we must solve it before we act."

With Murrath and Vormich restored to their secret places within his mind, Voruum created the web that would protect him and Kaspel from whatever searches the enclave might apply. He and the youth

traversed the crags, inching their way across treacherous spars and broken knuckles of rock like two human spiders. Both felt the probing mental sentinels that scanned the surface of the towering edifice, hewn out of the peak, its windows above them like the bony sockets of an alien life form.

Voruum marvelled at the determination of the youth. No task seemed to be beyond him, his spirit unbreakable, even though fear welled inside him. Perhaps he encapsulated the fierce will of Earth's people, who had suffered so much over the years, both from the deprivations of the Empire's tyranny and from the harshness of life in the world they were rebuilding from the ruins of war.

They reached an opening. Voruum satisfied himself there was no immediate danger. He and Kaspel swung onto the ledge and slipped inside. They eased their way along a narrow ledge, gradually accustoming their eyes to a pallid light that came from somewhere below them, as though a fire burned in the entrails of the citadel. It had the appearance of a huge nest, hollowed out from the rock, and there were numerous spars criss-crossing its dimensions, like thick strands of a monstrous spider's web. More lights shimmered in various parts of the echoing cavern, and Voruum concentrated his mind, trying to locate the voices or minds of those he sought.

Satisfied that he and Kaspel remained undetected, he clambered onto a spar, and the two of them began a tortuous climb. They realized these spars were constructed from metal, probably many years old, possibly dating back to the ancient times before the old wars. Dusty and hung with smaller, real spider webs, they had not been disturbed for an age. Voruum decided their purpose was simply to support the weight of the huge building's upper section. Darkness obscured its depths, but an occasional deep echo suggested the floor was hundreds of feet below.

They wove around the source of light until they reached a spar some distance above it. Occasionally something shifted in the shadows, like a beast sniffing at the air, on the point of discovering them, but Voruum's shield held good, strengthened by the wraith-like

presence of Murrath and Vormich. Voruum and Kaspel knelt on the spar, looking down to the source of the light, fifty feet below them.

Several spars interlocked, weaving a convoluted metal platform that served as a floor, a slightly concave bowl some hundred feet in diameter. At the centre of this was a fountain-like structure, but with light rather than water rising up from it. Voruum could feel this was no ordinary flame, drawn from an unnatural source, poisonous and directed by powerful forces. On either side of the stone structure were several statues, each the size of a man. These had the heads of goats, with long, curled horns and exaggerated teeth.

Voruum could feel Kaspel's fear almost bursting out of him in a cry, but the youth bit his own hand to suppress it. His terror was justified, though. Voruum knew they had stumbled into yet another haunt of the Brotherhood of the Goat, a lair dedicated to their evil founder, Daras Vorta. The tyrant of Ur had been destroyed a hundred years ago by Galad Sarian, but his terrible shadow moved yet among these fanatical acolytes.

About a score of men stood before the flame and its hideous stone guardians. Two of these, Voruum knew, were Gildar Sarian and Dynaster. He had touched the edges of their minds with his own, light as a breeze. It was evident from the way the youths were standing, free of any restriction, that neither felt imprisoned or held against his will. Dynaster put both his hands on the shoulders of his companion and said something to him, his smiling face clearly visible in the dancing light of the flames. Sarian bowed his head briefly and turned to the men. They saluted him.

*So Dynaster serves the lord of darkness, Shaitan,* Voruum thought. He wanted to probe Sarian's mind and find out if the youth had been duped or drugged into coming here so willingly. Shaitan was the sworn enemy of all men, the quintessence of evil. The Sarian Dynasty had been committed to obliterating all powers associated with the monstrous god since Galad's triumph over Vorta. How could Gildar have been turned, if not by sorcery or some other base coercion?

*I must get him away from this place. Dynaster may die as a result of it, but it will be a small price to pay.*

Dynaster turned from Gildar and lifted his hands in supplication to the flames. “We have brought Lord Sarian here to witness our allegiance to He Who Shall Rise Again. To understand true power, its sharing with all men, and not the debased power so profligate amongst the self-styled masters of Earth, those who have usurped it and who guard it so selfishly for their own purposes. Shaitan provides power for *all* men.

“Know that, just as we all abjure the Dream Lords and those who serve them, so does Gildar Sarian renounce his position in the royal line and devote himself to our cause. To a new war! To the fall of the Dream Lord authority and the freedom of mankind.”

Voruum shuddered as the words rang out, expanding in the hovering darkness, which seemed to listen eagerly with a thousand ears, its shadows heaving and pulsing with delight and desire. So this was the secret behind the flight from the Sacred City. A hellish union and a new threat to the frail stability of the world.

On the platform, the men were cheering, and Gildar waved to them, a thin smile on his features, confirmation that he had indeed been suborned by Dynaster, a young man who bore all the traits of his distant relative, Annulian, who had been called the Annihilator for good reason.

“When the moon reaches its zenith,” he said, “Gildar will be fully absorbed into Shaitan’s service, his blood our blood, his mind our mind. And soon it will be time to ride out into the world and begin anew its conversion. Our warriors of the night are ready!”

Voruum knew there were no more than a few hours before the moon reached its zenith. If he was to drag Gildar from this place, there was little time to plan and execute an abduction. He and Kaspel watched as the men above descended various spars. Gildar was led by Dynaster, with three guards, downwards towards a place in the wall of the immense chamber. Voruum and Kaspel slipped silently across the spars, hugging the deeper shadows. They could feel



clumsy mind probes groping for them, but Voruum's shield, enforced by Murrath and Vormich, easily deflected them.

There was a tunnel, one of many, into the stone wall. Voruum and Kaspel went along it, pausing as it came to a small chamber, from which several doors led to rooms. Melding into shadow, Voruum heard Dynaster guiding his charge into one of the rooms.

"Prepare yourself," he said to Gildar. "Empty your mind of all doubts. The glory of Shaitan will be yours to share—soon! I will come for you."

Voruum satisfied himself that Dynaster had left. Gildar closed the door behind him, compliantly shut away. The three guards stationed themselves outside, though Voruum read in their minds they were at ease, lulled by a sense of security, a belief that nothing was likely to disrupt the sanctity of this place, so far from the rest of humanity. It made Voruum's task an easy one.

He sent Murrath and Vormich out from his mind to invade those of the guards. It was a simple matter for them to enter the men and close their minds down, easing the men gently into subconsciousness without their even being aware of the intrusion. They slumped like so many sacks of wheat. Voruum went to the door and used a small tool to open it. Quickly he went inside, with Kaspel guarding his back.

Gildar had settled on a narrow bed, the only furnishing in the room. He rose slowly, a youth of seventeen, wiry, his face chiselled, handsome, his eyes slightly unfocused, as though he had already been asleep for several hours. He had no reason to assume Voruum was an enemy and was about to speak when he felt something slide into his mind. Automatically his own Dream Lord powers struggled to counter this invasion, but the combination of Murrath and Vormich was too powerful. They held him as tightly as though they had pinned his arms.

"I regret this affront to your royal person," said Voruum coolly. He watched as Gildar walked slightly drunkenly to the door. Kaspel nodded – the way was clear, and in moments the small company had wound its way back along the tunnel to the chamber of spars.

Quickening their pace, they took Gildar out onto the network of steel and began the ascent. Halfway to their goal, Voruum detected movements in the writhing darkness above.

“They’ve discovered our entry,” he whispered to Kaspel. “All the exits up here will be guarded. It’s too dangerous to risk a fight.” Turning, he led the way back down the tangled spars, keeping to the side of the chamber and the shadows that muffled it like voluminous curtains. Kaspel guided Gildar, but the youth’s mind remained locked, responding only to the simplest of instructions. A rebellion here would lay the intruders open to discovery and certain disaster.

As they went deeper and deeper into the lower realms of the chamber, they could sense pursuit, a cloud descending from above, filled with energy and seething with evil intent. Dynaster himself was there, his voice occasionally echoing across the chasm.

Finally, they dropped to the solid stone of the ground. The light here was almost out, but they could see several openings in the wall and Voruum led them through one of them. A narrow tunnel wound deep into the guts of the mountain. Ahead of them they heard a strange, deep throbbing, as though colossal engines pounded away far underground, relics of lost centuries. Voruum’s senses warned him the air here was unclean. Old powers suffused it. He slipped his star lance from its sheath and held it before him. Its soft blue light acted as a shield against the rancid air.

Behind them, they heard their enemies closing, like a tide sweeping through the stone, blood through an artery. They reached another open chamber, a wide, low place choked with strange metal tubes time had fused together in a collapsing mass, sections linked together with fat pipes and trailing knots of thick wire, the rust of centuries coating them. Voruum could feel the vibrations of something dormant but powerful within these spheres, a decaying atmosphere, a blight. The star lance focused cleaner energy, and as the three figures weaved in and out between the endless piles of bloated metal objects, light fizzed from them, met and countered by the power of the star lance.

Screams of rage and frustration tore at the air behind them as their pursuers were repulsed by the dreadful energies at play in this place. Voruum drove his companions on through endless corridors of the past's excesses until there was another door in the far wall. Voruum wasted no time in using the star lance to melt its old ironwork. It collapsed and admitted a gust of cold air. Quickly the party went through and out into the night beyond. They were in the deep gut of a valley and by the star lance glow could see the roots of the Sacred City's rock towers.

"What was that place?" said Kaspel, clearly amazed by the alien artefacts he had seen.

"Lost weapons, I think," said Voruum. "Relics from wars beyond memory. Shut away for eternity, slowly degrading. Let's hope Dynaster and his followers never attempt to revive them."

If the pursuit continued, it had been stalled—no sounds testified to it. Swiftly Voruum led the way around the base of the outcrop. Gildar showed no signs of resistance, as if he had fallen into a deep sleep, moved only by the will of the two mental presences within him.

By dawn, they had found the way back to the entrance to the Sacred City.

"Dynaster will come by moonlight."

Voruum's prediction hung in the air as the priests waited in silence on the high balcony below the huge disc. Their collective nervousness made the air thrum. Voruum, rested and refreshed, studied the silhouettes of the upper crags against the dying of the daylight. Beside him Kaspel stood like one of the statues, his own resolution and concentration fixed. Nerrester, close at hand, was not so calm, for once his priestly concentration deeply disturbed, like that of his fellows. Conflict was something of which they knew but had no experience. They had made the City a place of peace and knew little of malice.

Gildar sat in the shadows on a low stone bench, his hands shackled behind him, the chain looped through a steel ring in the

floor. Since being brought back to the Sacred City he had been withdrawn, totally silent, his mind closed off.

*Perhaps he's been damaged, Voruum thought. We must keep his Dream Lord powers dormant. I'd be no match for them.*

Murrath and Vormich had left Gildar and returned to Voruum, submerged in his subconscious, waiting.

Voruum had considered riding out from the City and returning as swiftly as possible to Karkesh, but he knew the business would not be finished until Dynaster was subdued, his potential rebellion put down. Doubtless he would have pursued Voruum, probably from the air, so making a stand here up in the citadel presented itself as the best solution. Nerrester had been utterly appalled by the knowledge that Gildar had been tainted by Dynaster and his defection to the forces of the Brotherhood. The two youths had sealed that from him too easily: it suggested their powers were daunting.

"Can you defeat him?" he asked Voruum.

"This conflict is inevitable. Dynaster will be in no mood for compromise. I am a threat to him, even if he recovers Gildar. You and your priests must concentrate all your faculties on holding back whatever forces Dynaster unleashes. I'll deal with him."

Soon after moonrise, the skies darkened unnaturally, a cloud forming across the peaks as Dynaster's aerial creatures flocked. They swooped as one and circled the upper towers of the citadel, limned in the moon-glow. Voruum felt the power of Dynaster's mind probe, sweeping the battlements. Kaspel went to Gildar's side and waited, sword drawn, though the chained youth remained motionless.

Dynaster's mount dropped lightly to the battlements, soft as a shadow, and the youth sprang from its back, sword in hand, and studied the gathering. He looked with contempt at the priests, dismissing them as no threat to his powers. He saw Gildar and immediately sent a probe his way. The chained youth stiffened but did not look up.

“What have you done to him?” said Dynaster, sword pointing at Voruum.

“His mind has been freed. From everything,” said Voruum, stepping forward, his star lance faintly glowing in his hand. “He is in limbo. Soon he’ll have to make a choice.”

“He has already made his choice!” Dynaster snarled. “He and I are as one. We reject the Council’s control. We serve another master now. A greater destiny awaits us – we will crush the Dream Lords and tear down the stars together!”

“What if he refuses you and returns to his Dream Lord path?”

“No! That will not happen. He will die before that.”

“You will have to destroy me first,” said Voruum, the star lance humming, as though alive and eager to discharge its power.

“Very well,” said Dynaster. He waved his creatures forward and they made for the battlements, allowing a score of warriors to land. The priests moulded their fear and churning emotions into a barrier, and the air crackled as both groups of men locked mental energies. Dynaster’s warriors were clearly superior physically, but their mental powers were not strong. The priests held them at bay, though Voruum knew they would not be able to do so for a prolonged period.

Dynaster advanced toward him, his blade slicing the air in confident preparation for the kill. Something dark and evil uncoiled within him, and Voruum sensed it, projecting his own mental barrier to deflect its advances. He felt both Murrath and Vormich awaken to those unwholesome probes and join their powers to his. Light fizzed and dazzled the eye as the combatants locked weapons. Dynaster’s sword had bathed in some freakish, ancient power, and it clashed against the softer light of the star lance.

They fought tenaciously for long minutes. Voruum knew instinctively, alarmingly, that his powers were the lesser of the two. Dynaster was no ordinary man, his inner strength shocking, and it was only through battle that Voruum realised what gave him his

frightful energy. The truth slammed Voruum back, a realization that he'd miscalculated.

Voruum urged Murrath and Vormich to greater efforts of support, and for a moment they began to gain control. Yet Dynaster again drew upon awesome power and reclaimed the initiative, driving Voruum back.

Kaspel and the priests watched in growing terror as Dynaster, his face a mask of triumph, drove forward, intent on destroying Voruum. He raised his blade for what would have been the inevitable climax of this uneven contest – the death blow.

A bolt of livid light crossed the arena and struck Dynaster on the chest, splashing around him, molten and sizzling. It sent him staggering backwards, his sword shattering like glass into a thousand fragments. Dynaster crashed to the stone, temporarily blinded, crawling away slowly like a broken spider. Voruum swung round to see Gildar coming forward. The youth had torn up his chains like so much parchment, his hands free. His eyes blazed as if he'd ripped aside the last of any mental chains that had also bound him.

He stood over Dynaster, his Dream Lord powers holding him pinned like a moth to a board. "This ends here, Dynaster. I am not your puppet—nor Shaitan's. You have chosen the wrong path."

Dynaster slowly pulled himself together, although his strength was broken. He struggled to his knees. "You were with me, like a brother. We saw the greed of the Dream Lords—"

"We saw what Shaitan's servants poured into our minds. Those were the lies. You, more than any of us, have been deceived. Your birthright is a lie."

"No! My line goes back to Annulian! He was my ancestor, father of my line."

Gildar turned to Voruum. "You, witchfinder, unlocked my mind. Your inner companions helped to free it. I saw back through time to the truth. Galad Sarian sired my line, through his royal wife, Taria. But he

was schooled for war here in the Sacred City, with Annulian and the Warlord's betrothed, Vellonica."

"My line stems from them," said Dynaster.

"The priests knew the truth. Galad Sarian sired an illegitimate son on Vellonica. A secret held since the fall of Empire. Your line of descent, Dynaster, runs from *that* union. You, like me, are a Sarian. What courses through your veins and pulses like fire within you was not put there by that incarnate evil, Shaitan. You have Dream Lord power."

"No! That cannot be. I am sworn to destroy the Dream Lords!"

Voruum stood beside Gildar. "You bested me, Dynaster," said the witchfinder. "And my aides. I read it in you as we fought. Dream Lord power. It is so. You have it in your blood. I, too, have seen your past."

Dynaster slumped again, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"We have both been poisoned," said Gildar. "We must purge ourselves of that darkness. There is a war to fight, but we must choose the light. That, or madness." He reached out his hand.

Voruum watched, waiting. Out in the darkness, the shadows withdrew, as though a new light bleached them.

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*Adrian Cole is the author of some two dozen fantasy and sf novels and numerous short stories over four decades. His recent NICK NIGHTMARE INVESTIGATES won the prestigious British Fantasy Award for the best collection of 2014*



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# The Magelords of Ruach

By ABRAHAM STRONGJOHN

***Betrayed by the defeated Queen of Neptune, Ch'Or and Ra'Ana find themselves not on Mars but on Triton in the hands of slavers! Will the Martians stop the machinations of the iniquitous Magelords or fall victim to the intrigues of that vile council?!***

## I

"Xilland!"

The party of Neptunian huntsmen and slavers scattered as the hulking brute came crashing through towering fungal stalks. The shambling mass of shaggy fur, claws, and teeth had announced its deadly presence with a low moaning screech.

"Don't let the prisoners escape!" shouted one of the band before pointing at Ra'Ana and adding "Get that one to Andarvi, they'll want her alive."

The two leather-clad huntsmen who had been escorting the ochre-haired woman struggled to regain their footing. As one stumbled in the muck, the woman rammed her shoulder into the other in a bid to break free. Two more huntsmen lunged at the woman, tackling her into the wet earth. She cried out as the cords which bound her hands behind her cut into her wrists whilst the men dragged her roughly by the arms.

"Ra'Ana!" Ch'Or shouted over the shrieks of the charging beast as he watched them disappear further into Triton's swamplands. He had scarcely closed his mouth when the creature was upon them

The bounding xilland swiped aside one of the blue-faced men with a saber-tipped paw. He fell screaming, his insides torn asunder and strewn along the claw's savage arc.

The Neptunians recovered from the initial shock of the monster's attack. A few spread out seeking cover behind mushrooms and in slimy depressions. The ones holding Ch'Or led him behind a rock while the other men readied their weapons—metal rods with variously colored crystal tips—and positioned themselves around the creature.

The xilland was unlike anything Ch'Or had seen; when it reared its full twelve feet in height, it revealed two additional sets of limbs. The lower, just above the hind legs, had claws much like the ones that had torn apart the slaver. Above those was a pair of vaguely anthropoid hands which the xilland used to snatch up another of the slavers and bring him to the four-tusked maw stretching from its vaguely ursine head to the middle of its chest. Bones snapped, as did the Neptunian's weapon. Ch'Or could scarcely believe that this was the beast whose furs were worn as clothing on icy Neptune.

One of the Neptunians fired his weapon at the xilland; the crystal's violet beam succeeded only in singeing its shaggy grey coat. The xilland dropped the writhing remains of its previous victim and proceeded to roll on the ground, coating its fur with a thick layer of muck that seemed to render further blasts even less effective.

"My weapon!" cried Ch'Or. "Return my blade—I will fight by your side and try nothing!"

"You will die either way, Mars man, but I shall not be the one to abet your escape."

Ch'Or cursed.

The xilland struck down another Neptunian who was in the process of drawing his knife.

"Can you not flee the beast?" Ch'Or asked as one of the three slavers with him drew a short blade and moved to join those still facing the creature.

“He will kill all he can, if we cannot slay him, and sate his belly with our guts,” a Neptunian answered. “Be glad your woman got away with the others. She may live still if it pleases the Magelord.”

The Neptunians who managed to draw steel fared better at keeping the creature at bay than those with the crystal ray-shooters. Still, the short blades were clearly more for utility than combat, and the eight-limbed monster still seemed confident that it could kill all of the Neptunians facing it.

Ch’Or eyed the knife the xilland had swatted aside. It had landed handle down, sunk part-way into the swampy ground. The Martian edgeman noted that the two slavers were rapt watching their comrades face down the snarling octoped.

Ch’Or leapt from his captors and toward the knife. The Neptunian who held the rope by which Ch’Or had been led cried out as the fibers cut into his hands. The xilland noticed the shouting Neptunians rather than the scrambling Martian. Ch’Or reached the knife and awkwardly used it to cut the leather cords holding his wrists behind his back. The slavers dared not try to stop him with the xilland between them. The huntsmen implored the slavers and those still taking cover behind the rancid and crumbling fungal vegetation to aid them, paying no heed to the Martian who had slipped his bonds.

Ch’Or freed his hands and took the knife. If he fled, the xilland would surely strike him down and feast upon him once its slaughter was complete. The Neptunian slavers, if they lived, might well kill him if they thought he could escape, and with Ra’Ana gone and taken who knows where, they would have nothing to hold over him. Perhaps it would be better to find Ra’Ana without the Neptunians’ fetters, but he had to live if he was to find his betrothed.

The xilland turned to face one of the huntsmen. It presented to Ch’Or both its shaggy back and a golden opportunity. Ch’Or took the mud-caked knife between his teeth and rushed the long-haired creature. Hopping over its bushy tail, Ch’Or grabbed fists-full of fur and pulled himself up. Though its fur was slippery with muck, it was long enough that Ch’Or could twist it into grips by which he could hang on to the rampaging beast.

The xilland seemed to barely notice Ch’Or through its dense coat. Or it was so single-mindedly focused on the huntsman it had pressed up against the stump of a snapped mushroom that it did not care that the Martian was clinging tenaciously to its hide. Ch’Or reached the scruff of the thing’s neck just as it struck down the Neptunian. Holding on with one hand and his knees, Ch’Or plunged the knife into the monster’s neck. The blade went in with no resistance, but when Ch’Or pulled it out, it was bloodless. So thick was the xilland’s wool that the steel could not reach its flesh!

Ch’Or carefully turned his attention to the rope still dangling from where it was tied around his waist. He cut through it making certain to leave himself a good length handy. Returning the blade to his teeth, Ch’Or pulled the rope free. Holding it as a loop in his right hand, he cast it so that it would clear the thing’s head without getting snagged on its tusks. The rope fell into place in the xilland’s mouth like a bridle. Ch’Or pulled, and the rope dug into the corners of its mouth where the razor teeth could not chew into the fibers.

Ch’Or held tight as the xilland reared up again. The creature dashed forward, trampling another of the Neptunian huntsmen. The Martian kept his head down as wispy stalks snapped about him. The xilland dropped to the ground and rolled. Ch’Or was surprised when the xilland returned to its feet and he was no worse for the beast’s maneuver. The thing’s hair was so thick and the monster itself so comparatively light that Ch’Or had been safely cushioned between the soft mud and the xilland’s hide.

The Martian took both ends of the rope in one hand. With a sharp jerk, he caused the xilland to rear its head. Ch’Or reached over the beast’s shoulder and slashed its exposed throat. The xilland let out a series of gasping squeaks. After a few thrashing moments as its life-blood ebbed away, the xilland fell forward with a gurgle.

Ch’Or rolled off the beast, exhausted and dirty.

II

A foot nudged Ch’Or.

“Is he alive?”

“He breathes. We must get him to cover before Inuon’s hunters find us.”

Ch’Or awoke to see a pair of gray men wearing naught but loin-cloths standing over him. They were Tritonians.

Ch’Or looked about and did not see the xilland. He must have crawled away some distance and hid himself in the brush before losing consciousness.

“Can he truly be the one Cerwon described?”

“There is no doubt, he is the Red Man!”

The two men attempted to aid Ch’Or to his feet. The Martian jerked away.

“He wakes!”

The two Tritonians made brief gestures of supplication then one said “I am Telsho, and this is Sortsre. All will be explained, but please, we must move before those who seized you find the courage to follow the wild xilland’s trail.”

The one called Sortsre, younger of the two, forced a nervous smile and proffered handle-first the knife which Ch’Or had used to kill the xilland. Ch’Or took it and stuck it in his belt with a nod of gratitude.

There was shouting in the distance.

“Please,” Telsho implored firmly. “We must move swiftly. The hunters ought not to find us, but you have seen what their weapons can do if we stand here.”

Though ineffective against the thickly carpeted fur of a xilland, the crystal rods had dealt swift death to the Tritonians he and Ra’Ana had encountered days ago when they first arrived on Neptune’s moon.

“I follow,” spoke Ch’Or grimly, the cruel yet lovely visage of Vraala, potentate of that huge globe hanging above them, burning in his mind.

When the hunters and slavers finally picked up Ch’Or’s trail from the dead xilland, they could find nothing save where three men had stood in a clearing.

Ra’Ana had given up attempting to flee. After a few hours, the Neptunians who had survived the xilland’s attack caught up with those who’d dragged her on deeper into the swampland and grumbled that the prince had escaped. The Martian princess knew that Ch’Or would come for her as soon as he was able. She would be safe. The crude and oafish fighting men who’d insulted, groped, and beat her were not. Each taunt and slight was met with a stoic smile upon her blood-caked royal lips.

The wet and humid mushroom forest gave way to a vast open plain of gray grain-grasses. Her captors took a route following the edge of the wetlands until arriving at a small settlement. Here naked gray men were chained to stakes and listlessly tended to green three-legged camelids that the Neptunians called sulps. The leader of the Neptunian band was greeted by an ashen-skinned man with a steel-blue beard who was dressed in fabulous yellow and rust-brown silks.

After an amicable exchange that involved invoking the names Vraala and—one that Ra’Ana had not heard—Inuon, the Neptunians handed the garishly dressed man a small purse. He waved to the chained men, who brought over six of the tripod camels and began to tack and bridle them.

“Where do you plan to take me on these disgusting beasts?” Ra’Ana flinched as one of the green camels spat.

“You live to insult majesty,” the leader of the band patted the beast on its snout with a laugh. “We take you to Inuon—fifth among the Magelords of Ruach—” he held up the strand of sapphires Vraala had “gifted” her, “to answer for your crimes against the Queen and against Neptune.”

There was no sense in arguing the matter. The only real crime had been against her prince—Ch'Or, who would even now be High King of All Mars had not Vraala in her lust abducted the couple and their traitorous companion Bi'Tik on the very steps of the Temple of Coronation.

One of the slaves preparing and loading supplies onto the riding beasts caught sight of Ra'Ana and looked at her with marvel. After a moment, with deference he sought to give her a drink from a vegetable flask. One of the slavers slapped aside the uncorked gourd and threatened to beat the slave.

“Forgive me, I misheard and thought surely this was a queen in your midst.”

A smile was all Ra'Ana could offer the man who was summarily beaten and ordered to tend to the sulps' droppings.

After all had been finalized, the band departed. The sulps moved more swiftly than Ra'Ana would have guessed but less smoothly. They would propel themselves forward at tremendous bounds with their powerful hind leg and land by bracing themselves with the two spring-like forelegs. The riding was uncomfortable; doubly so for Ra'Ana, whose fetters opened anew the wounds about them. The plains waved and swayed as they moved past as though it was a living thing—a silvery anemone bristling at the prey so foolish as to fall within its reach. The ever present glint of blue shimmering off Neptune served to remind Ra'Ana just how distant her home and the warm slopes of Pavonis truly were.

Ra'Ana was unsure if she slept or if the jolting ride shook her till she could no longer maintain consciousness. But all was dark, and pain gave way to numbness.

### III

Telsho and Sortsre led Ch'Or down a defile that grew progressively deeper until the banks rose into bluffs on either side. Ch'Or smelled fire and food. He became dizzy with hunger upon the first wafts of that scent of cooking meat, realizing he had not eaten in days.

More gray men like Telsho and Sortsre emerged from hidden spots offering greetings to their brethren. These men wore variously tattered garbs, some little more than the loincloths his escorts wore, but all had distinguishing ring-scars on legs and wrists—marks of slavery.

“I bid you welcome, man of another world,” said one of those who'd come to greet them. “We had heard of your arrival but sadly had little opportunity to do anything about it until the wild xilland caught the scent of Vraala's dogs.”

Ch'Or sized the man up. He was middle-aged or older. There was no telling what bearing hardships of slavery had added to his wizened appearance, but the eyes were soft and kind, yet hungry, full of a hope whose like Ch'Or had not seen since Ra'Ana had looked upon him at Pavonis.

“I have many questions for you, my friend,” the man continued, “as I'm certain you do for me. I am Cerwon. Please, join our sup.”

Cerwon offered Ch'Or a seat by the crackling fire over which small creatures the Martian could not identify were spitted and turned. Other men came bearing stone cups and a jug, pouring for the seated a sweet smelling liquid, which Ch'Or was informed was a wild mushroom wine. Cerwon took a spit from the fire and handed it to Ch'Or.

“Hortak Lizard,” Cerwon said. “Not bad, when you can catch them.”

Ch'Or took a bite of the blackened scaly flesh then nodded in concurrence.

“We who you see are free Tritonians,” Cerwon explained as Ch'Or sipped the fragrant liquid. “We have escaped the crystal mines and the xilland farms—”

“Xilland farms? How is it those abominable creatures are raised and domesticated?” Ch'Or had nearly spat his wine at the very thought of rearing those monsters. “That one must have killed half a dozen men!”

“When they are born, they are fitted with collars. They are made docile by them, and overseers control them by mystical means.”

“Just like Vraala’s dragon,” mused Ch’Or.

“You must be a foe of the Queen to have ended up here,” Sortsre interjected. “We’ve not seen any man such as yourself on Triton. Only slaves or those who have fallen into disfavor with the Queen. But who are you who are red and not blue?”

Cerwon put out a hand to the excited young man, but Ch’Or gestured that all was well.

“I am Ch’Or, Edgeman and Prince of Mars. I was to be crowned king of my world when Vraala brought my companions and me to her world against our will.” Ch’Or related the events that had transpired in Vraala’s palace, the maze, the pandemonium in the coliseum and Vraala’s betrayal that had landed him and Ra’Ana on the moon Triton.

Ch’Or noticed a misty-eyed lass with long cobalt hair that covered with gentle waves where rags did not. She’d sat by the fire beside Sortsre partway through Ch’Or’s tale and hung rapt on every word. Her lips quivered and hands clenched as Ch’Or recounted Vraala’s failed attempt to seduce him into betraying Ra’Ana.

“What has become of this Ra’Ana, your beloved?” the girl asked, fretfully clutching a wine cup. Her almond eyes were red with stifled tears and cheeks flushed the color of tarnished silver. Ch’Or regarded her thoughtfully and with some pity for the distress his tale had evidently caused her.

“You will forgive my daughter, Tseri,” Cerwon placed his fingers on the girl’s knee.

“Father!” Tseri stood in protest. “Did you not hear? You must help the prince save his princess; clearly she is gone, taken by Inuon’s ruffians!”

This time it was Ch’Or’s turn to blush at the young woman’s insistent desire to aid him. The Tritonians clamorously spoke over one another for a moment until Ch’Or interrupted. “Who is Inuon?”

“A fat geld-sulp is what he is!” Tseri pouted then drained her cup.

“He is one of the Magelords of Ruach,” Cerwon stated, a cold gravity in his voice betraying a pain and sorrow that echoed the deep hurt in Tseri’s eyes.

“Magelords?” Ch’Or raised an eyebrow.

Cerwon, seemingly lost in some troubled memory, did not reply.

“Vraala’s autocrats,” Telsho said, watching Cerwon tremble fitfully. “They rule Triton on Vraala’s behalf, overseeing the mines and plantations. They enslave their own people at her behest. Our labor is stolen and fills the vaults of their castles, that which does not go in tribute to Neptune’s Queen.”

“How is it Vraala conquered this world?” Ch’Or asked. “Though the witch herself is a formidable sorceress, her soldiers...” The prince paused to think of a way to put it delicately. He was spared the need to by Sortsre.

“There are eight of them. Magelords, that is. They have powers in addition to those that Vraala gave them. Dark and deep magic native to Triton. The Spinnari—”

“Don’t talk such rot,” groaned Telsho.

“It’s true!” the young Tritonian stood shouting. “I’ve seen Inuon’s! Deep in the chat ponds of the basalt quarries you yourself saved me from. Black as the stones with ashes for hair and a knapsack made from his own silk in which he carried the bones of his brother!”

“Be that as it may,” Cerwon continued, having broken his reverie, “the men who captured you and your woman must have belonged to Inuon. He is overlord of this region. His palace is at Andarvi. If Ra’Ana is still with them, that is where she is being taken.”

“We must help Prince Ch’Or!” Tseri insisted. “if he was able to outwit and defeat Vraala, then perhaps we could defeat the Lords and free our families.”

“I must confess, child, that it was I who was outwitted by Vraala, but you have my word. So long as I have breath, I would aid any against those who stand between me and my queen and our return to Mars.”

“If anyone can return you home, it would be the Magelords,” Cerwon said. “They control the spiral lights like the one that brought you here. They use it to send goods back to Neptune. It may be able to send you home to Mars as well.”

Ch’Or looked at the ragged and ill clothed Tritonians. There were scarcely three sets of clothes among the dozen of them. Certainly, no weapons that could match the beam-shooting crystal tipped staves of the Neptunians. “We will need weapons and supplies.”

Cerwon poked the fire. “They can be acquired. There is a xilland hatchery nearby. The husbands will have what we need. And more men, if we can help them.”

“I can lead the way!” Sortsre chimed in. He beamed proudly at the admiring look Tseri gave him.

“Tomorrow,” said Cerwon, finishing his mushroom wine. “We will need our strength and should be well rested before we walk into the xilland’s den.”

Ch’Or finished his meal with the Tritonians who kept merry spirits and chattered on despite the obvious hardships they faced. When it was time to sleep, Ch’Or was shown to a mattress of broad leaves and grass stalks. Tseri drew him aside when the others had gone either to bed or to set watch.

“To hear how you speak of Ra’Ana,” Tseri began softly. “You must love her terrifically. She is a great beauty, is she not?”

“More lovely than a sunset on Ishtar. More serene than Phobos’ light on the Plains of Siberia. And...” Ch’Or trailed off.

“And?”

“More wild and fierce than a sandstorm raging across Tarsus,” Ch’Or added with a grin.

Tseri’s face contorted with fluctuations of envy and admiration. Ch’Or laughed to see the girl’s flustered pout.

“Perhaps,” she said, turning away and looking up at Neptune above, “I might inspire such sentiments in a man... Good night, Prince Ch’Or. You will find your Ra’Ana, I just know it!”

#### IV

It was planetfall when the band of Neptunians and their Martian captive arrived at Andarvi. Andarvi was a glistening titan of jet shimmering against the star-freckled skies. It looked like a hunched beetle, squat but towering in its size. The sharply angled architecture was wholly unlike the cyclopean construction of Mars’ oldest citadels and palaces, nor did it reflect anything of the later ashlar constructions of the majestic temples and cities; rather it seemed hewn, ground and polished from a single gargantuan mound of inky rock or glass. Or chiton, Ra’Ana thought with a shudder. It was almost beautiful in its malformed and jagged asymmetry.

When the party reached the outer wall, a gate became manifest. To Ra’Ana’s eyes, no entrance had existed moments before, but when the band was within a dozen paces of the wall, there appeared clearly a portal to the other side from whence footmen, porters and guards scrambled to assist the mounted Neptunians.

“Tell Inuon I am to meet him at once!” the leader of the band barked at the guardsmen, who looked at each other puzzled then laughed.



"You do not demand, but request, the Lord Inuon's time," one of the guardsmen said. "Besides, our Lord is meditating and is not to be disturbed until planetrise."

"Oh, he'll want to see me, and he'll have your head if he finds you kept him from seeing this for even a moment." The leader withdrew a long object wrapped in a blanket from the saddle of his sulp. He tore away the fastening cords and pulled the wrapping off to reveal a staff with a large blue crystal set upon its head.

Ra'Ana recognized the staff as Vraala's. Apparently, the guardsman did too—his eyes bugged out, and he sent a Tritonian pageboy to alert his master.

"Well?" the guard gestured urgently. "Go on, then!"

As various servants and slaves attended to the sulps, the leader ushered Ra'Ana forward, pressing his weapon at her back. "Stand aside, stand aside!" he cackled, advancing down a tunnel after the page.

The short tunnel opened into a path leading through a desolate inner courtyard. Each side of the path was flanked with standing stones—four on each side—covered with carvings in a script Ra'Ana did not recognize. What were discernable were the scenes of violence and servitude displayed in primitive relief. Depicted were men in yoke under lash, each overseer similar yet different on each menhir. A featureless male figure stood behind the overseers, arms crossed and shackled at the foot to him who held the whip. Above them was a feminine face with an unreadable expression. Ra'Ana at first thought this woman might have represented Vraala, but the features, limited in detail, did not belong to Neptune's Queen. The eyes, the hair, the lips—the fangs—were all different from she who had banished the Martians to her moon of slaves. Ra'Ana did not get the opportunity to study the images more closely; her captor was in great a hurry to show his prizes.

The page had been well ahead and within, scurrying to alert his master, when the armed doorman again swung open the heavy door to allow Ra'Ana and her captor admittance to a waiting hall. A guard instructed them to sit while waiting for the Magelord Inuon, but the Neptunian insisted on pacing. Ra'Ana, who'd been given water but no food for several days, was in no condition to do more than avoid eye contact with the Neptunian who looked ready to beat her out of sheer anxious excitement.

Ra'Ana instead looked up at the arched black ceilings whose carved arabesques seemed to swim around as though alive in the guttering torchlight. She thought she could see screaming faces in the patterns, but told herself it was surely just the smoke from the flames playing tricks on her tired mind.

Down the stairs at the end of the hall strode a gray Tritonian man dressed in black plates that shimmered green and purple; he looked like a giant insect, but he had a dignified hawkish face and spoke in a soft and even tone. "This had better be as important as the boy made it sound, Thelban." Inuon!

"Your Lordship..." the Neptunian addressed as Thelban stopped his pacing and bowed, dropping the staff on the checkered floor as he did.

"Tut-tut," Inuon gestured for the man to rise. "If you have what you say you have, just show it to me."

Thelban pulled out a fistful of sapphires strung by gold wire and chain that he unwrapped into the gem-webbed carcanet that had once rested upon the naked bosom of Neptune's Queen. These Inuon placed in a large pouch at his waist with little regard.

"The staff, man, give me the staff! I can see it right there."

Thelban reached down clumsily to pick the staff up and place it in Inuon's waiting hand.

"Ah, what Her Majesty would do to have this back..." Inuon licked his lips salaciously as he caressed the jeweled staff. "Do you have any idea what this means? No, of course you don't. Is this her? The Martian? Where is the other one?"

"We were attacked by a wild xilland, Lord," Thelban stammered. "The Prince fled, but surely he—"

Inuon smashed the crystal head of the staff across Thelban's jaw. The blow sent him reeling.

“Get up,” Inuon commanded. His voice remained unchanged, but his eyes were ablaze. “Vraala wanted them both alive that she might bear witness to and revel in their deaths. Shall I have you take the Prince’s place in whatever our Queen has planned for them?”

“No, my Lord.” The Neptunian trembled as he spoke.

“Then find him!” Inuon shouted. Thelban scrambled from the hall. Inuon turned to Ra’Ana who’d been watching the two men in a daze, half-hypnotized by the swirling colors of the Magelord’s armor. “It would appear that someone has knocked a few petals from your bloom. Pity.”

Ra’Ana moved to run. Inuon slammed the butt of the staff onto the floor. A wave of white light danced across the checkered tiles. Ra’Ana dropped, unable to move. The last energy she’d used to keep herself conscious after days of hunger and travel finally left her.

## V

Kibu bustled with the activities of slavery. Tritonians chipped away at stones, their hands and feet bare and bleeding, as Neptunian overseers shouted, whipped and directed slaves with hand carts filled with broken rock. One slave looked too long at a small red crystal he had discovered following the swing of his hammer; he was quickly beaten with rods and dragged moaning from his place.

“This is Kibu,” Sortsre announced to Ch’Or and the small band of free Tritonians looking down upon the busy quarry from their vantage, “where I had been a slave of the Magelords.”

“How was it you escaped?”

“With Telsho’s help.”

Telsho nodded the acknowledgement. “There are few patrols at night, as there are few free on Triton.” After some murmured agreement, Telsho added, “Most guards watch over the longhouses where the slaves sleep.”

“Then we must wait for nightfall?” Ch’Or asked.

“Yes,” Telsho answered. “Some slaves are kept working through the night as punishment. It was thus that I found and rescued Sortsre.”

“There,” Sortsre pointed to a squat brick building at the far right side of the camp. “That is where the slavers keep their cache of weapons. Freeing one slave is no small feat, and if we hope to free many this night, we will need more than our bows and knives.”

“If that is our target,” Ch’Or protested, “then why did we approach Kibu from the opposite side?”

“Why do you think Cerwon is not with us?” Telsho grinned and clasped Ch’Or’s shoulder. He extended his arm and made an arc with the tip of his blade in the direction of the bunker. “He has gone far east around Kibu. He will appear there. We kill the slavers patrolling here and here with sling and bow until the alarm is rung. Then—” Telsho motioned with his knife across his throat, “Cerwon will strike!”

“The guards will not pursue us far,” said Sortsre. “When Cerwon hits the armory, they will likely return and not give chase. Cerwon will free any he can, but without the weapons we can free no one.”

Ch’Or was troubled. “What is my part in this diversion? Could you not have effected this plan without me? I might have been better able to help Cerwon in attacking the armory.”

“I said the guard would *likely* not pursue. However, you are an off-worlder who was being brought to Andarvi by special behest of the Magelord Inuon.”

“I am to be bait, then.” Ch’Or frowned.

“In a trap that will lead to the fall of the Magelords, gods willing!” Sortsre looked at Ch’Or with such hope that the Martian edgeman could not help but give the Tritonians an affirming smile. He would do this thing. For Ra’Ana his love and these Tritonians, both who needed him, he would bring his blade to bear and take a stroke against blue Neptune and her minions.

A low-toned bell rang out as night began to fall. Movement near one of the chat ponds caught Ch'Or's attention.

"What is that?" Ch'Or asked, straining to look at the ripples on the disturbed surface of oily black water from which emerged an almost human form.

"The evening bell," answered Telsho, whose attention was on the overseers who'd begun wrangling the slave miners. "The workers will be returned to their pens in the longhouses."

"Not the bell, that!" Ch'Or thrust his finger in the direction of the murky pool and the figure that had crawled from it on all fours.

The Tritonians looked to where Ch'Or had pointed. The thing rose erect, taller than any man, on the bank of the pond. It was naked and inky black with long, spindly limbs. It pulled something behind it from the water.

"The Spinnari..." Sortsre murmured. "I told you they were real!"

"I'd not believe it if I did not see it with my own eyes!" Telsho exclaimed.

The other Tritonians chattered in hushed whispers about ill omens, making what Ch'Or guessed were signs to ward off evil.

"Hush!" Telsho rebuked his fellows. "Cerwon and the Martian are both counting on us."

"See how he carries his brother's bones in the silk he himself has spun!" Sortsre's eyes were wide. The creature did lift a white mesh sack over its shoulder as it skulked about the water's edge. It seemed to wait for something.

"I have slain monsters more foul than this thin-man," Ch'Or told the Tritonians. "Fear it not. If it troubles us, I will handle it, but it has not noticed us."

"I pray it does not!" Sortsre hissed, watching the strange being closely.

The thing Sortsre had called Spinnari began scaling one of the rock faces that slaves had been working shortly before. Halfway up, it threw its burden over the lip of the escarpment. The wiry humanoid drew itself up by the white cord that Ch'Or noticed tethered the netted bundle to the creature at the base of its spine.

"It departs," Sortsre sighed his relief, "taking its sorceries elsewhere."

Telsho redirected the warriors' attention to the matter at hand. The patrolling guards languidly paced along their routes. The hiding Tritonians could not make out the conversations between the sauntering pairs of slavers at this distance but it was clear they were worse than lax in their vigilance. Though the work camp had a few sulps, these were staked or stabled. "If they think to take mounts, the blue devils will run us down," Telsho noted. "We will need to kill or maim their sulps so they cannot overtake us as we flee."

"I will handle them." Ch'Or lifted his spear and made a motion to get ready. "Telsho, take your skirmishers and get into position. Once the guards' attention is drawn, I will go for their mounts. Kill swift and silent when you can, for hell will break loose the moment alarum is raised."

Telsho nodded. "Lanti, Tisga: you two accompany Ch'Or. See that he makes it to the stables safely."

The Tritonians, upon the signal Telsho gave, quietly descended the scree of the slope upon the routes of the patrols, one group led by the Tritonian, another following the Martian. Keeping to the shadows, Ch'Or and the two Tritonians with him made for the stables where the three-legged mounts were kept. While Ch'Or skulked on toward the corner of the nearest structure, well out of sight of the next patrol, Telsho and those with him readied their bows, training their sights on the Neptunians who were now several paces off and moving away. The arrows flew, striking the slaver guards.

The free Tritonians scrambled for cover as gurgled half-screams of the dying guards reached the ears of the next patrol. A few of the arrows had missed their mark, and the wounds they had caused had not

been mortal. These injured shouted in pain, urging their fellows to hasten to their aid as they clutched stricken limbs. The upcoming patrol rushed to investigate what had befallen their comrades, failing to notice the hiding Ch'Or, Lanti, and Tisga.

The Tritonians fired another volley from cover and fell back, each going off separately then firing again to better mask their numbers and positions.

The Neptunians called out to one another, and one blew a note on a horn. They shot wildly at the shadows with their crystal-tipped staves. Though the return volley missed, the beams lit up the hillside, illuminating the scattered Tritonians.

Ch'Or motioned to Lanti and Tisga and sprinted for the structures Telsho had pointed out as the stable. The sounds of alarum echoed between buildings of the camp, and guards came scrambling toward where the skirmishers had launched their first foray. Ch'Or watched closely that none would cross his path, he and his companions keeping their backs pressed alongside buildings where they could. He resisted the urge to strike down a Neptunian who passed closely—he could not afford to become caught up in fighting.

Ch'Or soon reached the stable, a building whose purpose was made immediately obvious by its smell. The stable hands, had there been any, must have left to investigate the commotion the others were causing, for Ch'Or and the others found the building unguarded. Within were twelve stalls, each containing one of the surly animals the Neptunians used as mounts on Triton. One of the tripod green camelids sneered and spat at Tisga, sending the young Tritonian leaping with a hushed yelp into the hooked rack where bridles hung from the wall.

Ch'Or scratched his chin thoughtfully. "It would be a senseless waste to merely slaughter all of these beasts. Do either of you know how to tack these creatures? Tisga?"

"No, sir. Not I."

"I do," Lanti volunteered. "I was a stable boy at another camp before I escaped."

"How long would it take to make one of these things ready?"

"I could bridle one in a minute," Lanti said; then, after thinking for a moment, he added, "Five minutes, if you required a saddle, which I expect you might."

Ch'Or nodded. "Ready one with a saddle for me and whatever you and Tisga would require to ride. When our work here is done, ride to the rendezvous with Telsho and Cerwon."

Lanti grabbed a saddle and blanket from a post upon which several rested. "I warn you, sulps are unpleasant creatures with foul dispositions."

"Surely no worse than a xilland," the Martian laughed.

Ch'Or and Tisga set about the grim work of slaughtering the other sulps as Lanti readied the three they would flee upon. The Martian prince felt pity for the brutes that spat and struggled as their throats were slit. Though he knew no more humane way, the grunting, groaning death gurgles of the creatures which thrashed about, jumping and kicking the walls of their stalls, made the business all the more unpleasant. Ch'Or hoped that the noises within would be ignored for the noises without—for they were many, loud and dreadful—and muttered a prayer to the gods of Mars that Cerwon fared well in his efforts with the armory.

Fortune must have heard Ch'Or's words and decided to spite him. A dimly burning lamp that hung upon the stable wall fell from the kick of frightened beast, and it burst into flames, quickly igniting the straw-dust littering the floor.

"Damnation! There goes the element of surprise," the Martian spat.

"The slavers will be surprised their stable is on fire, I suppose," Lanti remarked as he hastily finished cinching a saddle belt.

Half of the building was already engulfed; there was time neither to free nor humanely dispose of the remaining sulps. In moments, the Martian and the two Tritonians would be consumed as well, if they did not hurry.

Ch'Or pulled off a splintered hunk of a stall plank that one of the sulps had kicked and swung it like a cudgel, testing its weight.

"Open the doors, Lanti," the Martian ordered as he mounted the saddled beast. Though it was agitated by the noise of the growing inferno and the smell of blood and burning flesh, Ch'Or held firm the reins and brought the creature under his control. "I will ride out first; once you're clear of the building, follow behind me at a ten count. Lanti, keep an eye on Tisga."

"You think I'm any better a rider than him?" Lanti laughed wryly. "I only cared for the beasts, I never rode one!"

"We will take extra care, Martian," Tisga said, grabbing his mount's reins tightly, "and see you at the mushroom grove!"

And now it was Ch'Or's time to play bait—a mounted Martian would surely make a bigger ruckus than one on foot, and perhaps this way he might afford more time for Cerwon to retrieve the weapons and the fighting men with Telsho and Sortsre to escape. With flames from the burning stable whipping about him, Ch'Or spurred the creature on and out of the gate.

## VI

The fighting outside had intensified. There had been many more armed Neptunians present at the camp than the Tritonians had foreseen. They had Telsho's men pinned down, the light flashes from their crystal rods illuminating the night in rapid pulses. In the chaos, desperate slaves had seized the opportunity afforded them; those who could had strangled captors with the very chains that bound them and now poured forth from the longhouses to join the fray. Many of these were slaughtered as Kibu's guards turned their weapons on the unarmed escapees. This, however, bought Telsho's skirmishers another volley against their distracted foes and gave Ch'Or opportunity to make his presence felt upon the battlefield.

Ch'Or took up slack on the reins, pressing up against the sulp's neck, reducing his profile to make himself as small a target as possible, and gave his mount a firm kick to the ribs. The sulp barreled forward towards the fighting, bobbing up and down violently with each leaping step.

"For Mars!" Ch'Or cried as he brought his cudgel against the head of an unsuspecting Neptunian, caving it in with a sickening crunch.

"For Triton!" a cry resounded from the rocks above. A young woman's voice. It was quickly echoed by many more as stones and arrows flew. Ch'Or could spare it no further thought as he swung time and again with his crude makeshift weapon, delivering both solid and glancing blows. Nearly a score of the slavers fell to the Martian's swings or were trampled beneath his sulp's powerful forelegs. Still, there were many more Neptunians who remained and turned their attentions on the Martian warrior.

From the corner of his vision, Ch'Or saw Tisga and Lanti upon their own sulps; they rode through the loose formation of slavers before driving their steeds toward the slopes. Some of the slingers with Telsho raised a cheer when their companions returned to their ranks, chucking stones at those Neptunians who had been thrown off balance by the two loping sulps. Half of the remaining Tritonians pulled back as others covered their retreat, then those cast stones, spears and arrows to cover their brethren.

During this staggered withdrawal, Ch'Or continued to wreak what havoc he could on the Neptunians, but the sulp proved much more temperamental and difficult to guide than he imagined. Ch'Or was unable to turn it to double back toward either his foes or the slope up which his allies were retreating—indeed, the creature seemed hell-bent on running straight for the edge of one of the escarpments which dropped off to the chat ponds. Ch'Or looked down to see that his mount was wounded—several bolts from the Neptunians' weapons had seared its legs and flanks. Only momentum and blinding pain kept it

in motion. A Neptunian pointed his weapon at Ch'Or as he tried to turn the beast before it reached the rim of the mining pit. Just as a violet ray issued forth, Ch'Or threw his leg over the beast and attempted to roll. His maneuver was too late, and his forward momentum carried him over the brink, the dying sulp springing past him. Though Ch'Or managed to tuck his limbs in, the drop was sharper than it had appeared. He distinctly felt the first three impacts as he bounced and slid down the scree; he did not feel the wet as he broke the still surface of the pond at the bottom.

Stripped of all but her dignity, Ra'Ana rested as best she could in the oubliette beneath Andarvi. Her stomach knotted with hunger, and her mouth was parched. Inuon's guards occasionally lowered a single cup of water and a small hunk of bread on what she imagined was a daily basis. The Martian princess had yielded no pleasure to Inuon, though the Magelord had not aggressively sought it. The grim sorcerer's overtures had been half-hearted, as if merely going through the motions; he had been more interested in the whereabouts of Ch'Or and any native Tritonians they might have encountered than in further humiliating her. He might have even been described as preoccupied. His brooding concerns gave Ra'Ana hope that the crown prince of Mars still lived. Exasperated at both Ra'Ana's unwillingness and inability to tell him what he wanted to know, Inuon had her thrown into the filthy hole beneath his dungeons.

A symphony of groans, wails and the general misery of captive suffering had resounded in the upper tunnels Ra'Ana had been taken down. Blue Neptunians and gray Tritonians languished naked, indistinguishably faded to a sickly white, shut up in vaults and behind heavy bars. Many appeared blind, their eyes milky and clouded, as the prison guards' torches—the only light perhaps they ever chanced to see—had shown upon them in the gloom whilst Ra'Ana was taken further and further down. She did not regret the taunts she had directed at her captors before they had fitted the thick copper grate in place to seal her in the oubliette, but now began to doubt she might make good on them.

Ra'Ana closed her eyes and tried to filter out the stench with her mind. She found she could not help but listen to the sounds of the dungeon around her. Even down here, the moans of disquietude could be faintly heard as a hum behind the dripping of water somewhere beyond her reach. Added to the symphony of despair was the sound of footsteps approaching. She opened her eyes cautiously and knew the dim torchlight of the gaolers above. Ra'Ana heard two distinct voices, bawdy and laughing, approaching with the growing illumination.

A pair of Neptunians appeared just beyond the grate.

"There she is," one gaolor cackled in a gravelly voice. "A lovely queen, I hear!"

"Yeah, I saw them put her down here," the other chortled lewdly, "though her time in the pit has likely done her no favors. A waste, if you ask me!"

"Your feast has arrived, majesty!" the first Neptunian taunted as he knelt down and smeared a small loaf of bread through the grating, raining crumbs down upon Ra'Ana.

"Here!" the other laughed as he poured an acrid liquid down upon her. "Something to wash it down with!"

The water was foul and metallic, and the bread (what she could catch) was gritty and stale—unpalatable but necessary if she was to live in hope that Ch'Or would liberate her. Though she had not been down there long in the oubliette, the isolation had overpowered her, clouded her thoughts, made her imagine things.

Several minutes after both gaolers had left, taking their light with them, Ra'Ana swore she still saw a figure looking down at her, motionless, from the other side of the metal grate. But without the torchlight, what cast the strange silhouette in the gloom? Did her eyes deceive her that there was a faint grey light above her so that she could still see the trace outline of the pit's maw and the uneven stone that entombed her?

The painful grinding sound of metal against stone echoed down the walls of her prison. Something had moved aside the grate! With only slightly more clarity, Ra'Ana thought she saw a face or head

looking down at her, haloed by the faintest haze, a subterranean gloaming.

This tableau held for a moment, the alien figure looming above and Ra'Ana crouched at the bottom of the hole. Then, with a slow deliberateness that reminded Ra'Ana of a spider, the thing above her moved through the open grate. Ra'Ana was frozen in fear—the thing resembled a crawling man, putting one hand in front of the other, as it descended down the shaft head-first toward her.

The clicking noise its limbs made as they articulated ceased as it paused just above her. Ra'Ana could make out no detail of the thing's face though it was mere feet away from her own. It extended a hand toward her, bearing something rounded and weighty—a large bag or pouch.

“Take,” it said in a voice not remotely human. Ra'Ana cautiously raised her hands to seize the proffered object. It was heavy, and she felt its contents slosh as the monstrous being released its grip. “Water to keep you alive.”

Ra'Ana uncorked the stopper and sniffed its contents. Detecting no untoward odors, she took a sip—then a gulp. It was clean, potable water. She resealed the flask and gave a nod of gratitude.

“Who are you?” she asked, betraying none of the apprehension she felt for the crawling hominid who clung head-down above her by but three limbs.

“A messenger,” the creature clicked. “Nothing more.”

Ra'Ana swallowed hard and lifted her chin, assuming her regal poise she'd had little use for in recent days. “Then deliver your message to me.”

“Stay alive,” it replied. “The Prince of Mars lives still, and you shall see him soon. The Magelord Inuon did not send you down here to die but to keep you out of the way as he makes his plans. He has sent writ to convene the council in Ruach—there he will make his play, presenting you and the fetters of the Queen to the council where he will demand their fealty. Inuon does not know his servant is dead and all others conspire against him and their fellow Lords.”

“Servant?”

“Yes, like myself.”

Ra'Ana's apprehension grew. “You are a Magelord's servant?”

“Each of my brothers is bound to a lord—we may not betray him, and he may set us against one another. But as our fellows died, we learned that we could act so long as we do not act against the command of our own—or Mother. Triton's Queen shall reclaim her.”

“Mother?” Ra'Ana tried to imagine what could have spawned this thing which seemed to be both fuzzy and chitinous, humanoid and arthropoid, black as iron even in the strange glow it carried behind it. And “Triton's Queen?” Surely it could not mean the cerulean witch Vraala.

“I can reveal no more, mortal, my message delivered. Stay alive, and you shall see your prince triumphant.” Holding onto the walls now with only its legs, it reached its other arm to the base of its back. When it moved again, it held the source of the strange dim illumination—a small sliver of white crystal that lit the creature's face to reveal no humanoid features but mandibles and eight large red eyes. Though she had faced her share of horrors, here alone in the darkness of Inuon's pit, Ra'Ana could not suppress a shudder. “This shall help keep you from madness. None but Inuon himself would dare take it from you, and it will no longer burn so fiercely when you are retrieved. By it you shall count down the hours till your salvation. Here—” It dropped the crystal into the hand of Ra'Ana, who cupped it that she might see her benefactor's awful face no more. “I've a little food which will keep you alive until the appointed time.”

A satchel lowered, attached to some sort of rope that was sticky to the touch. There was a snap as the cord was severed. The creature quickly turned and skittered back up the walls of the oubliette—its disappearance was followed by the heartbreaking sound of the grate being replaced above Ra'Ana.

Ra'Ana uncovered the crystal in her hands. She was alone again in the pit far below the black-tiled mosaics of Inuon's halls. For the first time since she had fallen into the hands of the Magelord, Ra'Ana

wept. They were tears of joy—Ch'Or was alive!

## VII

Ch'Or opened his eyes to a lovely face and the sweet sound of a woman singing. The song was not that of the girl who stood over him. The worry on that girl's face melted into relief. It was Tseri.

"You're awake," the Tritonian knelt close beside him. "Thank the stars!"

Ch'Or felt hard stone at his back and saw Tseri, not by illumination that came from Neptune or the stars but strange fungi and glowing crystals dotting the walls of a cavern chamber. The air was cool, damp yet crisp with the faintly electric scent of sorceries.

"Tseri, what are you—what are we doing here?"

"I followed you and the others to Kibu," the Tritonian lass blushed, her cheeks like tarnished silver, as she looked down, not meeting Ch'Or's eyes. "I wanted to help..."

Ch'Or glanced over and saw the girl's bow and a bone long-knife resting against the cave wall beside her, and he smiled.

"I saw you ride through the slavers, cutting them down as a farmer does his stalks, but you fell—I tried to reach you, but one of the Spinnari snatched up the both of us, and we've been down here with her ever since."

"Her?" Ch'Or was still woozy from the blows to the head he'd suffered in his fall. In his moment speaking with Tseri, he had all but forgotten the eerie song which filled the cavern around them. Despite Tseri's protests, Ch'Or struggled to rise to his feet. On the other side of the chamber, a woman worked studiously at a wheel beside a loom with a half-finished tapestry upon it. She was spinning thread and singing to herself a song that threatened to bring tears to the Martian warrior's eyes, though he understood not the words she sang. The woman herself was dressed in effervescent whites that shone and glittered like the sea foam of the sunward world. Her eyes and lips spoke of summers gone and dreams half-remembered, of loves who never set foot in the sad realm of wakefulness but whose kisses linger in the moments at sleep's end. Her hair fell in black waterfalls of wild curls over her shoulders as she worked her wheel, adding promises of warmth and comfort to what caresses she might offer with those liquid arms they spilled upon. Without realizing it, Ch'Or had walked a dozen paces halfway across the cavern to this siren of the grotto.

Ch'Or's wits had not completely abandoned him when the woman at the wheel turned her gaze upon him.

"My lady," he addressed the elfin beauty. "You have my gratitude for my life, and that of the girl, but the scent of sorcery is overpowering. Dispel a bit of this glamour that surrounds us so that I, Ch'Or, Prince of Mars, may thank you in earnest."

The woman at the wheel smiled sweetly. Even as she spoke in reply, the strange and lovely song she wove did not cease. "You speak bluntly and bravely for one with some understanding of what stands before him, Prince."

"I've recent reason to suspect the hospitality of sorcerous women," Ch'Or replied with a bow and a smirk. "I merely thought it best we be frank with one another."

The lady smiled, though her eyebrows betrayed signs of both contempt and admiration. "Then let there be no secrets between us, Martian."

The mysterious woman stood from her wheel and, with one fluid movement, shed her garment. Naked, she took a step forward toward Ch'Or.

The Martian tried to step back but found he could not. Looking at his feet, Ch'Or saw that he was fixed to the ground by a sticky white substance.



As the woman approached, a sly smirk upon her lips, Ch'Or saw her legs melt away. She seemed to grow taller even as her thighs vanished in a shadow that had risen from her toes and settled just below her navel. The face, arms and torso that would be the envy of woman and desire of man appeared to hover and float above Ch'Or. That lovely form was affixed, Ch'Or saw, to a great black orb from which six long, segmented legs extended. The wheel was gone, and Ch'Or heard Tseri gasp behind him.

"I had thought to spare you the sight of this form," the half woman thing crooned, "but I happily share your value on being honest with one another."

"And that is why you trapped me to your floor?"

The creature laughed sincerely, with no hint of malice. "Were you not free, mere moments ago, before you thought to get a better look at me? Allow me." The woman-thing looped her human arms beneath Ch'Or's and, pulling him to her breast, lifted him from the ground. His boots broke free of the white substance, and she set him gently down beside the trembling Tseri.

"My apologies," the creature addressed the Tritonian waif who pressed herself behind Ch'Or. "I'd not suffer you see me thus, if not for our friend's boorish insistence."

"I was startled is all," Tseri protested.

"I am Zindaya, Mother of those you call Spinnari," the half-woman creature gestured to a nearby shadowy recess; one of the coal black humanoids like those Ch'Or had seen by the chat-pond at Kibu, squatted, quietly rocking to the rhythm of the song Zindaya no longer sang. "In the ages before the blue folk of the winter-orb set foot on Triton, I was queen, and my children ruled the grey people of the marshes."

Zindaya turned her large arachnoid body to the loom. Unlike the spinning wheel, the loom and the half-finished tapestry were not an illusion, but the shimmering silver weave rippled with powerful magic, looking more like a surface of mercury than any fabric. As Zindaya spoke, shadowy forms appeared and danced upon the surface of the tapestry, exploding into colors and depicting the strange landscapes of Triton and beings upon it.

"A foolish boon was struck when a sorceress from the winter orb was given a gift from a chieftain of the greys. She found means to augment her magicks with the resonant powers of the sacred stones of Triton. Having mastered their powers, she hungered for more. She gathered about her eight shaman chiefs of the greyfolk, promising them great riches beyond the dreams of any Tritonian. They would plunder and despoil Triton for her, ruling as her autocrats, and she would imbue them with magic stronger than any mere shaman had ever possessed.

"With her aid, they wove an enchantment of binding upon my children and me that even I was unable to guard against."

The tapestry showed, with the dancing of Zindaya's finger, eight grey men gathered in a circle, each holding a variously colored shard of crystal. Among them, with arms upraised, was the familiar figure of an almost naked woman with silver hair and deep cerulean skin—Vraala, Queen of Neptune!

"The spell thus bound one of my children to each of them and saves them from harm at my hands," Zindaya continued, her words dripping with anger. "I myself cannot act against the Magelords of Ruach, but you, Martian, can be the instrument of my vengeance."

"And how am I to be your pawn in this?" Ch'Or inquired with a bow and a wry smirk.

"With gratitude and humility, Prince, for Ra'Ana lives, and I shall deliver her to you, just as I shall deliver the Magelords' armies to those you fought alongside."

Ch'Or's demeanor of grim cynicism melted into shock and rekindled hope.

"I have seen to it that she will survive the torment Inuon had in store for her, but it is up to you to pry her from his hands." Zindaya brushed the tapestry with her fingertips. Colored splotches swam and formed the shape of a red woman, naked and clutching a glowing crystal to her breast, at the bottom of a stone pit.

“Ra’Ana!” Ch’Or cried out, nearly stepping again into the sticky webbing on the rock before him. “What must I do? Your enemy is mine.”

“Even now, Triton marches to victory against the Magelords. You, Ch’Or of Mars, must stop Inuon from contacting Neptune’s Queen. I cannot clearly see his plans, though he intends to declare himself archimagus of the council. Perhaps he will petition the favor of Vraala, or with her trappings, he will betray her and declare himself ruler of Triton and Neptune. Whatever his scheme, he must not activate the light bridge, or Vraala’s dragons might make short work of your friends.”

Ch’Or remembered how Vraala had commanded the ice wyvern with her staff and shuddered to think of Inuon using it to call forth beasts to use against his Tritonian allies.

Again the tapestry changed—it showed the spiral of light, the means by which he and Ra’Ana had been first brought to Neptune then sent to Triton.

“You wish to go home,” Zindaya gently caressed the face of the Martian prince, stroking his ragged beard with a soft, long-nailed hand. As she leaned in, Ch’Or glimpsed the needle-like fangs hidden behind her pouting lips. “Do this for me, and I shall give you all you wish.”

“Do what?” Ch’Or asked breathlessly, the spider queen’s face mere inches from his own. Beautiful though she was, her words stank of blood.

“Kill the Magelord Inuon.” The spider-woman’s voice in Ch’Or’s ear made him shiver uncomfortably.

“How?” Ch’Or had lost his weapons and would not dream of taking Tseri’s and leaving her without. “I’ve no weapon, and surely the council boasts powerful magicks.”

Zindaya stretched high upon her six arthropoidal limbs. Her slender hand grasped one of the many crystals which illuminated the chamber. The crystal came loose with ease, and the spider-woman withdrew a narrow quartzite rod nearly two feet in length. This she kissed, and it shone more brilliantly than before, and she held it out to the Martian.

“An unconventional weapon,” Zindaya remarked, “but an effective one, you’ll find.”

The monstrous beauty placed the radiant crystal in Ch’Or’s hand. It pulsed at his touch, and he felt it alternate between a neutral and a warm state that made the hairs on his arm stand on end. It felt light, yet solid, firm and balanced in his grip. Yes, he could kill with this.

“The hour grows short,” Zindaya said as the imagery vanished from the tapestry. “I shall open the way for you to Amarum, where the council of Magelords meets.”

The spider queen pulled the loom aside to reveal a round, black tunnel, flecked with white light, leading from the chamber.

“The way is dangerous,” she warned, “but it is the only way you will reach the castle at the same time as your friends. You must not tarry on the path.”

Tseri slung her bow over her shoulder and tucked her knife into her skirt. The Tritonian girl’s eyes shone wet in the light of the crystal Ch’Or held. “I’m ready, Ch’Or.”

Traverse this tunnel, defeat the Magelords, save Ra’Ana, and return to Mars. The High Kingship would be waiting for him when he and his future queen returned. What of these folk? The Martian swore to himself he would not leave the Tritonians in the thrall of Neptune. Or the Spinnari, should enthrallment be their aim.

“I’m sure Sortsre and the others will be waiting for us when we reach Amarum,” said Tseri, putting a hand on Ch’Or’s arm. He could only smile and nod at the girl.

“We shall take our leave, then, Queen Zindaya,” Ch’Or saluted the great and terrible beauty who returned the gesture with a kiss on the Martian’s mouth.

“I know what you have done and would do for love,” Zindaya whispered, “and it is for love that I brought you to me. Not for you, Prince, but my children. Go now with my blessing upon your lips and

speaking death to the Magelords of Ruach.”

With that, Ch’Or turned and entered the strange tunnel, the trembling Tritonian girl close behind him.

## VIII

The tunnel stretched on from the chamber where the spider queen had spoken to the Martian and the Tritonian. The passage grew wider and wider as they continued down it. Ahead was only more of the white-flecked darkness.

The pair carefully stepped through the tiny forest of glowing crystals and luminous fungus, Ch’Or holding the white, gleaming spike aloft. The walls and ceiling receded further and further until the light of the crystal bar could no longer illuminate them.

“Look!” Tseri shouted, pointing down at their feet. There was nothing below them except for twinkling points of light. There were thousands of them, and they appeared as far away as those on the walls and ceiling. They were not stones or mushroom caps, but distant stars!

“Stay close to me!” the Martian commanded, though the Tritonian had ever been at Ch’Or’s elbow.

The spacious expanse was disorienting, and Tseri lamented they would surely lose their way.

“No, look,” Ch’Or pointed ahead with the fluorescent rod at a particular group of stars ahead of them. “If we travel straight ahead toward that constellation, we should reach our destination and not lose our bearings.”

Ch’Or explained his reasoning, that Zindaya would have sent them by the straightest path, ere she sent them by void, which must have been similar to the corkscrew of light Vraala used to transport treasures from and exiles to the moon Triton.

Tseri was disconsolate, however, for she had never ridden the light between worlds and was seized by vertigo.

“It was a mistake for me to come,” she cried. “Leave me; at least you should be reunited with your kind.”

Ch’Or tore a strip of xilland leather from his breeches to make a blindfold for the girl. He placed it over her head and held her close until she stopped shaking.

“I would not leave you in this place. Take my hand; I will lead you, and I will not let you get lost.”

The Tritonian girl nodded.

Taking the girl’s small, warm hand in his left and holding the crystal aloft in his right, Ch’Or proceeded onward through the starry expanse.

They pressed on for hours. In the direction of the constellation Ch’Or had pointed out, the Martian Prince noticed something strange: some clusters of stars seemed to flicker as though they were extinguished then rekindled in waves—or things were passing in front of them.

“Is something wrong?” Tseri had noticed Ch’Or’s unease and squeezed his hand tighter.

“I may need to let go of your hand, but until I do—Run!”

Ch’Or fixed his grip upon the girl’s wrist, and though he did not hold much back, the Tritonian kept pace behind him. When he stole a look, Ch’Or could make out blob-like shapes against the stars behind them. He could not, however, judge how large they were or how close. The light of his weapon did not reflect off them but bent around them. It was as if they were holes. Absence.

When their pursuers were as large as men and seemed within arm’s reach of the Tritonian, Ch’Or wheeled about, swinging the brilliant rod at the nearest mass. The Martian felt no impact as his weapon passed through the black thing. Despite this, the blow appeared to have had an effect—the shadow reeled and looked as though some of its substance, if it could be called such, had been torn away.

Ch'Or felt Tseri's hand yank out of his grasp. He looked, fearful that a shadow had seized her, to see the girl removing her blind.

"I'll be okay!" she assured him, unslinging her bow.

With both hands upon his weapon, Ch'Or chopped at the shadows with the crystal. The air around them felt deadly cold. A numbness coursed through his arm as one of the entities grazed against him.

"Don't let them touch you!" Ch'Or shouted, swinging wildly. He heard the whizzing of a few arrows; the Tritonian had let fly a few missiles at their attackers. The arrows, however, passed harmlessly through their targets.

While the arrows had no effect, the weapon Zindaya had gifted Ch'Or was taking its toll on the entities. It glowed ever brighter with each swing, and the shadow-holes recoiled from the circle of light that had surrounded the Martian and his Tritonian ward.

Ch'Or's left arm was no longer numb but tingling sharply. He let it fall to his side, as it had slowed his swings. The fighting man had lost none of his ferocity, though, and while his foes seemed without number, he could see none that had yet to feel the sting of his weapon and be left ragged and tattered by it.

The things that did not recede into the distant stars gave the couple a wide berth. Ch'Or and Tseri, who swore she no longer needed the blind, eventually felt safe enough to take a moment to regain their bearings and resumed their journey. For a while, the amorphous things followed at a distance, and Ch'Or remained ever watchful, with Tseri's help, for other threats. There were none. Eventually, even the ragged shadows that followed them departed, and the two were left alone on their sojourn through the void.

## IX

Hunger had just begun to set in when the journey ended, and the Martian warrior and the Tritonian waif found themselves in the lower halls of the castle Zindaya had called Amarum. It had happened abruptly—the central star in the constellation Ch'Or had steered them toward had enlarged rapidly and became a round portal large enough to step through. The hole had closed—vanished, rather—behind them when they were both through. They quickly supped on bread Zindaya had provided Tseri when they were certain no one would pass by their way.

They could hear some sort of commotion in the halls above and occasionally saw rushing squads of heavily armed and armored men marching by cross tunnels and raising general alarm. Though he could scarce believe it, Ch'Or overheard from one group that the castle was under siege, by mounted killard riders, no less! Whatever was happening, the men-at-arms seemed just on the verge of panic.

Ch'Or carefully hid the light of his weapon and stayed out of sight until he was sure they would not be followed up the stairs to the ground levels of Amarum.

The slowly curving spiral stair Ch'Or had found led to a vast circular hall with polished black pilastered arches every dozen paces. The shadowy recesses created by the pilasters afforded the pair opportunities to evade both a pacing guard patrol and a squadron whose sergeant shouted that more men were needed at the southwest gates.

The pair wended about the hall until they came upon two guards standing on either side of a double-door. They waited until the patrolling guards were a few moments out of sight behind the bend. Ch'Or signaled to Tseri. The Tritonian girl let an arrow fly, striking the further guard, while the Martian rushed the nearer, bludgeoning him with the crystal until he ceased to move. The die had been cast, and the future of Triton, Ch'Or's life—and Ra'Ana's—would hinge upon the next few moments. The Prince of Mars threw open the doors and entered the chamber.

"To imagine that the vile marsh rabble would dare attack us while the Council met!" a corpulent Tritonian slammed his fist on the table. "Unthinkable!"

“What is unthinkable,” lisped a thin-lipped fellow in an ostentatious tunic, “is that Inuon would call the Council to convene at all, unless he had some infernal machination planned. Come, Inuon, let us see this charade through that we may get back to the important business of quashing this rebellion.”

“Peace, Zelafor,” the beetle-armored Magelord curled his lip in what might almost be mistaken for a smile. “You know I would not invoke the ancient rite of the meet unless I had very good reasons.”

“I don’t suppose that reason has anything to do with why there are only seven of us here today,” the fattest of the Magelords charged, pointing a sausage finger at Inuon.

“Ostronoth? Hardly.” Inuon changed neither tone nor expression. “Despite your insinuations, Bertor, our colleague’s untimely and unfortunate passing at the hands of *someone’s* Spinnari is not why I have summoned you to Ruach.”

The Magelords shifted uncomfortably at the council table at the mentions of the spider-like monster-men, one of which each Magelord called both slave and minion. Though none were permitted in the meeting chamber, all had brought their Spinnari with them to Amarum.

Inuon had made quite the show, and despite his deadpan delivery and the troubling chaos beyond the walls, many of the Magelords were utterly rapt and could hardly wait for their fellow to unveil the large object he’d had brought in behind him. The fat man called Bertor, however, had done with waiting for Inuon to speak his piece and now rose from his seat, having to be restrained by two of his fellows.

“The troubles we now face and those which have afflicted our Mistress would seem to share a common origin,” Inuon stated matter-of-factly, motioning for Thelban, the slaver, and his companions to move the veiled object forward. It was, by a few heads, taller than the Magelord and covered in a black, velvety cloth. “I believe I have found the solution to our problem.”

Thelban removed the black cloth at Inuon’s signal. Gagged and bound to a cross-post and wearing naught but a carcanet of sapphires was the Princess of Mars!

The members of that assembly of notables let out a gasp.

“Not only have I she who humiliated Neptune’s ruler—” Inuon sneered at the word, then retrieved something from behind Ra’Ana. “I find myself in possession of the master key.”

Inuon held aloft Vraala’s staff. “Every collared beast on either world is mine to command. Did you not wonder why I did not fear the slaves, no matter how many beasts they bring to our gates?”

The Magelord Zelafor rose from his seat. “I, for one, am happy to proclaim Inuon—Kill him!” The effete Tritonian threw a dagger that had been tucked into his sleeve at his fellow Magelord, but the weapon bounced harmlessly off a pale blue flashing barrier.

“There is no spellcraft permitted in the Council chamber!” one of the others protested.

“Nor is an attempt on the life of a fellow Magelord,” Inuon replied coolly, raising a finger which emitted a ray that engulfed Zelafor in flames. Two of the other five Magelords were so shocked that they did not even turn when the doors burst open to reveal the Prince of Mars.

“Thelban, take care of them!” Inuon ordered.

Thelban, leader of the band who’d captured the Martians on their arrival on Triton, moved to meet his old foe, when a young Tritonian lass emerged from behind Ch’Or and put an arrow in his chest.

Driven to berserker rage by the sight of his betrothed bound, emaciated and barely conscious, the Martian howled and charged into the Magelords’ midst, delivering a killing blow to the burning Zelafor and a staggering one to bloated Bertor before landing in front of the beetle-armored villain.

“Inuon!”

The Magelord did not move in anticipation of Ch’Or’s swing, yet he seemed surprised when the flashing white crystal hit him.

The look on Inuon's blue-grey face was one of wide-eyed shock and disbelief as he recovered his footing.

"Impossible!"

Inuon slammed the sapphire tip of the staff onto the ground before him. A wave of bluish light radiated out until it engulfed the room. The other Magelords were knocked from their seats to the floor, and Tseri was thrown back against the wall. Ch'Or, however, remained standing, unaffected by the staff's power.

"I will kill you for what you've done!" the Martian gritted his teeth and brought the crystal up into Inuon's jaw.

The Magelord proved resilient to the blow, but he had clearly not anticipated Ch'Or's ability to resist the powers of the staff. Inuon stepped back and drew his blade, holding it in one hand and Vraala's staff in the other.

The walls crawled with inhuman shadows. The Magelords, save Inuon, made noises of discomfiture and fright, Ra'Ana lifted her head as best she could, and Tseri screamed. Only Inuon and Ch'Or remained fixed on one another.

"Neptune and Triton need only one Magelord," Inuon growled, swinging his sword and hoping to take advantage of the fact Ch'Or's weapon had no guard. "One prince! One *King!*"

Inuon struck at the air with Vraala's staff. Mists swirled and grew, becoming a maelstrom of black and white and a thousand shades of turquoise in between. And in the din, Ch'Or heard a familiar cry—a Neptunian ice drake! If Inuon were able to pull one into the council chamber, they were all dead....

Ch'Or had an idea as desperate as the situation. The shrieking head of the frost-white lizard beast emerged from the center of the swirling storm of magic. Dodging Inuon's lunge, Ch'Or hurled his crystal rod like a javelin into the open mouth of the ice drake before it could spit frozen death onto all in the room. It closed its jaws on the white rod, seemingly unaffected by the thrust of the blow; however, the crystal flashed brightly in its mouth. The portal of mists evaporated like fog at the coming of dawn, and the drake's head fell, severed from its body, upon the council table of the Magelords. The crystal fell as well, cracked in two and glowing no more.

"It seems we've broken our little impasse," Inuon remarked with a wry smile. But before he could swing again with Vraala's staff, an arrow from Tseri missed but distracted the Magelord for an instant. Ch'Or seized the lifeless head of the dragon and lobbed it at Inuon, knocking him off his feet.

Ch'Or did not notice the Tritonian guards and slavers who'd come to the chamber to investigate the commotion, nor did he notice the rippling black monstrosities descending the chamber's walls or the ensuing bloodshed, so focused was he on Inuon.

The Magelord had found wielding both staff and blade clumsy, so he discarded the staff as he tried to rise. As he did, Ch'Or planted one foot on the shimmering green-black beetle-like breastplate and kicked away the sword with the other.

Inuon turned quickly on the ground, tripping Ch'Or slightly. Inuon reached for the closest of his weapons, the staff, as Ch'Or went for the sword.

The Magelord sought to block a chop that the Martian delivered with Inuon's own blade; the shaft of Vraala's staff buckled under the force of the blow, snapping right in front of the Tritonian's face. The momentum behind Ch'Or's attack carried the blade down into Inuon's skull, sundering it as it had the staff.

The man who would have ruled both Triton and Neptune staggered back a step before falling dead to the ground. His opponent smitten, Ch'Or felt the bloodlust leave him, and his eyes unclouded.... He hurried to Ra'Ana's side and carefully cut through the bonds which held her to that crossed stake. The Martian princess fell into his arms.

"I knew you would come," she uttered hoarsely into the ear of the Prince of Mars.

## X

Ch'Or turned to see for the first time the slaughter that had taken place during his duel with Inuon. Bodies of the guards and slavers, slaves and rebels—even several Magelords lay strewn and heaped about the chamber in pools of blood. Hideous black man-things gnawed upon the more elegantly dressed of the dead, Magelords being devoured by the very Spinnari they had bound to their service.

"We yield!" cried one of the three remaining Magelords keeping one of the man-spiders at bay with a chair leg.

"Enough!" cried Ch'Or. "By the Crown of the High King, this ends now!"

The looming Spinnari hissed with hesitation.

"Your queen's wishes are fulfilled—this day has seen Inuon slain and the Council of Magelords reduced to ruin. Let your lust for vengeance be as sated as mine. Return to Zindaya and tell her it is done!"

A clamor of running feet approached from the hall without. The Spinnari ascended into the gloom of the chamber's upper recesses, vanishing without a sound, as several lightly armed Tritonians entered through the double doors.

"Ch'Or! We'd dared not hope!"

It was Cerwon who led the Tritonians into the chamber. He raced to the Martian's side, and the warriors embraced.

"If you are here, then the day is won!" the Martian exclaimed.

"Aye, so it would seem. We thought one more battle awaited us, but here you stand atop a mountain of our foes!" Cerwon turned to the fighting men behind him and barked, "Quickly, bring healers!" He added, pointing to the still-living Magelords, "And see that those three are bound!"

"How did you manage to breach the walls?"

"The weapons you allowed us to escape with included controlling stones for binding collars. The slaves we freed joined us on another raid against a xilland farm. You've never seen such a wild sight!"

"And what about Sortsre?" a soft voice asked faintly. Tseri emerged from behind a pile of dead and trained her bow on the front-most of the now-groveling Magelords. She was much bruised and had many cuts on her exposed arms and shoulders but had lost none of the fire in her eyes.

"Even now, he marshals forces in the barbican," Cerwon answered.

At that news, Tseri relaxed her bow with a sigh of relief, nearly bursting into tears.

"I'm sure he will be just as glad to see you," said the Martian prince, who then recounted to Cerwon all that had befallen him and the Tritonian girl since the raid on Kibu. When he had finished, Ch'Or added, "I hope I have not entered you into a deadly alliance. Though Vraala's power here may be broken, Zindaya seems a fell mistress in her own right."

"She will be at peace, for a time, I think," Cerwon answered thoughtfully, "and it shall be long before the people of Triton will again suffer the yoke. All that remains is to return you and Ra'Ana to Mars."

"It cannot be done!" interjected one of the Magelords. "Forgive me, Your Highness," the now-bound Tritonian prostrated himself before Ch'Or, "but the device in Amarum cannot, at present, send you home. There are but three of us, and the master key is destroyed. The light is mostly for transport between Triton and Neptune. We haven't the power, in our reduced state of utter defeat, to do that which you ask."

"Let us swear fealty, though, to the true King and Queen of our world, that we might aid you in using the master machine in Vraala's palace! Do but spare us, that we might atone for the crimes of our Queen and the Council!"

“Such fealty is hollowly promised by those in chains,” Ch’Or remarked before turning to Cerwon. “Only if the free peoples of Triton would have it, would I dare reach for the goal you know to be in my heart.”

“There are victory feasts to be had tonight and for many nights to come,” Cerwon replied with a grin. “But before the first cook-fire grows cold and the refrain of our song of victory fades from the first man’s tongue, you shall have the spears of Triton behind you!”

“Then there is but one thing I need no longer delay,” Ch’Or looked to Ra’Ana and kissed his princess who, despite her deprivations, returned the gesture with a fierce animal strength. “It shall also be a wedding feast, and I shall have my Queen. Before Triton completes another cycle, we shall have the machine in Amarum ready. We are going to war!”

---

*Abraham Strongjohn writes science fiction when he gets a minute. He also wrote a Lovecraft flashfic story that might hurt your feelings. He’d like to give special thanks to Nick Foster at RumorsOfWarComic.com for inspiring the Spinnari. Part three of the Neptune trilogy will be out*



*eventually.*



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# My Name is John Carter (Part 5)

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

With her face pale and taut, Dejah Thoris said naught,  
though her nature showed plain in her bearing.  
An invincible will held her upright and still,  
when most folk would have fallen, despairing.

Put so nobly to shame, I attempted the same,  
and my slumbering courage awoke,  
and I put on an act of the strength that I lacked,  
and addressing the tyrant, I spoke.

“Grind my skull into dust, if ye reckon it just,  
and be certain Barsoom would agree.  
If it shed not a tear for the place that stood here,  
It will sorrow but little for me.”

“Yet yon woman,” I said, “is as gold to my lead.  
She has given her life and her oath  
that this waste shall be made into meadow and glade  
for the sake of her folk and thine both.

“And mayhap she shall fail and this planet shall sail  
on its orbit as naught but a tomb,  
still I rate them as right who defy fate and fight,  
and disdain to give in to their doom.

“We may go to the dark with none living to mark  
if I died as a coward or martyr,  
and my stand may be vain—yet she shall not be slain,  
save ye slay her defender, John Carter.”

---

“Then indeed ye shall die!” came the despot's reply,  
and a hot-headed ghou! drew his sword,  
and he leapt for the kill, with more ardor than skill,  
and my fist was his only reward.

How the ghou!’s weapon gleamed! In that moment it seemed  
more a working of fate than of chance  
that it fit me as well as a snail fits its shell,  
and thus partnered, I entered the dance.

All my talk of defense was, in truth, a pretense,

like the lies of a libertine lover.  
When my blood starts to burn, I forget all concern  
for my life, let alone any other.

I saw only my prey, and to conquer and slay  
seemed a noble and jubilant course,  
and my vow to defend my companion and friend  
was as far from my mind as remorse.

But the gods had decreed that my foolhardy deed  
would not harvest the grief it had sown.  
Eons past has Mars warred, and a child learns the sword  
from the day they can stand on their own.

Dejah Thoris espied vicious ghouls on all sides,  
and John Carter too frenzied to save her,  
and the things she was taught, buried deeper than thought  
bade her, too, grab a sword from her neighbor.

Now our swords fairly flew, just as quick and as true  
as the needles of swift-fingered maids,  
and the dangling threads were the blood of the dead  
as it ran thick and red from our blades.

And our steel rose and fell like the hammers of Hell,  
piercing muscle and shattering bone.  
There was death in our hand that no ghoul could withstand  
till we stood 'midst the slaughter, alone.

When the beast has his fill of the hunt and the kill,  
and the man once again takes control,  
there is naught he can say that can reason away  
all the wounds of his flesh and his soul.

---

Now the thane has his hall, and the rat has his wall,  
and the wolf licks his wounds in his den.  
Having nowhere to run, I sat silent and numb  
and admired the city again.

As the dusk turned to dark, I let fall some remark  
to the maiden of Mars at my side  
that, had I built this place, I would cover my face  
lest the sight of it tempt me to pride.

"They were prideful indeed," Dejah Thoris agreed  
"and that pride was their doom and their glory,"  
and the stars filled the sky, as if hoping to spy,  
as she told me the sorrowful story.

Long ago—ages long—when the planet was strong  
and the deserts were forests and seas,  
there was silver and gold, too abundant to hold,  
and the folk dwelt in plenty and ease.

Like the jewels in the hair of a queen, proud and fair,  
were the cities of Mars at its height,  
yet for all of the fame that a city could claim,  
two outshone all the rest for delight.

Cities wondrous in size, cities noble and wise,  
cities fair as the notes of the lyre  
were as stars to the moons, and as midnight to noon  
and as candles to towers afire.

Great and ancient was Yang. From her, Helium sprang.  
Yet the mother looked ill on a daughter  
who usurped her in rank with no thought and no thanks  
for the graces her parent had taught her.

It is strange that the worst rarely envies the first,  
yet the second grows bloated with bile  
and excuses defeat by declaring competing  
a vice for the vulgar and vile.

“Let our crass cousins crow at the victory they owe  
to great Yang,” went their comforting cant.  
“Clever, capering Youth is a stranger to truth,  
and the harvest she gathers is scant.”

And their own lies deceived till they nearly believed  
that the salt of the sea had no tang  
and the sky did not storm and the hearth did not warm  
on the whole of Barsoom save for Yang.

---

Then Barsoom saw the joy of her people destroyed,  
saw cruel Fortune take back all she gave,  
saw her fields gone to sand and her cities abandoned  
and all of herself made a grave.

Now the Heliumites saw the oncoming night,  
and they sent out a planet-wide call:  
“Come to Helium soon, for your cities are doomed,  
and be one, ere the desert takes all.”

But the message Yang read in what Helium said  
was no kin to the words that were spoken:

“In your desperate hour, we plot that your power  
be weakened and finally broken.”

And the priests' ranting rang through the temples of Yang:  
“Thou art heroes from heroes descended.  
They would cry out with shame that ye carry their name,  
were the flames of the altars not tended.

“Be we ragged or royal, we are grown from this soil,  
and unnumbered our ancestors lie here.  
Who among you will stay and defiantly say  
'Be the day far or soon, I shall die here'?”

In their folly and pride every one of them cried  
“By the first of our fathers, I will!”  
and they swallowed their fear as the desert drew near,  
and they labored with all of their skill.

Working wonders to slow an implacable foe  
that no sword and no wall could delay,  
she was greatest of all near her ultimate fall  
like the sunset that closes the day.

All in vain, all in vain, and in death she had lain,  
since the winds of the wasteland know when.  
Such a city should boast a good number of ghosts,  
and perhaps one was watching us then.

---

*James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. He fights crime as Poetic Justice, but his day job is acting. You might know him by his stage-name 'Brad Pitt.' His work has appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly and Wisdom Crieth Without among other markets. His ebook 'Ideas and Inspiration For Fantasy and Science Fiction Writers' is now available from Amazon, Smashwords, and DriveThruFiction. James blogs regularly at <http://www.apolitical.info/teleleli>.*

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# Notes From The Nest

P. Alexander

Okay, guys! That's it! At least until 2018. Despite only putting out two issues this year, things have felt just as hectic, just as busy.

We published around 120k words of fiction from around a dozen authors and will be nearly doubling that next year as we go back to a quarterly schedule. Yep, we sorted through a two foot stack of a hundred manuscripts to find some really great stories for next year!

I suppose I should've waited until the Hugos were announced before penning this particular Notes, but I don't have the patience. By the time most folks are reading this, we will have lost or lost badly. For us, it was an honor just to be there! (Well, not really there, because I sure as hell am not flying out to Finland; next year in Cali, we'll see.)

If we had won (or if we do and I was too lazy to update this before going to press), I would dedicate the win to my grandfathers, Vernon Kimball, who was a brilliant engineer and computer programmer who loved science fiction and would be so proud to know his grandson received the award, and Enrique Miyares, who was himself a writer and an editor, a teacher, and in the last year of his life, a fan of Cirsova Magazine.

We managed to make it through this year's awards with only a few folks calling us fascist, bigoted misogynists and apologists for neo-Nazis. We might even manage to endure it again, though we won't be putting a lot of effort into chasing prizes. Frankly, with four issues next year, we have too much to do to get wrapped up in such things; we'll be too busy keeping up with our deadlines.

See you next year with Issue 7, featuring more awesome goodness from some old Cirsova favorites and some brand new authors.




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JOHN E. BOYLE

A mosaic of a golden snake on a dark blue brick wall. The snake is depicted in profile, facing left, with its head raised and tongue flicking out. Its body is covered in intricate scales, and it has a prominent, curled tail. The mosaic is set against a background of dark blue, rectangular bricks.

QUEEN'S  
HEIR

A FANTASY SET AMONG  
THE HITTITES AT  
THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE

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