

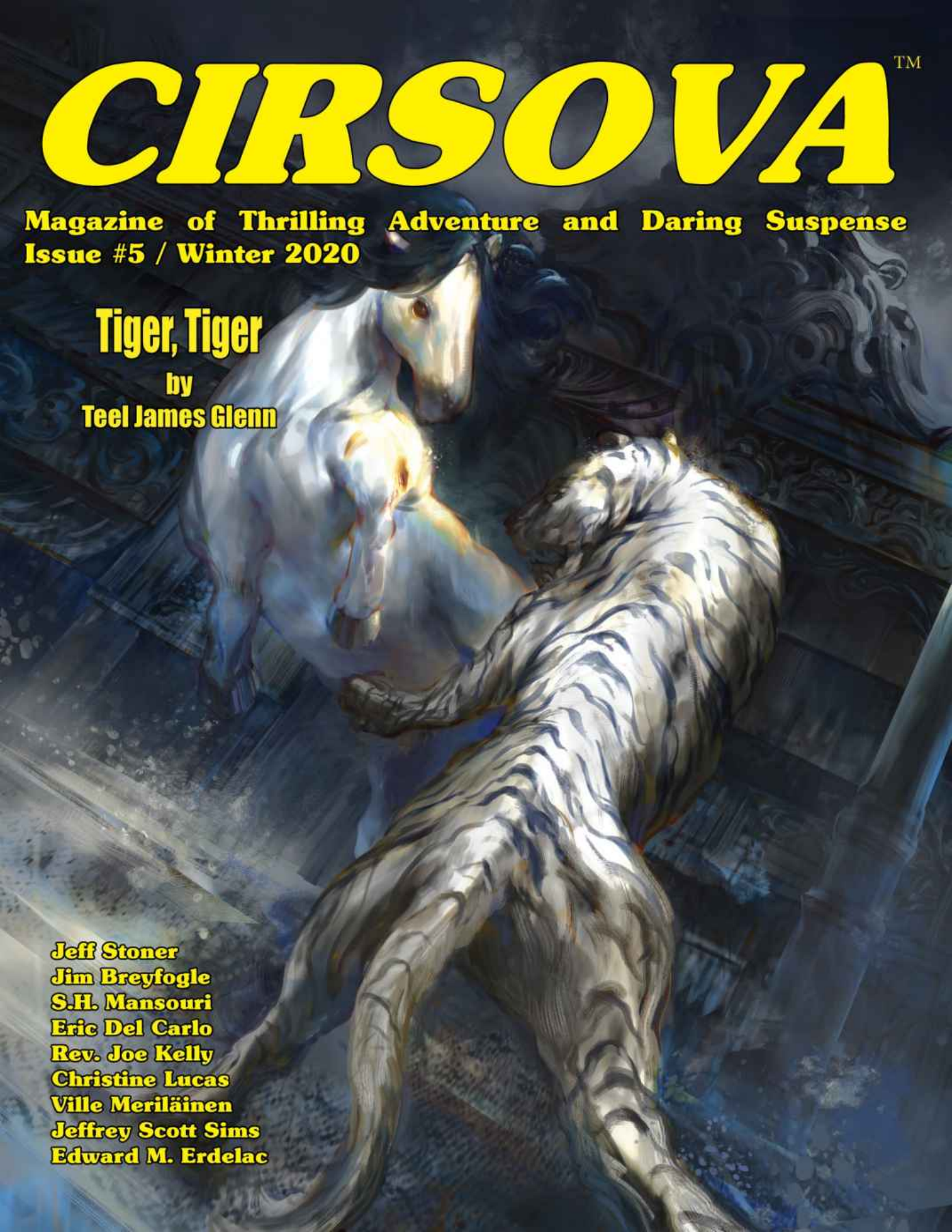
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Tiger, Tiger

by
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Rev. Joe Kelly
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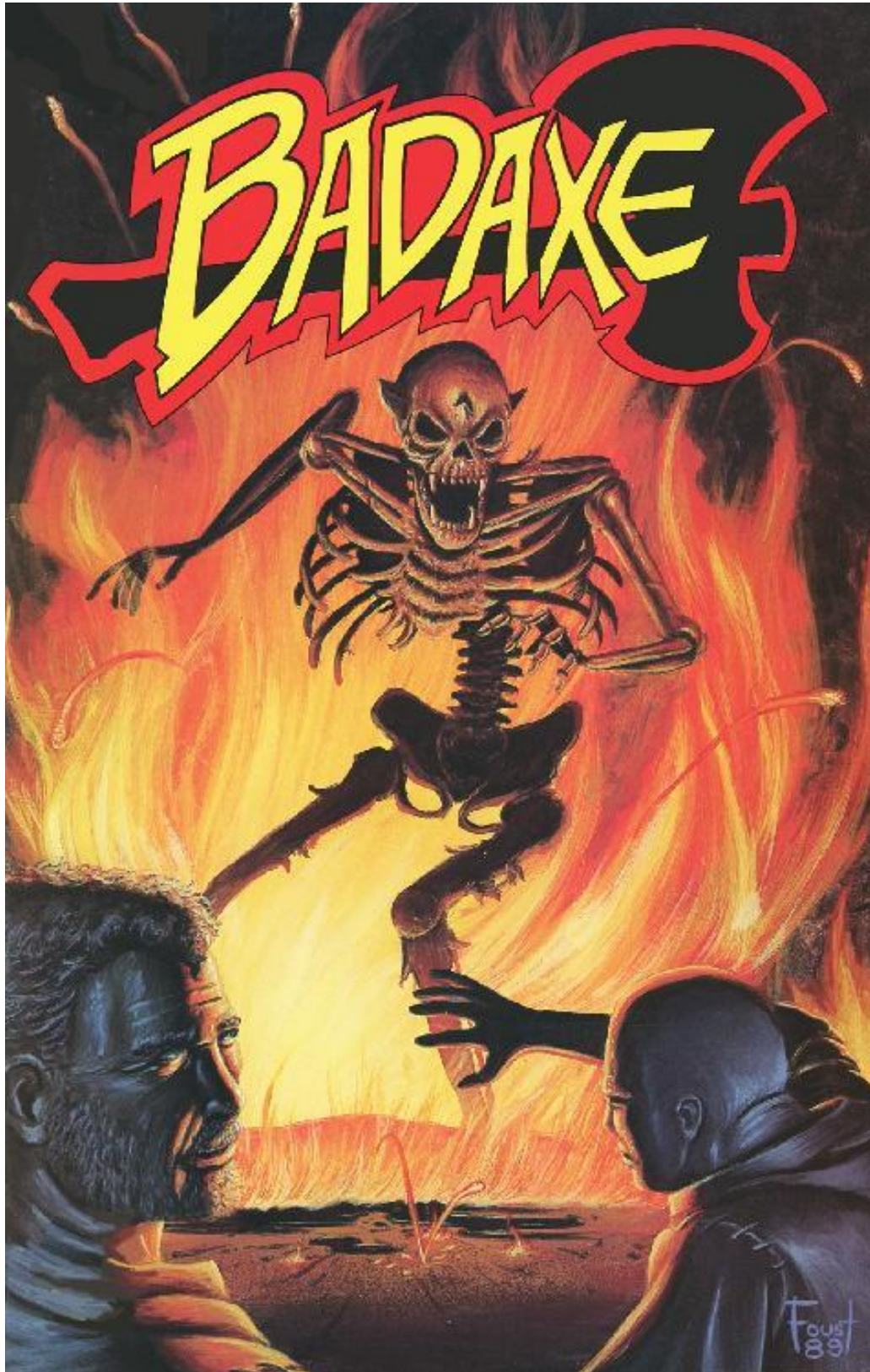
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JOHN E. BOYLE



RAVEN'S
BLOOD

ADVENTURE AMONG THE DESCENDANTS
OF ATLANTIS AT THE CLOSE OF
THE BRONZE AGE



COMING SPRING 2021 FROM CIRSOVA...

Tiger, Tiger

By TEEL JAMES GLENN

Rumors of a charismatic occultist haunting a cabaret in Berlin has reached British intelligence! But is Major Smythe prepared for the powers of this prophet of Vril?!

I

Berlin was a magic place in the year Nineteen Thirty; a place of dark magic and dark thoughts that passed through Major Geoffrey Smythe's memory.

“Rudolf Ziesse is the most dangerous man in Germany,” Doctor Argent said when he assigned Smythe the mission, *“And we think he is planning a coup more violent than the Nineteen Sixteen revolt there. We could have the beginnings of another war on our hands, a definite threat to the British Empire.”*

Smythe, tall and straight-backed with piercing blue eyes and close-cropped blond hair cut in the Teutonic fashion, walked down the *Leipziger Straße*. He smoked a cigarette in a long holder and relaxed into his surroundings.

He looked like anyone else on the street except that he was a British spy.

He knew that the key to blending in was simply to be, to have no thought that he did not belong. He took his true self, his inner man who had been raised in the Midlands of England, and locked him away inside of the public persona of Dieter Von Holms. He did not play the part of a Saxony Architectural student turned businessman, he became him.

Smythe's mother had been a German from Saxony, so he spoke the language like a native and, indeed, often went abroad as Dieter Von Holms. He had maintained the dual identity for several years, and it had brought him into contact with many levels of German society and provided him much valuable intelligence.

The streets of Berlin were full of gay partiers, a Curt Bois film was playing at the Art House Theatre, and the air was crisp with an early fall storm looming. Smythe/Dieter passed the Eldorado Klub, where the men dressed as women.

Smythe walked over to *Jägerstraße*, passing the Cabaret of the Nameless at Number Eighteen, where so many poor souls who hoped for

a real career were humiliated by the emcee for the entertainment of the audience. It was all the rage, and for Smythe it summarized, in a nutshell, the depths of cruelty to which the German Republic had fallen.

And the place that pointed to the darkest heart of the dark empire was the Klub Magus, Smythe's destination. It was at the end of a narrow and dimly lit alley. A simple neon sign announced the club with the image of a wizard, arms raised, in red.

The entrance was gained by descending a flight of stairs to a crimson door. Smythe knocked twice heavily, and a small window in the door slid back to reveal dark eyes and a scowling brow.

"I have walked a narrow path to the Luminous Lodge from a golden dawn," Smythe said. He knew that the occult society that operated the club had ties with the Golden Dawn Society in London.

"Let the light be both Luminous and Golden," the 'eyes' said, and the panel slid closed. Then the door opened and a thin man in evening clothes beckoned the secret agent in.

"Welcome, *mein herr*," the man said in a reedy voice. "It is good of you to join us."

When the door was closed and bolted, Smythe turned his attention to his host, who was painfully thin with hair slicked back and with a pencil mustache, both jet black and obviously fake. Smythe looked more closely and noticed the 'man' did not have an Adam's apple.

Nothing unusual for Berlin.

She turned to lead him toward the curtain with just a bit too much 'English' in her walk for a young lad.

Smythe thought he had become used to the strange and bizarre in Berlin, but when the door 'man' led him into the interior of the Klub Magus, he changed his opinion.

The physical space of the Klub Magus had been a storage warehouse at one point and still retained the vaulted roof architecture in many divided rooms. It was lit mostly with candelabras and some small electric table lamps.

The center space of each room was a dance floor, and when Smythe entered the first room, a cabaret act was in progress.

The act consisted of several near-naked women enacting a Roman gladiatorial battle in dance; two of the women were made up as warriors, and another had been body-painted to resemble a lion with her hair braided and teased into a fair resemblance of a mane. The three women danced and wrestled to atonal music played by three topless women. An androgynous man in a toga provided a humorous play-by-play as the women created a sensual combat scenario.

The ‘battle’ ended when the lion began to ‘eat’ one of the gladiators by chewing on her breasts and the third woman ‘stabbed’ the lion in the back. The three women took a bow as the crowd applauded with lackluster enthusiasm.

“My friends,” the emcee said as the women scurried away, “I know you are all waiting for the event of the evening, but you will have to wait just a bit longer; meantime enjoy the music of *Fraulein* Fritta Klum to drown your sorrows.”

The trio began to play Million Dollar Baby, and a lanky blonde singer stepped out on to the dance floor to mesmerize every person in the club. She had perfect features: high cheekbones, huge blue eyes, and a perfect bow-shaped mouth that seemed to be trying to kiss everyone in the room.

Her voice was good, but her presentation was better, and she soon had everyone in the room clapping.

While the chanteuse performed, Smythe was conducted to a small booth near the back of the room. “Your waiter will be with you in a moment, *mein herr*,” the faux doorman smiled.

Within a few moments, a waiter did make an appearance. He was wearing only an apron, garter belt, and bow tie.

“What would you like, sir,” he said, managing to make it sound like an indecent proposal. He also wore stark blue eye makeup and bright red lipstick.

“Lager,” Smythe said, doing his best to ignore the waiter’s implied offer; he knew it was standard practice in the ‘cellar clubs’ to mix business and pleasure.

“Very good,” the waiter said. “I will bring it right away.” He moved away with more swing in his hips than even the faux doorman had in hers.

Fraulein Klum finished her song just as the beer arrived for Smythe. He watched her smile her way around the room and set about looking for his assignment: Rudolf Ziesse.

Smythe knew what the man looked like from the newspaper articles he had read on him; square, jutting jaw, piercing green eyes, unusual for a Teutonic, and an arrogant expression that was the norm for members of the National Socialists.

Smythe watched the crowd of dilettantes and degenerates and thought about how different it was from even the ‘down-low’ night clubs in London. Save for such legendary nightspots as the infamous Hellfire Club, English society, even at its darkest and most deviant, had passion in it. Those in the room seemed detached from their own selves and their actions, as if they were being deviant because everyone else was; a herd mentality the cavalry officer could not understand.

Get hold of yourself, Smythe, he admonished himself. *You are here not to judge or philosophize, but to do a job—a job that must be done.*

As he concluded his thought, he spotted the next best thing to his prey: Helga Brandstatter, the woman known to travel with Ziesse as his mistress and confidant.

She was thin and noble, with short bobbed black hair and dark hooded eyes that regarded the room with cool disdain.

She knows she's the queen, she does, Smythe thought, and expects to be treated like it.

A *maître-de* in drag brought the woman to what was obviously her regular booth. It was across the dance floor from Smythe's booth but out of the direct line of the entrance to the club. She slid into her booth like a graceful panther, and a waiter appeared immediately with a glass of absinthe for her. She sipped it while she scanned the room to settle her gaze on Smythe.

The English spy locked eyes with the woman and gave her a slight smile that she acknowledged without returning.

The emcee chose that moment to step out on the floor with a comical two-step. "And now, my dearest of dear friends," he grimaced and smiled, "I present to you the event you have waited your whole life for, the Magus of the Magus; *Herr Doktor Ziesse!*"

The trio of musicians struck up a martial tune.

Rudolf Ziesse entered the room followed by three barely-clad women painted silver and gold.

Ziesse himself was dressed in a long flowing robe with a hood that all but concealed his face. It could not hide the piercing power of his stare. His eyes shone out from beneath the cowl like torches.

When he reached the dance floor, the three women assumed positions at the three points of a triangle, kneeling with their arms spread wide in supplicating positions.

Ziesse stood still, bowing his head to shadow his face completely. From the depths of the cowl, his voice roiled out to fill the room.

"All of you are the brave ones who have faced the stolid, calcified traditions of the past and seen them lacking. You have looked beyond

convention for the power of Vril.” He raised his head dramatically to reveal his handsome Nordic features.

“Vril, whose vibrations are given to us from the Masters of Wisdom, will help us all to rise above the common, racially impure cattle who pollute the surface of the Earth.”

He made a complex gesture in the air, and a burst of light grew from a single pinpoint before him. The flaming ball of light raced around the room, whizzing over Smythe’s head, and fizzled out in a hiss of steam.

Smythe watched Helga as she watched Ziesse. His mesmerism of her was different from the crowd’s. In her eyes, he saw not the fawning and blind obedience of a follower, but the convinced and cunning power of a collaborator.

“The work for which we are responsible,” Ziesse continued in a quiet voice, “will be able to spread and gain strength in the world. It will be accepted only by those who are able to generate higher energies.” Now the power glowed from within his whole body rather than just his hands. It was an inner glow, and Smythe was at a loss to say how the German had accomplished it.

The three women began to sing now, a keening song in ancient German.

Suddenly, the song and the light reached a fever pitch, and with a blinding flash, Ziesse disappeared to be replaced by a huge white tiger!

III

The transformation of Ziesse was startling, and the whole room gasped audibly. The tiger reared up on his hind legs and roared a challenge at the room.

The three women seem unfazed when it turned in a tight circle and sniffed at one of them. The animal moved to a second woman and sniffed her as well.

The sycophants continued to sing as the feline reared back and pounced on one of the silver-painted women and began to savagely tear at her flesh.

The audience screamed at the gory display, paralyzed between fear and fascination. Smythe jumped to his feet, not sure what he could do but determined to intervene.

Before Smythe could take any action, there was another flash of light, and Ziesse stood in the center of three uninjured women.

“Thus, the power of the Vril can transform the surface of the world if we believe; believe with me, my fellows, and the destiny of *Lebensraum* will be fulfilled!”

The crowd broke into a firestorm of applause, and the magician soaked in the accolades.

Ziesse acknowledged the adulation with a nod of his head and then imperiously headed off while the emcee took center-stage again.

“How is that for a show?” the emcee giggled. “And what a dreamy robe!”

Everyone laughed as a release for their shock.

Smythe remembered Dr. Argent’s words “*Just watch your back, believe only half of what you see.*” And wondered again how he could find a way to get close to Ziesse. The answer presented itself when he looked across to see Helga looking once more at him.

Well, damn the torpedoes! Smythe walked across the room to the woman’s booth.

“Good evening, *Fraulein,*” he said. “Quite a show; is it like this every night?”

She smiled disarmingly and laughed. “Oh, not quite so dull. I noticed you were prepared to intervene—a brave man or foolish?”

He slid easily into the booth opposite her and did his best to charm her; it wasn't hard to try. Her eyes sparkled with intellect and something more—a wildness and lack of fear that he had seen in men going into combat, the ones who always led the charge regardless of danger.

“A bit foolish, I must confess,” he said. “I had no idea there was a magic show here; do I get to see him saw a woman in half later?” He saw a flash of something behind her eyes then, something beyond the wild girl. *Yes, she is dangerous, but my best way to meet Ziesse.*

“You shouldn't make fun of Rudolf,” she said with a sly smile. “He might turn you into a rabbit—or worse.”

“You know him?” he asked with his best innocent voice.

“Biblically, some might say,” she said. “So what is your name, bold animal fighter?”

“Dieter Von Holms, from Saxony.”

“You may call me Helga,” she said, extending her hand that he bent to kiss. “And you are a very forward man—I like that.”

They sat and chatted and fenced with innuendo and nuance for half an hour.

“So, Mister ‘importer of suits and clocks’,” she said as she finished another drink, “do you have bravery on the dance floor as well as in the animal arena?”

He stood quickly and offered her his hand. “Never let it be said that the men of Saxony are afraid to beard a tigress in her den.”

They moved out onto the dance floor as the band changed the tempo of the song from soft jazz to a wild swing song. The two dancers took it in stride and were soon wildly moving across the floor.

Smythe found himself dancing as if it were a battle. The woman challenged him with sparkling eyes and a lascivious grin. The band

sensed that there was something unusual going on and increased the tempo.

When the song ended, the crowd applauded. Smythe and Helga fell into each other's arms, laughing and out of breath. The musical trio switched to a slow tune, and Helga pulled him to her, and they danced cheek to cheek.

"You are as good as your word, *mein herr*," she whispered in his ear. "Are you as good in other areas?"

"I have had no complaints in any field I have ventured into," he said. "What area might you need some help, dear lady?"

She was about to reply when a hand touched Smythe's arm, and a deep voice said, "Excuse me, *herr*, I would like to cut in."

It was a tuxedoed Rudolf Ziesse!

"If you wish," Smythe said. He reluctantly released the woman, and Ziesse stepped in to take her in his arms. She looked to Smythe and winked, then allowed herself to be swept away.

Smythe went back to his table and watched.

"You were in dangerous waters," a female voice said. He looked over to see Fritta Klum. She blew smoke at him with a languid gesture.

"You sing beautifully, *Fraulein Klum*."

"And you dance across thin ice, *herr*." Her eyes followed Ziesse and Helga as they moved slowly across the floor.

"Do I? I didn't know."

"Oh, I think you knew," she said, "and *that* is very intriguing."

"Why is it everyone in Berlin likes to see a country fellow take chances?"

"Everything else is so dull," she said in a droll voice. He saw that she, too, had the wild light in her gaze.

The music ended, and the crowd on the floor dispersed to their seats. Ziesse and Helga went back to her booth. She paused to wave Smythe over.

“Safe dancing, fellow,” *Fraulein Klum* said, “and watch out for tigers.”

Smythe walked across the empty dance floor. He became aware of Ziesse’s green eyes boring into him as if they were searchlights. The magus smiled a reptile smile and extended his hand to Smythe.

“Good evening, *mein herr*,” Ziesse said. “I enjoyed your performance.”

“And I yours,” Smythe said. “Wonderful tricks.”

“Oh,” Ziesse said with a dark smile, “wait around, it will get better; I am full of tricks.”

IV

Smythe sat with Ziesse and Helga for much of the evening, chatting about the state of Germany and the world, with Ziesse holding court on matters psychic.

“The Vril have resided for untold ages at the center of the world to strengthen their mastery of the divine Vril energy.” As he spoke, others gathered around the booth to soak in the celebrity of his presence.

Smythe watched everyone and understood why this man was so dangerous to the British cause. Smythe could see that charismatic individuals like Ziesse and that fellow Hitler with the National Socialists could energize with religious zeal the hopeless masses of Germany to war. And religious wars were the most dangerous.

“We, the German people,” Ziesse said as he held everyone rapt with his low, deep voice, “are the natural inheritors of this Vril power, but we must not squander it. We must harness it, clean the streets of the human refuse. You have seen just a small sample of what this energy can do to transform matter; we, the perfect people, the perfect masters of the world!”

No one standing around the booth dared to speak, and the music of the band in the background seemed to fade as the mystic held court. It was not just a political movement—it was a crusade, and anyone who got in its way would be trampled: Jew, English, French—all stomped beneath the boot heels of the army Smythe was seeing birthed right before him.

While Ziesse spoke, Helga watched Smythe. The spy worked to hide his disgust at the magus' words.

“He is a powerful speaker, isn't he,” Helga said to Smythe.

“He is a great man,” Smythe said *sotto voce*. “You must feel honored to hold his company.”

“Yes, a great man,” she pouted, “but great men are so much in demand... so little time for the purely human needs.” She leaned into Smythe, and he could feel the warmth of her through his jacket.

“But he is a man,” the Englishman whispered, “and I am a stranger here.”

“This is Berlin,” she said, “there are no strangers here—if you are good German stock.” She squeezed his arm. “Breeding is so important.” She emphasized the word ‘breeding’ with all the meanings she could give it.

“So, my friends,” Ziesse concluded his lecture with a benevolent smile, “we must all work to better ourselves and keep the faith. But we are not divine yet, so, let us feel joy and make merry!” With that, he suddenly stood up from the table and grabbed one of the women standing by the booth and whirled her out onto the dance floor.

The crowd erupted into cheers, and all rushed to join the couple on the floor as the jazz tune went up-tempo.

Helga pointedly did not move to join them, grabbing hold of the Englishman's arm.

“You don't want to dance?” Smythe asked.

In answer, she reached up and placed a hand behind his head and drew him in to kiss him hard on the mouth. Smythe responded with passion, knowing that this dangerous tack was the fastest way into the inner circle of Ziesse's followers.

The music of the club roared on around them, but the two might have been on a desert island for the abandon with which the woman threw herself at Smythe.

Smythe's natural shyness and reserve were in direct conflict with the sensations and the circumstance he found himself in. More so when she slid from the booth, pulling him after her and leading him to the second room of the club.

This backroom was dark, and arrayed around the walls, instead of booths, were small, enclosed spaces like sleeper compartments from a train. Figures could be seen in many of them, some unmoving as opium smoke drifted from the booths, but some clearly writhing in carnal passion.

There was every combination of partners, and the numbers varied from simple pairs to trios and groups of more.

Truly, there were no 'strangers' in Berlin.

Helga pulled the English spy to one of the empty booths.

"This is so abrupt," he managed to breathe as she began to divest him of his clothes. "Shouldn't we work up to it?"

"You could not be more worked up," she said as her own clothing melted from her lithe form. "There is no time but the now in the new order," she added. "We must seize the moments as we will seize the world."

Still, the spy resisted against his own body's desire for the woman's for one more attempt. "But the magus—"

"Oh, screw the magus," she whispered. "I have, and it's not a big deal. Come on, Dieter—don't be such an Englishman about it all; take me

now!”

And the spy did his best to not be an Englishman about it, all the while thinking, “*The things one does for the Empire!*”

V

Smythe’s ‘romancing’ Helga paid off in post-coital conversation.

“The cells are almost ready,” she whispered as they snuggled. “We will soon have enough in place in England itself to cripple their navy. Believers like those you met in the Golden Dawn Society will prepare the way; the National Socialists are ready to join us when we are ready.”

This is the information that the Doctor must have, Smythe thought, *but I must be careful not to seem too eager about it to Helga.* He stroked her hair and let his outer appearance reflect his purely physical joy.

“It is a glorious prospect,” he said. “I often go to England on business, and its arrogance is hard to take.”

“*Jawohl,*” she nodded. “They have no understanding of the world to come. We are the future!” She nuzzled her head once more into the hollow of his neck, assured that he was completely simpatico with her agenda.

“Had we not better return to the other room before we are missed too much?” he said.

“I suppose so.”

When they returned to the main room, no one seemed to have noticed that they had ever left. The music still played, the crowd still danced, Ziesse sat with *Fraulein Klum*, and the two of them obviously had not missed anyone.

“It is a wonderful night,” Ziesse said as he sipped from a glass of cognac. “Comradeship, cause, and the cosmic,” the magus said.

Fraulein Klum joined him in a toast, and when Helga slid into the booth, she snuggled up to the singer and the two exchanged a kiss.

I really am too English not to be shocked, Smythe thought, *But I must keep my game face on.*

“You were remarkable tonight,” Smythe said to Ziesse. “I had heard tales in the Society, but none do your skill and power justice, *Herr Ziesse.*”

The magus smiled with a canny expression. “I am surprised I have not heard more of you, *Herr Von Holm*. I have many friends in the Society.”

“I have been to a mere handful of meetings when they have coincided with my visits to that decrepit isle.”

“And yet you have not been to a meeting of the Lodge here?”

“I must confess my interest in the energies of Vril are but newly awakened,” Smythe bluffed. “I know it seems silly, but I really had no inkling that such things existed until recently.” He did his best to turn his blush into a self-abashed shyness about his ‘psychic ignorance’ to throw Ziesse off.

“Well, yes,” the magus said. “Most of the world, and sadly most of the fatherland, lives in a state of disbelief and confusion. I am glad our words reached you.” Ziesse ordered drinks for the table, and the spy inwardly relaxed.

When the nearly naked waiter brought the drinks, the magus held up his stein.

“To the new world order,” Ziesse said, “and we who will make it!”

The others raised their glasses, and all said, “The Fatherland!”

They drained their drinks in one swallow.

“So tell me, *Herr Von Holm*,” Ziesse asked, “what do you think of the transforming power of Vril energy?”

“Truly amazing,” the spy said. “It is astounding to believe that such power can reside in one man.”

“In all men, my friend,” Ziesse said, “if they have the true blood and the stalwart heart to take the risks needed to achieve it.”

He really believes this horsewash, Smythe thought, or at least thinks all his brainwashed followers do. I know it was a trick, but it doesn't matter, it is what his followers believe—

Abruptly the English spy felt himself growing weak. His vision began to blur, and the sounds of the club became muffled.

“Is there something wrong, Dieter?” Helga asked.

“I think the wild dancer can't handle his liquor,” *Fraulein* Klum said with a bubbling laugh, “or maybe he can't handle Helga!”

Both women laughed, and the sound of it was like machine gun fire to the woozy spy. Ziesse joined in with his deep-throated laugh, and Smythe saw a different light ignite in the magus' eyes.

“I hear the English have no stomach for good German beer,” Ziesse said. “Perhaps that is Major Smythe's problem.”

He knows! Smythe tried to rise but his legs were rubber beneath him.

“Well, he may not be able to hold his liquor, but he can hold me anytime,” Helga said. “He's a regular English stallion.” This set the women to giggling again and brought a ‘hurmping’ sound from Ziesse.

“That will be enough, Helga,” he said. “Don't disgrace yourself with the lower forms.”

“Oh, please, Rudolf,” she said, “he is, after all, *half*-German.”

The spy tried to walk away from the table. *He has drugged me; he will kill me if I cannot escape.* He took only one step, but his legs would not support him, and he fell face forward to the floor.

In the haze of his delirium, he heard Ziesse say, "We shall see just how much of a stallion our English turncoat is, Helga; I think there will be another show here tonight!"

VI

When Geoffrey Smythe opened his eyes again, he knew he was in trouble. He was seated, but his arms were bound behind him. A dark figure approached and resolved itself into the robed form of Helga Brandstatter.

"I could not come sooner," she said to Smythe. When he started to protest, she shushed him.

"Take it easy," she said. "It is all decided, I am afraid." There was a tone to her voice he had not heard at any time earlier, a compassion he had not thought she possessed.

"Rudolf is livid with you," she said. She gave a slight smile that was almost girlish and shy. "No one has ever made him so mad." She stroked Smythe's cheek. She leaned in close to his ear and whispered, "Remember, as long as there is life, there is hope."

Just then two burly men appeared and lifted the chair with him to carry out to the center of a circle of people. Rudolf Ziesse was dressed once more in his magician's robes.

"Now you will see the true Vril power," Ziesse announced to the room. "This man came to us thinking we were ignorant of the English agitator and unbeliever, Doctor Argent." The magus leaned in to look the spy directly in the eyes.

"We have agents who watch him and saw you meet with him. We are the superior minds, Mr. Smythe."

"Stop this nonsense, Ziesse," Smythe bluffed. "Do you think we did not know your people were watching?"

Smythe had no idea that their network in England was so extensive. And he wondered if Helga had told him the truth in her pillow talk. He studied the woman's near-mad face and knew that it had been the truth, that she had not known nor cared that he was a British agent. *She was crazy enough to tell me the truth, to risk divulging their real plan to make it more exciting for her, the chance that I might escape. Now, I have to.*

The magus stepped away from the bound officer and raised his arms. His three sycophants, dressed more conventionally than at his first 'performance' in dark robes, surrounded him and began to sing in high keening tones.

The spy's vision began to blur again and at first he thought, *They have drugged me again*, but it was different. It was as though the lenses of a camera were being replaced. The quality of his vision changed.

Things went out of focus and refocused again, and he was aware that he was not seated anymore. In fact, the chair had fallen away with a cracking sound. The shirt across his chest tore, and the ropes that had bound him tightened and snapped.

"Now we will see just what kind of stallion you are, Mr. Smythe," Ziesse said.

Smythe felt his chest tighten as he saw the look of horror on so many of the watchers. He also heard the murmurs from the crowd of "amazing", "oh, my God!" and "I'd ride him."

Smythe took a step back, overcome by the oddness of the looks, and heard something that chilled him: a clapping sound. It was a sound he knew well; it was the sound of a horse's hoof. He looked down, not believing it possible but fearing the reality, and was still stunned to see the forelegs of a horse where the lower part of his body should have been.

"No!" Smythe tried to cry, but the sound that came out chilled him to his soul. It was a high-pitched whinnying sound.

"Now we will see if you are the young stallion of the Queen we thought you to be!" Ziesse said with a dark laugh, and the laughter was soon

general around the room.

Smythe spun first left, then right, looking for some face without diabolical delight at his plight, but he saw none.

I have to escape! I have to find a way to get to Dr. Argent. It was an irrational thought, a prayer for help to the dark gods that had trapped him, but his mind was consumed with the desperation of his situation.

He tossed his head and felt his mane slap against his elongated neck.

“Go ahead, Helga,” *Fraulein* Klum chided her companion, “he rode you, now let’s see if you can ride him!”

The dark-haired girl nodded her head and threw off her robe to reveal that she was naked beneath. She strode across the dance floor toward the transformed Smythe.

The crowd cheered.

Smythe tried to back up, as if the naked waif approaching him were the devil herself but his hindquarters came in contact with the wall.

She came forward slowly, sensuously with her arms wide and beckoning toward him. The crowd watching laughed at his cowering; it was an absurd sight—a thousand pounds of muscular animal retreating from barely a hundred pounds of waifish girl.

He could have crushed her, lunged forward and stomped her beneath his massive hooves, but there was still the man in the beast, and regardless of the circumstances of their tryst, they had been intimate, and he was a gentleman.

Not that his thoughts were so rational, rather they were a chaotic jumble. It allowed the woman to walk directly up to him so that she could reach out and touch his muzzle. She stared directly into his enlarged eyes, and there was that wildness in her eyes that fixed Smythe’s vision.

“Now, now,” she whispered as if to a child, “we will have a nice ride, Dieter.” She ran her hands along his muzzle.

Smythe froze.

The girl walked along his flank until she reached his withers. She then nimbly vaulted onto the spy’s back.

Despite her size, she felt like a heavy weight to the trapped Englishman. The warmth from her thighs seemed seared hot on his back.

She leaned forward, grabbed his mane, and whispered in his ear, “Now my stallion, let’s show them how we trot!” She kicked him in the sides, and the transformed spy shot forward!

VII

Smythe moved forward. His hooves clattered across the dance floor, and the three singers jumped aside. Smythe ran toward the crowd that was lining the dance floor who scattered with squeals and giggles like schoolchildren playing tag.

“Go on, fleet stallion,” Helga said in a breathless voice. He could feel her warm breath on his long muscular neck. Club goers leapt over tables and scattered steins and absinthe glasses every which way as he trotted around the club.

Helga laughed like a schoolgirl on a roller coaster ride and waved her hands at the partiers as she passed them.

Smythe’s mind was awlirl. He knew they could have killed him and, indeed, might still kill him, but as long as he was alive, he had a chance.

He knew he had to escape.

The crowd was running around in delicious confusion, still giggling with delight. Ziesse stood with his three singers and *Fraulein* Klum in the center of the floor, watching his handiwork with a sly smile on his face.

Helga tried to rein Smythe away from Ziesse with a pull on his mane, but the transformed spy raced straight at the magus, picking up speed, so that the robed man had no chance to react in any other way than to dive out of the horse's path.

Smythe gave a wild horselaugh as he raced by the panicked magician and toward the exit door of the club.

"Stop," Helga called. "Stop!" But the spy was committed, now, and ran on until his hooves slid to a stop on the polished wood near the doorway. He stopped so that he could duck beneath the lintel to push past the curtain and out into the foyer.

The faux-man greeter at the door screamed when she saw his equine head poke through the curtain.

Helga somehow clung to his back as he went under the door jam. "There is no point to this, Dieter. Rudolf cannot be opposed."

He bucked at her comment. She grabbed more tightly to his mane and clamped her legs around his flanks.

Next, he turned in the tight space and kicked hard, his hooves hitting the exit door. He looked back over his shoulder and flank to check his progress and looked directly into Helga's eyes.

There was something beyond the wildness there, now: a real fear, as if she had somehow suddenly discovered that this was a real situation and he a real man whose life had been stolen from him. He thought that the fear had a changing effect on her, and it made her feel human. And vulnerable.

He ignored her pleading eyes and kicked the door again, this time smashing it down. He spun again slowly and ducked his head down through the doorway.

Somehow Helga still held on, perhaps too scared to drop off, as Smythe fitted his bulk through the doorway. He could faintly hear the sounds of the crowd behind him that had gone from delighted squeals to

outraged indignation. Clear above the din was the voice of Ziesse admonishing the club goers to “Get him!”

Suddenly Smythe was in the cool night air of the alley. Helga was still on his back, but his only thought was flight.

He raced down the alley and out onto *Mohrenstraße* with Helga now screaming for Smythe to stop, but her voice just egged him on to further speed.

The crowd on the street tried to evidence no shock at the sight of Smythe and his burden, smiling and pointing with contrived nonchalance, but even for Berlin the sight of a fifteen-hand white stallion with a naked girl on his back racing down the night streets was unusual.

Smythe had no thought of where he would go, but he knew he had to run.

It began to rain, a light drizzle that slapped against his face and flanks. It stung him, and Smythe could hear the girl on his back complaining with sobs.

He ran toward *Leipziger Straße* and turned down it at a full gallop.

As he ran, Smythe noticed that the looks from the street crowds changed. They looked at him, but then their eyes went wide as they looked behind him. He had the strange sense that he was being pursued.

He paused at the corner of the *Straße* and whirled.

What the transformed spy saw filled him with a new depth of fear.

Racing down the *Straße*, with great loping strides, was a ravenous white tiger!

VIII

The white tiger was stark against the darkness of the street. *Felis Tigris Regalis*, nine hundred pounds of muscular carnivore, was racing

down the avenue with its jaws slack and moving in chewing motions. The feline shook its head and, with a roar, charged at an even faster pace.

A second roar of fear went up from the crowd, watching as they fled in anticipation of the horse's imminent disembowelment. The great cat hurled itself at Smythe's flank, but the transformed man waited until the last second and kicked backward.

The kick caught the descending tiger on the chest with both his hooves. The powerful hind legs struck dead center and propelled the startled beast upside-down onto the sidewalk of the *Straße*.

Helga was screaming at the top of her lungs, but it was not a mindless yell of fear. She yelled, "Rudolf, stop this! Stop this!" and slid off Smythe's back.

The transformed spy reared back and whinnied with all the strength of his massive lungs. He set his head down and fixed his eyes on the monster cat.

The tiger came to his feet and snarled at the horse, his jade-green eyes aflame with rage that went beyond the animal and approached the demonic.

The tiger looked directly at Helga and roared at her, but within the roar was the echo of a human voice—Rudolf Ziesse's. "Get away from him, Helga!"

She blanched and stepped against a streetlight. She ignored the sting of the increasingly heavy rain against her naked body and shook her head. "Stop this, Rudolf!" she yelled again.

The tiger ignored her now and fixed its attention directly on the horse. It moved forward at a slow stalking pace. The horse stood its ground, shaking its head from side to side.

In the wild of the American west, a mustang will fight even a cougar to defend its harem of mares, and the smaller cat will usually retreat; a cat prefers to leap on the back of a fleeing prey, if it hunts a horse.

A tiger, however, is more than twice the size of a cougar, so the few hardy souls who lingered in doorways to watch the battle to come were sure the horse was going to die.

This horse, however, was not just a horse. Smythe had the mind to resist and to strategize.

You will not take me without a fight, Smythe thought. I will never surrender!

When the tiger got close enough, Smythe lashed out with his forehooves and struck the great feline on the head. The cat staggered back.

Smythe pressed the attack, lashing out with both hooves like they were fists working a speedbag. The magus-in-tiger-form had to back up under the onslaught.

Smythe felt a fierce satisfaction as the great cat retreated and snarled his displeasure, but it was short-lived. The tiger-magus darted to the side with a rapidity that seemed impossible and struck back with a massive paw.

The slashing cuts across his foreleg caused Smythe to whinny in pain.

The tiger moved forward with deliberate care to Smythe's right. He was trying to get at Smythe's throat, but the transformed spy spun quickly and kicked back with his hind legs again, hitting the feline on the shoulder.

This maddened the magus, and he whirled with the kick. With a flex of his powerful legs, the tiger leapt on the back of the spy.

Smythe screamed in pain as the razored claws of the magus sliced into his back. He tried to shake him off, but the cat dug in too tightly.

"Stop it, Rudolf!" Helga screamed. The naked woman ran up to the side of the two fighting animals and slapped at the great cat's haunches.

The tiger swatted at her with the back of its right paw and sent her sprawling to the street. The motion unbalanced the cat, and he fell from the Smythe's back.

The transformed spy bolted forward when the weight came off his back, but the rain-slick streets and the wounded front leg caused him to slip. Smythe went down on to his front legs and rolled.

He gained his hooves again before the cat was on him and, past the fearsome beast, saw the naked, sprawled form of Helga, still and bloody. The image filled Smythe with rage at the cruelty of the tiger-mage, and he charged the cat.

The frontal assault so startled Ziesse that the tiger-mage did not react quickly enough to dodge. The horse collided with him head on and sent the two of them tumbling.

The mass of flailing legs and hooves rolled across the wet cobbles then exploded apart as Smythe pulled free. The equine spy bounded into the air and pounced on the tiger before the cat could get off his back.

The hooves of the horse pummeled the fallen feline relentlessly until there was a cracking sound, and the great cat went limp. Smythe continued his deadly dance on the corpse of the cat until a convulsive shudder ran through Smythe.

The transformed spy staggered away from the still tiger-mage and felt a spasm of pain that blinded him momentarily. When his sight returned, he was human once more, naked and kneeling in the pouring rain.

The still form of Rudolf Ziesse, his skull crushed to a pulp, lay in a growing crimson pool of his blood, the magick and the life gone from him.

Smythe took one more look back at the still form of Helga Brandstatter with a sigh of regret, then staggered off into the Berlin night to send his report to Doctor Argent.

Rudolf Ziesse, the most dangerous man in Germany, would be dangerous to no one ever again.

Teel James Glenn is Winner of the 2012 Pulp Ark ‘Best Author of the Year,’ Epic ebook award finalist, P&E winner ‘Best Thriller Novel,’ “Best Steampunk Short,” Multiple finalist “Best Fantasy short stories,” Collection and Member HWA, MWA, HNS, ITWA. Visit him at Theurbanswashbuckler.com



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Making Good

By JEFF STONER

A top-secret government facility has gone into lockdown! The suits have arrived, as has the mysterious Doctor Paasche, but what will it really take to stop the threat?!

Two men in matching black suits stood before a door. It was an old wooden door with a porcelain knob and a green Bakelite plaque on the batten reading 'no entry'. A dim bulb under a rusty shade flickered overhead. It made a tiny puddle of light beneath the star-strewn skirts of the New Mexico sky.

"Do you think he's in?" asked Agent Miller, *sotto voce*. It was his first mission, and he was nervous.

"The kraut's always in," replied Agent Anderson.

"Who is he?"

"You don't need to know. Stick close and follow orders. You have to make good tonight."

Anderson rapped hard on the door. A sharp male voice with a hint of a German accent responded. "What is it?"

"Doctor Paasche, you're needed at the containment center. There's been a breach."

A heavy sigh. "One moment, please."

There was silence, followed by a shriek of pain. Miller jumped. "What was that?"

"Nothing. Wait."

The door flew open. A man in a camel overcoat emerged. He was tall and thin, with a shock of thick grey hair peeking out from under his fedora. In spite of the warm season, he wore a muffler. His mood was caustic. "You Amis are idiots. Always playing with things you don't understand."

"That's none of your concern, Doctor," Anderson soothed. "Will you come with us?"

"*Ja, ja*. What is it *this* time? Not one of those flying slug-things again, I hope! I told you they will burn with fire, if you make it hot enough. White phosphorous always does the trick."

“Not here, Doctor. Come along.”

The G-men led their charge to a waiting sedan delivery. The building they left behind was a nondescript clapboard barracks dating to the Mexican war. More remarkable was the steep concrete revetment surrounding it, and the chain-link fence crowned with barbed wire atop that. Operation Majestic guarded its assets well.

The drive was long. Dr. Paasche rode in back, cuffed and blindfolded. He bore the indignity in stoic calm, save for a hushed conversation with himself. Agent Miller picked out a few sentences. “...*Nein*, you may not feed... *Ja*, I know they are less than nothing. The Amis think otherwise, fools that they are, and I must play along... Later! Later, I say!”

“Does he always go on like this?” Miller whispered to Anderson.

“Every damned time.”

The delivery pulled up to a rusty Quonset garage. A bored MP opened the rolling door, and Anderson guided the vehicle inside. The floor dropped into the ground, revealing a disguised lift. It was deep, and the air grew cold as they descended. Anderson produced a flask and offered it to Miller. “Drink?”

“Um, no, sir. Not on duty.”

“Suit yourself. You’ll wish you had.”

Many minutes later, the elevator shuddered to a stop. The door opened on a starkly lit tunnel. Anderson and Miller collected Doctor Paasche, still blindfolded and becoming impatient. “I know exactly where I am. I designed this facility.”

“Sorry, Doc. It’s procedure.”

“If you were following procedure, you wouldn’t need me.”

The tunnel led to a high walkway above an enormous open space. While Anderson released the doctor, Miller looked around. Soldiers manned the rails, rifles at the ready. Searchlight beams swept the floor

below, illuminating orderly files of steel containers separated by tall fences. The scene resembled a prison riot, except for the eerie silence.

An officer in crisp khakis moved to meet them. His blue-shaven visage was steely calm but damp with perspiration. He cut straight to the point. “Agent Anderson, we’ve got a situation here.”

“I can see that, Captain. Details?”

“The trouble started when a specimen expired in the gray block. The decon team responded but went out of contact. Then there was an alarm at the gate. Another team went in to investigate, but we lost them almost immediately. That’s when I put the facility on lockdown and called you. There’s been no activity since.”

“How many live specimens were in the gray block?”

“Eleven.”

“Are any of them accounted for?”

“No.”

“Idiots,” murmured Doctor Paasche.

A scream rang out below. The beams of a half-dozen searchlights converged on a running man. His green fatigues were torn and bloody. He charged straight to a gate topped with razor wire and pounded on the heavy mesh. “Let me out!” he shouted.

The captain took a megaphone from one of his men. His reply warbled and boomed in the cavernous void. “Negative. Go to the quarantine lock and wait for the processors.”

“No!” the man wailed. “They’re right behind me! Please!”

Something moved in the shadows below. The searchlights groped for it but caught only a momentary flash of something dark that scurried on its belly like an insect, but was far too large to be an insect.

“What was that?” Miller hissed.

“Shh!” Anderson scolded, finger at his lips.

“Please! Help!” echoed up from below. The man was climbing now, clumsily scaling the locked gates. When he touched the razor wire, there was a flash and a pop, and he fell to the floor.

“Electrified,” Anderson said matter-of-factly.

The shadows moved again. Inhuman shapes dragged themselves out of the darkness with bone-thin arms. Despite their tortuous mode of locomotion, they were swift. They converged on the fallen man before he could regain his feet.

“Sergeant, take care of him,” the captain barked. A rifle cracked, and the man went limp. The creatures scattered into the dark alleys between the containers.

“God,” whispered Miller.

Anderson coughed. “God’s got nothing to do with this.”

“Idiots,” grumbled Doctor Paasche.

The captain’s eyes flashed. “Is that all you can say, you goddamned dirty Jerry?”

Doctor Paasche shook his head. “*Nein*, I could say quite a lot. I might speak of murderous ignorance, of pig-headed intransigence, and of arrogant fools who can’t follow the simplest instructions, but what good would it do? I’d be better off talking to this post!” He rapped the railing with a bony finger to emphasize the point.

“Keep that up, and I’ll have you sent back to Europe for trial!”

“You might, if you’d rather wait out your little infestation. This kind is sterile and short-lived. Assuming no one, shall we say, *majestic* pays you a visit for a few months, I’m sure you’ll do just fine without me.”

The captain deflated. “Just do what you have to and get the hell out of my sight.”

Anderson laid a hand on Paasche's arm. "Are you ready, Doctor?"

"*Ja*. Take me down there."

They led Doctor Paasche to a lift. A sign above the gate read, "Danger! Absolutely No Admittance."

As they rattled down to the lower level, Miller leaned close to Anderson. "Are we going in with him?" he whispered.

"He's a top asset. Can't let him out of our sight."

"What if those things attack?"

"There's no *what if* about it. They will," Anderson said and pulled away.

The lift stopped with a bang, and the steel gate clanked open. Doctor Paasche strode boldly into the maze of containment blocks. Anderson and Miller trotted to keep up with him. The place stank of death, and the concrete underfoot was blotchy with uncertain stains. Gaining the main avenue, Paasche turned and headed straight for the fallen man.

"Is he crazy?" Miller exclaimed under his breath.

"Watch and see," Anderson replied.

The dead body lay at the intersection of a starburst of searchlight beams. Doctor Paasche knelt and closed the man's eyes. The victim's chest was ripped asunder. Ribs gleamed white in the harsh beams. Miller leaned in for a closer look. "Jesus. Were they going to eat him?"

The doctor shook his head. "This kind only wants the heart."

"What the hell are they?"

In lieu of an answer, Paasche held up a stern hand. "Get behind me," he commanded.

On all sides, just beyond the lights, the shadows were moving. One by one, monstrous things emerged. They were small and grey-skinned, with saucer eyes set in high, narrow heads. Their breasts were keeled like

those of birds, and they dragged their fleshless, atrophied legs behind them as they crawled toward the trio.

Miller's hand flew to his holstered automatic, but Anderson stopped him. "Let the kraut work," he said.

The monsters came to a crouching halt a few yards away. Miller retained the presence of mind to count them. There were eleven. Some were naked, but others wore filthy tatters of rubbery fabric blazoned with strange, many-branching signs.

All at once, they charged.

Doctor Paasche calmly opened his overcoat. The creatures immediately stopped and dipped their bony heads until they touched the offal-strewn concrete. "*Ja*, that's better," Paasche said. "Too bad you'll die here in this hole without ever being able to tell your overlords what you've seen. Now, get back to your places."

The monsters obeyed immediately. They formed an orderly file and crawled away. Paasche quickly buttoned his coat. "Damned Arzenekoi," he muttered to himself.

Miller watched them go. "Arzenekoi? What are they?"

"They're nothing," the doctor replied.

"It looked like some of them were wearing flight suits."

"What of it? We have our scum, and the heavens have theirs. May I go? There's business to attend to."

Anderson nodded. "Certainly, Doctor. The United States government thanks you for your service."

"Thanks aren't enough. Are you prepared to pay?"

"Yes."

"Good," Paasche replied, wearing a puzzling grimace.

Agent Miller was relieved when the car finally trundled out of the Quonset garage. Anderson spoke little on the drive back to the barracks but sucked hard on his flask as they whizzed through the darkness.

“I know why you drink on the job now,” Miller commented.

“You really think so?” Anderson replied and said no more.

It was past midnight when they rolled up in front of the revetted barracks that the doctor called home. A sickle moon was peeking over the ranges to the east, and coyotes were howling in the chaparral. Doctor Paasche anxiously shifted from foot to foot while Anderson removed his cuffs and blindfold. Miller was amused. “Don’t worry, Doc. We’ll keep the coyotes off.”

Paasche blinked in the chill breeze. “Coyotes? Ah, *ja*, coyotes. It’s very kind of you. But if you don’t mind, I must get inside.”

“You’re free to go,” Anderson said. The doctor nodded his farewell and made a beeline for the door.

Miller watched him go. “That was strange.”

Anderson shrugged. “He’s always like that. Let’s go.”

They climbed back into the car. But no sooner had they closed the doors than Anderson tapped his forehead in frustration. Reaching beneath the seat, he withdrew a thin leather valise and passed it to Miller. “I forgot the payment. Take this to the kraut. I’ll start the paperwork.”

Miller took the valise. Stepping out of the car, he noticed that the night had gone absolutely still. The air had died, the coyote chorus was silent, and the waning moon hid her light behind a gray caul. It was disquieting, and Miller hastened to the barrack. “Doctor Paasche, I’ve got your pay,” he called. There was no response.

He called again, this time adding a hard rap as punctuation. The door was ajar and swung open a crack. An exotic scent, like jasmine and lightning admixed, wafted from the interior of the old barracks. Miller’s

curiosity was piqued, and he entered the barracks. There was no sign of the doctor, but a battered coffee percolator was already sputtering on his little dining table. Across from it was a writing desk piled high with journals and papers. The only other object in the spartan room was a massive sarcophagus of galvanized steel. Big enough for a gorilla, it lay squat in the center of the bare wooden floor. With each step Miller took toward it, the strange fragrance grew. But he was dismayed, for the casket was welded shut. The lid bore a curious inscription:

Eigentum die Ahnenerbe-SS

Schaefer Tibet-Expedition 1939

Nicht Offnen

“*Nicht offnen...* Do not open,” Miller translated under his breath.

There was a cough behind him. “I see you’ve met my traveling companion,” said Doctor Paasche.

Turning, Miller found him standing in front of the door, unbuttoning his heavy overcoat. “Your traveling companion?” Miller asked.

“*Ja*. For ten years, she’s stuck by my side, across two continents and an ocean. No one’s been able to separate us yet, though plenty have tried. Not much to look at for one so persistent, is she?”

“I, uh, suppose not. Here, I have the money.”

Paasche waved the valise away. “*Gott*, he used that ruse again? Amis have no imagination.”

A sliver of cold fear crystallized in Agent Miller’s gut. “Ruse? What are you planning?”

“I’m going to get a cup of coffee and step outside while you make good your debt.”

“How do you mean? I’m here to pay you.”

“Me? Do you think I can, by myself, command Arzenekoi as if they are trained poodles? No, such authority may only be imputed to a man by certain words and signs. They do not come easy or cheap.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but who gets paid, if not you?”

“You’ll meet her soon enough.”

By now, Miller had heard enough vaguely threatening riddles. He threw the valise on the table and drew his pistol. “There’s the money. Take it or leave it, but stand aside!”

Doctor Paasche raised his hands and did as he was told. His unbuttoned coat fell open. Beneath it, he was naked to the waist. His lean torso was ragged with oozing scratches. They traced a bloody sigil that mirrored the designs on the creatures’ ruined flight suits.

Miller stopped in his tracks. “Is...is that the sign?”

“*Ja.*”

“What the hell are you?”

“I’m the Chosen One,” Doctor Paasche said unhappily.

“Chosen for what?”

“Nothing you need worry about. She who is coming for you wants *everything*. Never fear! She’s quick about it.”

A cloud appeared before Miller’s eyes. It solidified into a beautiful white hand, redolent of jasmine and arcing with unclean energy. It covered Miller’s mouth in a flash, stifling his scream. Before he could escape, sharp teeth sliced into his windpipe. After the briefest of struggles, Agent Miller knew no more.

One man in a black suit stood before a door, the first ruby rays of dawn at his back. He knocked once, politely.

Doctor Paasche emerged, a scowl on his thin lips. He held the valise flat in his hands. Atop it lay a blood-soaked wallet and the mangled remains of a Colt 1911. The barrel was bitten off at the chamber. “Next time, don’t send a family man,” Paasche snapped.

Agent Anderson accepted the items. “He had kids? I didn’t know that.”

“There are photographs in his wallet.”

“That’s too bad, but we have to use what Uncle Sam gives us. I’m surprised she left anything behind. She usually doesn’t.”

“The wallet’s synthetic. It’s not an acceptable sacrifice.”

“They weren’t lying when they said the gods were fickle. Are we square?”

“*Ja*. With her, at least.”

“That’s all that matters. Thanks again, Doc, until next time.” He turned on his heel and returned to the waiting car.

Paasche leaned against his door and watched the high desert flame into day with the rising sun. “Idiots,” he said to himself.

Jeff Stoner is a software analyst hailing from rural Maryland. His stories have previously appeared in Planet Scumm and Cirsova Magazine. Jeff's other interests include military history, astronomy, and space. He can be found on Twitter as @stoner_68.

Pulsa

By EDWARD M. ERDELAC

Otto Hueber, a widower living in Argentina with his son, believes he's escaped justice for his war crimes...until a plague of blood coincides with a mysterious brand!

It began with blood.

It came from the tap, gushing over the dinner plates in spurts, splashing Otto Hueber's son Christian's brown hands in crimson. Christian had always done the dishes with his mother. When she'd died two years ago, killed in a mudslide that caused her to flip their Baqueano six times on the way home from the market, Christian, then ten years old, had wordlessly assumed her duties around the house. That had been a relief, at least, as his wife Iara had joked that Otto was like an elephant that had to be followed around and cleaned up after. He couldn't help it. After he had left the military, his former discipline had slackened. Out of ease, he had foregone a great many of his youthful habits, even shaving his previously meticulously groomed sun-blond hair. Iara and the warm Argentinian weather had perhaps mellowed his prior temperament, softened him. *Hauptsturmführer* List would never recognize him now.

Otto thought little of the incident at first, assuming it was some peculiarity of the rural plumbing. Perhaps a pipe had burst somewhere and allowed red clay into the main. But no, in a panic, Christian had announced all the taps in the house were spewing the red stuff, and even the standing water in the toilet bowl was red.

When he poured from the pitcher on the table, his drinking glass filled with blood.

It *was* blood. Otto knew that metallic smell all too well.

He went down to the river with a pail to fetch fresh water and found it flowing red, the banks choked with flopping trout and lananga, their gills flaring.

"I'm thirsty," Christian said, as Otto shut out the lights that night. "Will there be water in the morning?"

"I don't know," he answered.

When he lay down in the big bedroom alone, he noticed an odd patch of puckered flesh had risen on his right forearm. It looked like a scar, as if a fanciful 'X' had been carved there.

It rained all the next day, and they set buckets and containers outside to collect it.

That night, the intruders came.

Christian roused him from sleep. It was past midnight, and the rain was still pattering steadily.

“Someone is moving outside, Papa,” he said, rubbing his eye with his fist.

Sometimes bandits and rebels came down from the hills. Otto kept his Luger loaded by the nightstand. He motioned for Christian to crawl into the bed, and he crept barefoot into the kitchen. He saw a large shadow slide across the blinds, heard the kitchen doorknob rattle.

He doubled backed to the bathroom, jerked open the window, and was about to slide out into the night when a flash of lightning showed his house was surrounded by a mob of about twenty pale, hunched, naked figures whose skin shone slick in the dark. What kind of men they were, Otto could not say, but his hackles rose at their strange, subhuman gait, their white, bloated bellies, and hard, scaly limbs.

He slipped quietly back inside and returned to the bedroom, whispering for Christian to don his coat and boots. He took the keys to the jeep from the nightstand, knelt by the bedside, and dragged out the slim box he kept under there. He had torched his uniform long ago, along with all his orders and documents, but the Schmeisser he had kept, and two clips of bullets.

By the time Christian returned from his room, he had loaded the submachine gun. They heard the almost musical tinkling of the kitchen window breaking, and Otto put the jeep keys between his teeth, tucked his son’s head under his arm, and went swiftly to the front door.

He kicked it open and fired a burst from the machine gun into the tangle of hissing creatures outside. His blood iced over as the muzzle flashes further illuminated their horrid, fish-like features, their wide

mouths of piranha teeth and bulging frog eyes. Their stinking black blood splashed across his face, his hands, his shoulders.

Christian shrieked, but Otto pulled the boy along to the jeep, flung him inside, firing at the things that came around the corners of the house. At least they fell. He jumped into the jeep, smothering his son with his own weight as he clambered over him into the driver's seat, spat the keys into his fist, turned the engine over, and kicked the accelerator.

The jeep lurched away and groaned, bouncing down the rutted road, headlights slashing wildly through the slanting rain.

A glance in the rearview mirror showed the hulking things loping haphazardly in his wake, as if their broad, flapping feet were unused or ill-accustomed to navigating dry land. They were lit by the taillights in a red glare that suited their hideous, hellish appearance.

“What are they, papa?” Christian whined, peering fearfully over the back of his seat.

Otto didn't know, and would not guess.

He drove for hours, breathless, heart hammering. They reached his father-in-law's sheep ranch sometime before dawn, while his son dozed in the passenger seat. The rain ceased.

The old man had never liked him, but he loved his grandson, and he accepted them both without question. He listened to the boy's breathless tale of the strange intruders, and looked now and then to Otto for silent confirmation.

When Christian realized his father intended to return to their house, he begged him to stay.

“I have to go back and see if they're gone,” he told his son. The house was all they had in the world. “I'll be careful.”

The old man did not dissuade him, but when he finally extricated himself from his son and got back in the jeep, the old man said quietly,

“You are marked, Otto.”

The blood of the things he'd killed was all over him, and it reeked—a rotten skipjack smell that drew the jungle flies to him in a buzzing, annoying cloud. He had tried to scrub it from his skin, but though the blackish ichor was gone, the stink remained, like the pervasive musk of a skunk. He had changed into a spare set of the old man's clothes, and thrown his own on the mulch pile.

“I know,” he said. “It's going to have to wear off.”

The old man shook his head and touched his arm, tapping the new design of puffy flesh that now rode beneath the first. This one was shaped like a crooked, backwards ‘L.’

“I mean you are *cursed*.”

Otto was no great believer in such things, and he was no coward. He'd earned the Iron Cross at Rotterdam in '42 and would have fought at the front the rest of the war if a Dutch Marine bullet hadn't struck him in the head and gotten him reassigned to guard duty on Alderney.

But he had seen the things at his house, and he knew his son was not safe there.

By midday, the hot sun was drawing the night's rain back into the cloudless sky, and he drove back through a sultry haze, sweating through his shirt and soaking his belt until it was pliable around his waist as the hide it had once been.

He drove fast, not because he was eager to return to the house, but because the stinging flies gathered so thickly on his face and neck and on his hands where the blood had splashed that he had to keep the jeep barreling, the warm air rushing, to ease his own suffering even a little.

He did not see the creatures on the road, and when he reached his house again around four o'clock, the carcasses of the few he'd killed the night before were clustered with dark swarms of insects and unapproachable.

The flies filled the air around the house, hovering impatiently for a chance to dart into the mass of their fellows and have their turn at lapping at the foul blood that was apparently irresistible to them.

He beat his way through the wretched, whirling hot air to the house. After making sure none of the frog creatures were waiting inside, he broke up one of the kitchen chairs and boarded up the damaged window to keep the gnats and flies out of the house.

But it was an impossible task. He sprayed himself down with insecticide and drew a square of Chinese chalk around the gaps in the boards over the kitchen window. The flies buzzed in and died by the thousands trying to get at his smelly flesh. Soon they were a carpet of curling carcasses bouncing in a myriad of tiny death throes on the floor beneath the broken window.

He tried the spigots and found the water had cleared, so he went into the bathroom, propping the Schmeisser against the toilet, and showered.

Iara had kept a salve of her Indian grandmother's making as a remedy for insect bites. As he lathered it over his angry skin, he found a third mark on his forearm. This one was like an upside-down 'y.' Crooked. He smeared the irritated marks with salve.

The insects were so thick outside the house he could hear the beating of their wings, and the pile of dead flies beneath the window had spread halfway across the kitchen. He got the broom and swept them back to the wall.

He was reminded of the piles of bodies at Lager Sylt KL on Alderney. *Hauptsturmführer* List had once ordered seventy sick men liquidated. They were already dying, having been worked and starved half to death building fortifications against the inevitable Allied advance into the Channel Islands. As they were unable to work, List had ordered them killed, but with the stipulation that no bullets be wasted on them, as ammunition had to be saved to fight the enemy.

So, Otto and two other men had gone down the line and simply strangled them one at a time. The first skeletal, shaven headed man in

loose pajamas had been difficult—watching the already protruding, watery eyes bulge in the wraith-like skull, hearing that croaking, rasping sound from his gulping mouth, feeling the bony fingers clench weakly at the backs of his gloved hands. He had learned to throttle them a bit after that, and by the third time, he was wringing their skinny necks with efficiency, like the chickens on his father's farm in Traunstein.

At the end of the pile of seventy bodies, he'd had the highest count among the three of them at thirty-seven. Poor *Sturmmann* Nussbaum had vomited after his second and sat out with his face in his hands while he and *Unterscharführer* Riesling finished the rest. They'd made Nussbaum burn the whole lot of them with a flamethrower and bury the remains by himself.

Otto sat in the kitchen and smoked, listening to the buzzing of the insects. Iara would never let him do such a thing, were she alive, have a cigarette in her kitchen. He strained to hear the return of the creatures, but none came. Eventually, as night came on, he dozed.

He awoke with a start to the sound of an unearthly, multitudinous hissing and yowling. He was stiff from having slept in the chair, and his legs were numb. He nearly fell to the filthy floor among the dead insects and lurched toward the broken window to peer through the barricade outside.

In the early light, he saw a sight that chilled him to his marrow, almost more than his first look at the inhuman horrors that had assailed the house two nights ago.

The yard leading to the tree line was alive with luminescent yellow eyes and scintillating feline shapes.

Otto had seen and heard many wild pumas in his time in Argentina, even shot a few that had ventured too near the house. Never had he seen such a congregation. It was unheard of. These weren't pack animals. It was unnatural.

There were more than two dozen of the man-sized cats roaming the yard, playing tug of war with the carcasses of the frog things, hissing,

fighting, roaring, even mating furiously. The smell of the ruptured corpses combined with the thick stench of feline urine and musk was overwhelming, and he backed away from the window.

Suddenly, the measly wood of the broken chair nailed across the aperture seemed like a flimsy, insubstantial thing to stand between him and the terrible fangs of the great cats outside.

He stood in the kitchen and held his breath, fearful the beasts would hear him and investigate. He pressed his hands to his ears as the high, alien yowling of the mating females and the snarling of the contenders for the strange frog-man meat rose in volume, so loud they seemed to be in the next room. He could not hear the thudding of his own blood in his veins over the screeching of the cats.

Lips trembling, he went to the front door, and the small of his back tightened and froze with a burst of cool sweat when he remembered he had broken it. It hung partly open, still. Through the crack, he saw the jeep waiting in the gravel drive.

He unslung his machine gun and eased to the floor, keeping the muzzle pointed at the broken door. He sat this way for untold hours, watching the light and shadow progress across the wall and floors, listening to the terrible noises of the predators in the yard, waiting for one of their great golden heads to appear in the door crack.

When night came, the cacophony died down, but he still heard them out there, steadily breathing, gnawing the occasional knot of bone, but otherwise sated at last and now lazing in their gluttony. How could they still stand each other's company in relative peace? Why didn't they leave?

He got up, knees popping, and went to the door, putting his face to the space between.

The golden cats were strewn about the yard, dozing, tails swatting their muscled flanks, teddy bear ears twitching against the buzz of the nocturnal insects, which was not so prevalent as before now that the

meat that had so enticed their prior frenzy was in the swollen bellies of the pumas.

He returned to his place and set his back against the wall, the Schmeisser in his lap. As the last shaft of moonlight departed from him, he rolled up his sleeve and saw another sign beside the rest, climbing up his arm, a haphazard 't.'

Was the old man right? Was he cursed? Was there any such thing? It didn't seem possible, but neither did these things that were happening. That they coincided with the appearance of each new symbol on his arm was undeniable.

He did not believe in God.

Lager Sylt, the grey, rain-scoured pillboxes of Alderney with their mortar of blood, the prisoners they had hung kicking from the gateposts, the pitiful lives he had pinched out like candle flames between his own fingers, these things had precluded any infantile faith he had been instructed in as a child. The wrathful God his shivering old grandmother had warned him about so furtively in the night had never forced his hands from the necks of His chosen people, never stopped his boot from kicking in their moaning faces, never stayed the lash of his comrades on their bent backs.

Was God late to His verdict? Was He behind on His heavenly accounts and only now turned to mete out Otto's just punishment?

Mostly, he thought little of his time at Lager Sylt. When he had nightmares, they were not of Jews mewling for mercy. His hands had never choked his wife in their bed in the midst of some guilt-ridden night terror. He sometimes dreamt of the war, before his injury, of falling bombs and the mechanical squeal of tank treads, the groaning of steel, and the snap of rifle fire. But never of Sylt.

Until now.

Strange that his thoughts had turned to that dismal isle.

Now, he saw *Hauptsturmführer* List, standing on a palanquin borne by six skeletal *mussulman* Jews in their loose striped pajamas, the yellow stars sewn on their breasts. The commandant's uniform was strange. It was not the grey of a Waffen-SS. He was girded in a white linen skirt, his feet in golden sandals. His bare chest bore a handsome device of golden eagle wings and a broad jeweled necklace, and his eyes were painted in an exotic style. On his head was not the officer's cap with its death's head skull insignia, but a golden circlet with a rearing cobra and a rich-looking kerchief headdress. In his arms, crossed over his chest, he bore a hooked staff scepter and a gilded flail.

And he, Otto, was there, along with Nussbaum and Reisling. They were in their SS uniforms, and kneeling before them were three figures in striped prisoners' uniforms, their heads obscured by white linen hoods.

At a nod from List, they put their hands around the throats of the kneeling prisoners.

The posture, the almost forgotten feeling, aroused Otto. He felt himself quicken and flutter as he pressed his thumbs into the soft pit of the prisoner's throat.

He glanced at his fellows.

Reisling was laughing, thrusting his hips lewdly as he worked.

Nussbaum was blubbering like the weak fool he was.

The hood of his victim slipped from his head, revealing the face of a leering, fanged puma. It hissed and immediately buried its muzzle in Nussbaum's belly, ripping a ragged wound that spilled his coiled intestines out over the prisoner's shoulders.

Reisling laughed at Nussbaum's misfortune and yanked the sack from his own prisoner's head. Beneath the linen hood was the distorted face of one of the amphibious things that had attacked Otto's house. It gave a terrible croak-cry and bit off his hands with its wide, toothed maw. Reisling shrieked, blood spurting from the stumps of his forearms.

Otto was determined not to share their fate. He squeezed his prisoner's neck harder, felt the bones give between his fingers, heard them crack, kept throttling till the head rocked limply back and forth on the narrow shoulders.

He threw the ragged body triumphantly to the ground and the sack fell away.

He did not want to look at the face, so he looked back at the pharaoh/commandant, and gave a nervous, triumphant laugh.

List's face was gone. In its place was a sheer mirror. He saw himself reflected there, saw the corpse at his own feet.

He glanced away, at the palanquin bearers. They all raised their heads and bore the same mirror faces. He had to look.

He had to see Christian's head turned almost all the way around on his twisted neck.

Otto lurched awake, a groan escaping his dry lips.

He slapped his hand over his mouth.

Surely the beasts in the yard had heard that.

He primed the machine gun and waited, blinking, sweating.

There was no sound outside.

He crawled to the door and peered out into the sunlit yard.

There was no sign of the pumas, nor even of the frog-thing carcasses, and no more flies than usual.

He got to his feet, scratching his face and the backs of his hands idly, in wonderment.

Had it all been part of the same nightmare?

He swung the door open with a creak and cautiously stepped into the yard, pointing the Schmeisser wherever he looked.

Then he saw them.

The pumas had not left.

They were still there, lying in heaps in the tall grass.

Poisoned, perhaps, by the strange meat? Or gorged into a stupor?

He got to the jeep, opened the driver's door, put one foot inside, and fired a rapid burst into the nearest carcass.

Not sleeping. Dead as Hitler.

Was it all over?

He looked at his arm.

No. There was a new mark there.

And he recognized it. Or rather, remembered it.

He had seen it at Sylt.

List had told him and Nussbaum to gather five Jews to work on the old telegraph tower, and he had gone into the barracks early that morning and found an old bespectacled Jew drawing the same symbol with his finger in the dust as a few younger men looked on.

“What the hell is that?”

“Nothing, sir,” the old man had said.

“It's not nothing. What is it? Answer me, you pig!”

“A *He*,” the old man replied finally.

“A what? Hay?”

“A number five.”

“A five?” Otto had said, and something in the old Jew's manner had rubbed him the wrong way just then. “How prophetic.” He called over his shoulder. “You hear that, Nussbaum? We have a regular old Abraham here.”

“Abraham was not a prophet,” the old man said quietly, then lowered his eyes.

Otto pursed his lips.

“I need five of you Jews for work detail.”

Slowly, five of the scarecrow men got up from their iron cots and shambled out.

The last glanced back at the old man before he left.

In a moment, Nussbaum was barking at them to follow him up the hill.

Otto felt they were up to something, and the tone of the old Jew’s correction of his mistake had irked him.

“And you, Abraham,” he said to the old man, pulling out his pistol. “To teach you to answer the first time you are spoken to, here are five reminders.”

He brought the butt of the Luger down once on the top of the old man’s skull, hard enough for blood to jet from his nostrils.

“One!”

The old man slumped to the cot.

Otto slapped him in the forehead with the barrel.

“Two!”

“Three!”

“Four!”

“Five!”

He had left the old Jew lying on the cot, the gray blanket beneath his pulped head spreading with dark blood, his shattered spectacles askew on his ruined face. He had lingered only to blot out the Hebrew character scrawled in the dirt with his boot heel.

And now there was a Jewish number five on his arm.

And five days had passed since all this strangeness had started.

Something slammed down on the hood of the jeep.

It was a black-feathered cormorant, yellow bill agape, long neck twisted in death. It had hit the hood hard enough to dent it.

A few feet away, another of the big birds struck the ground violently.

Then, it was as if a storm had broke, but it was a storm of birds.

Birds of every variety. They rained down in fast succession. One struck the windshield, spreading a silvery spiderweb of cracks across it.

He cursed and started the engine, pushed down the accelerator, roaring off down the road, not sure where he was going.

In the fields to his right and left, he saw whole herds of cattle and flocks of sheep collapse in unison.

A barefooted boy's horse crumpled beneath him as Otto drove past.

He gunned the engine and bounced under the forest canopy.

He saw scores of howler monkeys tumble from a tree, and the jeep jumped as it ran over a jaguar dead in the road.

He gripped the wheel tightly and drove like a madman. He turned east. All he knew was he had to get away from Christian.

He left the road eventually, and a mass of dead livestock and animals of every sort in his wake. Wherever he passed, they died in droves.

He drove into the night, until the jeep spluttered and stopped, its tank dry at last.

He was somewhere near the coast, in a dark and empty field at the edge of a jungle, he knew, but not precisely where.

He slumped over the wheel, exhausted, but too frightened to sleep, for fear the dream of Christian would return.

Iara's father had been right. Somehow, he was marked, like Cain, surely for the things he had done on Alderney. Perhaps God Himself was hounding him, lashing him, driving him. But why? Why had he been presented with all these horrors and not simply killed? Struck by lightning or cast straightaway into hell, if there was such a place?

Or was it simply his mind going at last?

Was any of this really happening? It was so fantastic! Sometimes he had wondered, after he had come to Argentina, after he had met and fallen in love with Iara....how he could have done the things he had done at Lager Sylt and yet become a husband and a father. In his mind, it had solidified his unbelief in the concept of God and divine justice. He had strangled over thirty men and been rewarded. If there was a God or gods in this strange universe, he had decided they either approved of him or, more likely, cared nothing for the paltry crimes and concerns of humanity at all. Why would an omnipotent god care how many infinitesimal human souls were snuffed out, unless they were his commissary? And even then, to a being of infinite power and longevity, surely it would take the simultaneous deaths of an entire planet or two to rouse his notice. Murder and worldwide genocide to a soul-eating god would have to be like the difference between a single grape and a whole ham spoiling in some cosmic icebox.

But sometimes, just sometimes, he had wondered if perhaps he had gone mad on Sylt, as Nussbaum had in the end. Nussbaum, in his remorse, had hung himself from the gatepost beside the bloated corpse of the Russian they had caught stealing bread.

Perhaps Iara of the brown skin and round breasts and hair like a horse's mane, and strapping Christian of whom his heart was so proud, and all this life were just a dream, and now the dream was turning into a nightmare before he awoke in the damp barracks again, or blinked his way from a daydream and found himself standing once more in the rain in front of that line of *mussulmans*, wringing some skinny neck.

He looked at his face in the rearview mirror of the jeep and cried out.

His face was a mess of angry red and white sores, pulsing and hot to the touch. The backs of his hands, his arm, everywhere the foul blood had spattered him, was now tightly packed with hard, pus-filled bubbles.

He was monstrous.

He stumbled out of the jeep and fell in the grass, onto a heap of dead wolves, their tongues lolling from the sides of their muzzles.

He tried to squeeze one of the boils and screamed. It was too painful, and as volatile as the swelling sore looked, it would not erupt.

On his arm, another strange character, like an 'r.'

Six.

What had God created on the sixth day? He couldn't remember his grandmother's lessons.

He stood up, leaned against the jeep, the sun seeming to inflame the sores on his skin. He moaned and got on his belly. He crawled under the jeep and lay there for some time, agitated, restless. Every time he tried to scratch his bulbous skin, he shrieked in agony.

Finally, out of exhaustion, he dozed.

Moments later, he discovered that he was lying across an anthill. The biting insects marched across his tortured skin, in the corners of his eyes, in his ears, up his nose.

He screamed and dragged himself out from under the jeep and ran flailing, slapping at himself, eyes squeezed shut.

He crashed blindly down a steep embankment, rolled, dashed himself against a boulder, and came to a stop at last in a dry gully.

He lay on his face and wept.

The next thing he knew was the most tremendous peal of thunder he had ever heard.

His sores had burst and run as he'd slept, and he found he had to peel his own face from the dirt as the pus had dried and encrusted.

He didn't know if it was day or night. The sky was boiling with terrible clouds, and the lightning that flashed deep within them was red and strange.

He stood up uncertainly, hugging himself, as a hot, unpleasant wind kicked up.

He pushed himself beneath a stony outcropping and watched in fascination as a white smear appeared in the angry sky and fell swiftly towards the earth.

Hailstones big as golf balls rained down, with a clatter like machine gun bullets.

When they struck the ground, they burst apart and spilled fire across the ground like lit petrol.

The trees burst into flame. The fields.

He gasped, harrowed to the heart by the immensity of the destruction.

Instantly, the jungle above the gully was on fire.

He pushed himself closer under the stone, but the heat was intense. He knew he couldn't stand to stay here, but he also knew there was no safe haven out there in that supernatural holocaust. He screamed and pulled his hair. He punched the earth and his knee in fury and fear. He was like a maddened horse wheeling about in a burning barn.

He remembered seeing the Dutch soldiers rush out like madmen in the middle of artillery bombardments, their nerves too rattled for them to remain in cover under the shelling. He knew now how they'd felt.

Finally, he ran from his cover, full tilt down the center of the stone gully.

The stones struck his shoulders, glanced off his head.

His shirt caught fire, and he tore it off.

The stones at least, would not burn, even as the grass and trees above him became a raging conflagration.

He felt the land descend, and he followed the twisting bends of the gully like a rat in a maze.

At last, the high earth fell away, and he saw the shore of the Atlantic, into which this long-dead creek had once emptied.

A curtain of steam rose from the crashing surf. Spray, or had the ocean become superheated? He no longer cared. He thought only of the cool water and ran like a fool out onto the sand, then into the wet surf, and finally stumbled and fell headlong into the waves.

The salt water burned his ravaged, exposed hide, but it was as cool as he had imagined in the depths, and he let the water close over his head and sought the bottom with a stroke of his arms.

He lay down there till his lungs burned as much as his skin, then he thrust his head up above the surface.

The entire coast was a wall of flame and smoke. It looked like the boundary of hell itself. The strange hail was rippling the undulating water all around.

He turned toward the open ocean and saw, a hundred yards or more out, an impossible island, a mere patch of brushy land, the sparse peak of some underwater mountain, upon which stood an impossible two-floored cabin. Some fisherman's private abode maybe. He saw a little rowboat moored there, bobbing.

But most importantly, the island was not on fire. It lay beyond the destructive cloud overhead.

He swam for it, mainly beneath the water, to avoid the hail, but finally, he was able to traverse the distance wholly on the surface.

Behind him, the accursed cloud shrank and finally died out.

The shoreline was smoldering by the time he reached the little island and fell flat out on the small beach.

When he next opened his eyes, he felt a weight on his back, and heard a terrible chittering and clicking close in his ears.

He pushed himself up to his knees, and several sizable things fell from his shoulders, one directly onto the sand in front of him.

It was a kind of a beetle, or a cockroach, but it was the size of a small dog or a housecat. It was shiny black and had ten segmented legs, its shell capped with strange, segmented tendrils which moved in weird, deliberate patterns, as if pantomiming. The shell unfolded, and leathery wings fluttered out, beat the air rapidly, and lifted the bulky thing directly in front of Otto's face.

He stared into its large, lidless eyes and saw the red glow of the burning mainland behind him. He felt his stomach drop as he detected an alien but unmistakable presence, an *intelligence*, behind that unblinking gaze. Its weirdly shaped head cocked in animal-like curiosity, and three pyramidal-arranged mouths slid wetly open and let out an unnerving hiss.

The hiss was answered by the others scuttling all up and down his back. They chattered intimately into his ears, so close he could feel the heat of their breath and smell a heavy, vegetative stench.

He moaned and swatted the buzzing thing hovering in front of him away and stumbled up the beach.

The ground between the water and the house was alive, and his feet crunched on their humped backs, eliciting piercing shrieks and warning hisses. He shook them from his back, felt their sharp legs latch into his flesh, reached back and tore them free, flung them away.

And all the time, he ran for the tumbledown house with its crooked, unwieldy angles, its weather-beaten walls and empty, dark windows.

The huge insects rose into the air, nearly blocking his sight of the door. He hollered and beat them aside, knocking them out of the air. They

latched onto his arms, hugged his legs, probed at his creeping skin with their sharp, quivering appendages.

He reached the door, twisted the knob, flung himself inside, and kicked it closed.

He rolled on the things still attached to him, stomped them, forced down his own revulsion and pounded them with his bare hands until they crackled and jumped and expired on their backs, hideous, spindly limbs twitching and waving in death, as if beckoning or beseeching.

He got to his feet and went to the window. The giant insects crowded the pane with their carapaces, interlaced their serrated legs, rubbing them together, eliciting a dreadful whirring chorus. They engulfed the house, blotted out the light. He could hear them ticking against the walls by the millions. Their bulbous-eyed heads peered in at him.

Otto screamed.

Then, just as suddenly, the creatures detached from the house, as if startled by his cry or, perhaps, following some communal, unspoken command.

He pressed his face to the glass and watched as they coalesced into a whirling funnel that spiraled up into the sky, directing their fluttering flight towards a specific point, a diamond-shaped gap in both cloud and sky, dark as spilled ink.

They became a pinprick, swallowed up by the dark spot.

As if nourished by them, the spot grew. It spread across the sky, flowing downward towards the horizons, as if the world itself were being dipped in crude.

The stars were snuffed out. The moon was obscured. Even the red light of the fire on the mainland faded and disappeared.

Nothing shone on the waves or glinted on the windowpane. Outside the window was oblivion, black and total as a mine tunnel, still as a sealed grave. The darkness seemed to swallow sound as well as light. The

monotonous lapping of the waves, the bumping of the little boat, all were silenced.

Somehow, this deep calm filled him with a more total dread than any of the previous horrors had impressed upon him.

It was as if only this strange island existed, floating in a void.

He turned and saw the only light there was, in all of creation, burning somewhere at the top of a single staircase with a lacquered black wood rail.

He groped towards it.

He kicked over furniture, smashed some bit of knickknack, but at last saw his own torn and bloodied hand grip the creaking rail. On his arm, two more raised marks had appeared. A stylized 'n' and a kind of broken armed 'u.'

He put his foot on the stair, gathered up his courage, and ascended, shaking the whole while, terrified to face whatever waited.

The upstairs room was candlelit, the burning wicks of seven black candles casting a shivering glow on the peaked attic ceiling. The tall candles were arranged according to some rigid pattern inscribed in chalk or perhaps salt on the floor—a great circled emblem, a star of sorts, the points bearing the candles, the rim inscribed with sigils and runes, inscrutable but for the halo of Hebrew numbers matching the nine scars on his arm.

In the center of the floor knelt a thin, thickly-bearded man in a long black cotton robe, and a crude vest of black wool. Over his chest was a square plate set with rows of onyx stones. His face was framed by a pair of long, stringy curls that hung down behind his ears. The man stared at him expectantly. His hands were folded in front of him, his deep-set eyes ringed by wire-rimmed spectacles and half-lidded.

“We meet again, *Scharführer* Hueber,” said the man in a small, calm voice.

“I don’t know you,” Otto whispered, quieter than he would have liked. He cleared his throat. There was a man behind all this, he told himself now. Not some vengeful god. Just a man.

“It might be my beard and *payot*. But then again, we were never properly introduced,” said the man, rolling up his voluminous sleeve to expose a row of numbers tattooed on the inside of his arm. “You remember this, maybe?”

“I never had much of a head for numbers,” Otto quipped, straightening.

“I know you can count to five,” said the man in the robe, darkly.

He thought back to that day, to the man in the work detail, the one who had lingered and looked back at old Abraham from the doorway.

Otto wet his lips. He could kill this sniveling devil of a Jew. But would it end whatever he had set in motion? He had to be sure.

“They call Alderney the Island of Silence now,” said the man. “You SS evacuated the residents to make room for your camps and guns. The people do not know what happened there. At Norderney. At Sylt. And those who could tell them are ash.”

Otto’s gaze wandered about the room, to a mirror on the wall. His skin was raw and peeling, burned and cut and bitten, crusted over with scabs and dried blood.

“What did you do to me?”

“The *Pulsa diNura*,” said the Jew. “The Lashes of Fire. All the curses of the Torah. The ten plagues of Egypt. The rabbis invoked it to drive and punish the unrighteous in the old days.”

“Is that what I am, unrighteous?” Otto muttered.

“At Sylt, we called you the Sphinx. The Strangler. The man you killed, the rabbi. He was my teacher.”

“You did all this to me for a *teacher*?”

“He was a great man, Rabbi Weiss. He was going to free us with the *Pulsa diNura*. He was going to be our Moses. But you killed him before he could complete the ritual or pass on the knowledge. He taught me the first five at Sylt. It took me many years to learn the rest.”

“Look at you. We were right about you Jews,” Otto spat. “The only god you worship is the Devil.”

The man shook his head, and his eyes assumed a faraway look.

“It’s not Ha-Shem I invoked against you. No. I prayed to Him, for a long time, for vengeance. But He didn’t answer. Not the Adversary, either. This is not Rabbi Weiss’s *Pulsa diNura*. That secret died with him. No, I had to delve deep to learn my curse. *Very* deep. I called up things from a sunken city, and drew the locusts of a world of emerald suns for you. Now, we stand in the roiling shadow of the demon throne at the center of oblivion. Maybe this is the real *Pulsa*. Maybe it’s the true power the deliverer invoked against Pharaoh; the power that was before the first day. Maybe everything that came after is a lie.”

Otto stepped toward the man.

“Blood and frogs, flies and beasts, pestilence, sores, fire, locusts, and darkness.”

“*Aleph, bet, gimel, dalet, hei, vav, zayin, het, tet,*” said the Jew, counting them off on his fingers. “And now *yodh*, the tenth.”

“I remember this story,” Otto growled, putting his hands around the Jew’s throat. “But this doesn’t end with the death of the first-born.”

The old feeling. Like riding a bicycle. It returned so easy. The Jew’s neck was so thin his fingers met behind the nape. He drove his thumbs in deep under his bearded chin, till his nails bit into flesh and to the laryngeal prominence behind. Blood bubbled over the webs between his thumbs and forefingers, and the death rattle croaked out hoarse and raw. Tears ran freely down the Jew’s cheeks.

Otto let go. The body dropped and rolled. Beneath where he had been kneeling, a symbol, a simple, insignificant-looking dash scrawled in

chalk.

Sunlight streamed through the window, lighting the room. That terrible darkness was gone.

“*Yodh,*” said a voice behind his back.

The hairs on Otto’s neck stood at attention.

“*One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*”

He whirled.

The robed Jew stood in the corner of the room behind him, arms folded, a wry grin on his thin lips.

Otto looked at his own arm, as the tenth mark appeared.

“*Oh, mein Gott,*” he murmured, turning back to the circle.

His son lay dead on the floor.

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White Casket

By VILLE MERILÄINEN

Vilja has been cursed by a powerful forest spirit—in return for her own life, she must care for orphaned children to raise as her own until he calls for them!

Boots crunching on midwinter snow, Vilja gripped her shawl tighter when a gale cut through the forest. She had left her coat, hat, and gloves back home, a gesture of solidarity toward the victim she guided by hand. Twilight hung over the forest as a purple pall, heralding the coming of the Nattfader. Vilja shuddered at the thought of him and quickened her pace so suddenly she made Emil stumble.

“Slow down,” the boy said, hobbling to keep up in ankle-deep snow. His clothes weren’t warm enough for the season, but Vilja had nothing better to give. She had too many children to tend to, and those who outgrew what she could spare were luckless. Emil would be only nine in another month, but his notch for height on her doorframe was already her hand’s span higher than the next tallest boy’s.

And so it was his turn to follow Vilja into the woods.

“There’s no time.” Vilja’s gaze wandered over the shrouded trees. She felt the god’s eyes upon her and his presence in the chill of the air, but saw nothing. Bringing a torch or a lantern would’ve been for naught—no light could survive the Nattfader’s arrival. “We must find the fairies before night’s upon us in full.”

“You’re trying to trick me,” Emil grumbled. “There’s no such thing as fairies.”

She rubbed his knuckles. “The forest is a home to a great many things, and half of them are things you must see to believe.”

Candles stood in the drifts around them, and Vilja left Emil quivering in the circle of wax memorials as she tied strings to hang from the branch of a grey willow. The new candle she set on the strings was made from the tallow of her last offering: little Bea, who loved to fish and had come running at the chance to find fairies.

Once she finally scraped a match alight through her trembling, Vilja lit her admission of guilt, then the others. The Nattfader’s breath would put them out when he came for Emil, but it gave her an excuse to stay a

little longer. The boy bounced in place, shifting weight from one foot to the other, arms wrapped around himself.

“Is it going to be much longer?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Vilja said. She forced on a smile and rubbed the boy’s cheek, so terribly cold. “Fairies won’t show themselves to adults. I’ll be just over there, behind the birches.”

“I still don’t believe we’ll find anything,” Emil said, brow set in a frown.

“Would you like to go back, then?” Vilja asked. Emil fell into deep thoughts, noting his rumination with a hum, but then shook his head.

“I trust you,” he said, in tones of childish deference. “But only for a short while. I’ll freeze if I have to stay out much longer.”

Vilja scarcely kept her placid mask from cracking, but did not offer her shawl.

They both gasped at a groan on the wind. Emil’s gaze darted about, but Vilja fell to her knees and guided his wide-shot eyes onto hers with a hand on his chin. “What was that?” he hissed.

Vilja put on the most comforting smile she could. “It’s only the fairies, so excited to see you.”

Past the boy’s shoulder, Vilja saw blotches of ink spreading on untouched snow. Emil sucked in a shivering breath as he uttered, “I changed my mind. Take me back.”

Vilja kissed his brow, then whispered in his ear, “*Tyst nu, älskling. Allt är bra.*”

In a whimper, Emil said, “Promise you won’t be far?”

She rose from her knees, gave the boy’s hair a tousle. Behind him, where the shadows grew, appeared cloven tracks as great as a bear’s claws. “Promise.”

Vilja's shawl was wet with tears by the time she reached the house. The log cabin sat at the edge of the woods, between a field where she gathered herbs and clovers in the summer and mushrooms in autumn, and a lake rich with fish, sedges, and wild ducks. Beside her house sat an old barn, where her father had once kept livestock and which now served as a dormitory for the unwanted children entrusted in her care. There was no light inside, but when she came around the barn, Vilja found someone waiting for her at the step of her porch.

"Won't you let me grieve in peace?" she called quietly to the sitting devil-woman in a frayed dress. The Sister of Silence looked up from her work, the light of the lantern beside her shimmering on her wax-covered eyes hidden under earth-brown strands. Between her legs she held a pot of molten tallow, in which she dipped a wick made of Emil's hair. The sides of the metal container glowed red where her bare knees touched it.

"Now's not a night for grieving," the Sister of Silence said. "My prince was pleased with this one, and so he is pleased with you."

Vilja's sorrow burst out as a bitter scoff. "Get out of my way, corpsegrinder. I'm going to bed."

"The candle is almost done."

Vilja folded her arms and turned toward the barn's dark window. "How many children have you brought me this time?"

"Only one," the Sister of Silence said. "A girl of four. She has one blue eye and one green, and can charm winter birds with her singing. Her name is Eva. You will bring her to my prince when she loses a hand to curiosity."

The demon lifted her finished candle out of the container. "Here. It's small, but there wasn't much left for me to work with." She grinned at Vilja's discomfort with a mouth full of pike's teeth. "My prince was ravenous today. You'll find only bones in the glade."

Once the Sister of Silence had returned to the woods and her lantern's glow disappeared amidst trees, Vilja went inside, fell in her bed fully

clothed, and lay still until daybreak, thinking about Emil.

Vilja fell asleep in the early hours and awoke to the sound of the children playing outside. She sat up, puffy-eyed and with a headache, then went to the window for a look at the newest. Her four wards played outside, two girls and two boys now: Iris, a bright one of seven with a knack for coming up with stories, who would go to the Nattfader when she'd break Vilja's axe and lie the näck of the lake did it; Oscar, a six-year-old who was prone to disappearing on solitary adventures, who would go to the Nattfader when two of his baby teeth fell out at once; Benjamin, who refused to be called Ben and fancied himself the man of the house, and who would go to the Nattfader when Vilja would find him sleeping under her bed after a game of hide and seek.

And now Eva, a songstress of four with eyes of different colours, who would go to the Nattfader when—by God—she lost a hand. With her soft features and blonde locks, Eva looked so much like Vilja she could've been her daughter or a twin to any of the others. Vilja didn't know whether the demon hunted children with her likeness or if her litter of simulacra were an absurd coincidence.

Vilja stayed by the window for a while, watching the children play, the ache in her heart spreading until it choked her. They had made circles in the snow and threw sticks in turn to conquer the spaces of others. Eva was either a natural talent or the others were letting her win.

Instead of disturbing their play with her grim task for the day, Vilja set to making breakfast. When the porridge was done, she called the children in. They did not ask about Emil. Children came and went, and only Vilja suffered their passing. Eva asked if Vilja was her mother now, and she answered no.

Vilja released the children back to their game once every bowl was empty, went outside, and fetched her axe and sled. The day was bright and would be long, as it always was after sating the Nattfader. Axe on shoulder, she dragged her sled to a field of birch stumps, where she spent

the rest of the morning chopping another tree down, splitting it into logs and dragging them back to the house. Some would go into the stove, but the best ones she'd use to bury Emil. She may've been a murderess, but she would not leave the children to a fate as mylings and made a white casket for every one of them.

Left to their own devices, the children had disappeared from the yard by the time Vilja returned. From inside the house came singing that had lured a pair of blackbirds to perch on the roof. Vilja let the children be—she had her tools out on the workbench behind the house, where she pieced together the casket. Once, she had adorned them with crosses, but now that she relied on a demon to bring her nails, it seemed like an empty gesture. She still painted them white, a sign of the purity of the inhabitants, if not the maker.

Once she had tucked the children in—and made sure Oscar's teeth were still in place, that Eva had both her hands, and that Benjamin was in his own bed—Vilja took a shovel and the casket into the woods. The sun had set, but the light of her torch glittered in the footsteps she'd made earlier in the day as she followed them to the crossroads. From there, she had another light to guide her way. Sled hissing behind, Vilja chased the ghost wandering amidst the trees.

“Vilja,” came a disembodied voice when she spotted a candle standing in a drift. “I called for you. Why didn't you come?”

“I'm sorry.” Vilja knelt to light the candles anew, but kept the one made of Emil's fat in her pocket. It wouldn't be right to light it with him watching. “Were you frightened?”

“I called for you,” he repeated. Vilja stepped back in shock when she rose and found Emil standing behind her. “You said you wouldn't be far. Why did you leave me?”

There was no colour in the boy's spectral eyes. His skin glowed gently, his blond hair had turned into shining strands, but his eyes were the deep and dark abyssal pit between the stars. She pressed a hand to his face,

but could not force a smile of comfort onto her lips. His skin was deathly cold, chilling even through her thick glove.

“I’m sorry, Emil. More than you know.”

Emil followed her as she went around lighting the candles, but she made sure not to turn her back to him. “I should’ve believed you,” Emil said, went quiet, and Vilja glanced his way. “I saw the fairy,” he went on. “I thought it would be small and pretty, but it was...” His breathing quickened—or the imitation of it—until he was on the border of hyperventilating. “I think it... It...”

Emil began to sob, and Vilja exposed her back to him at last, by kneeling to light Bea’s candle. It had chewed through the strings and fallen sideways on the snow. As soon as she lowered herself to set it upright, Emil clung onto her back.

“It ate me, Vilja. Your fairy ate me!” he cried. Vilja had to lean on a tree for support to stand up. The boy’s weight grew with every sob, until she was down to her knees in the drift.

“Where did it take you?” she asked, half-crawling back to her sled. “I’ll make it right, Emil. I promise.”

He slammed a fist with the weight of stones against her shoulder, making her buckle and drop her torch. “*You promised you wouldn’t leave me!*” he screamed. “I trusted you! You said you wouldn’t be far, and I trusted you!”

His weight grew tenfold, and Vilja’s legs gave, sending her plummeting facedown into snow. Emil wrapped his hands around her neck, screaming madly as he tried to break it.

“Emil!” Vilja cried, helplessly shovelling herself room to breathe. “Emil, look what I made you!”

“*You killed me!*” Emil shrieked. “*You killed me! You—*”

“On the sled, Emil! It’s for you!”

The boy's scream cut off, then his grip weakened, and finally his weight lifted enough for Vilja to stand.

"You made me a casket?" he whispered.

"Help me find your bones," she said, rubbing her sore neck. "I'll give you a proper burial."

Emil hung quietly onto her back as Vilja went to the sled, stayed quiet while she searched for the remains, and only spoke once she noticed them. His skeleton lay against the trunk of a birch outside the circle of candles. "Why did you leave me behind?"

"Because..." She stopped to regard the bones, then opened the casket and gently gathered them. Emil whimpered when she piled them up to fit inside, but the casket was too small to lay the skeleton straight. "Because the thing that did this was not a fairy, Emil. It's the only god in these woods, and I am indebted to it. I knew what would become of you, so I asked the god's servant to bring me holy water. I blessed the grove where I'll bury you."

Emil dug the tips of his fingers into Vilja's throat and growled, "What right do you have to bless anything?"

"None," Vilja rasped. "But you aren't the first child I carry there on my back, Emil."

Blotches appeared in her vision as the boy's grip tightened, then suddenly loosened.

Emil said nothing for the rest of the way.

Digging frozen earth left Vilja's back and arms aching, but by dawn she and Emil stood over a fresh grave, placing the marker. The boy had climbed off her back, as proof of the sanctity of the earth.

"I feel strange," Emil said, black eyes downcast, voice low. "Like I don't belong here. Like I never have."

“You’ll pass on when the sun rises,” Vilja said, shielding her eyes from the first rays over the trees. “I’ll wait with you if you’d like. I could say a prayer.”

Emil shook his head. “That’s not what I meant.” Vilja’s brows lifted from the concern on his spectral features. “I’m sorry, Vilja. I’m so sorry for shouting at you.”

“*Tyst nu, älskling,*” she whispered. A frostbite cracked her lip from the touch of his forehead. “Don’t be afraid. It won’t be long now.”

“No! You don’t understand.” His hands shot up, made her wince from the chill through her cheekbones. “You don’t belong here either.”

“I know. Only demons do.”

Sunlight touched the grave.

Vilja was alone in the grove.

She gave herself a moment to stop the grief in her bruised throat from spilling out, gripped the rope of her sled, and started off. Before the trees blocked her view of the gravesite, she turned for a last look at Emil’s cross amidst a dozen others. The Sister of Silence sat on her knees before the mound, head bowed, strands of hair swaying in the wind like a mourning veil.

All the way home, Vilja wondered whether she had lied to Emil one last time, and this was the only place where she belonged.

The children were up and playing the game from yesterday. Eva was winning again. Oscar noticed Vilja coming out of the thicket and ran over, grinning impishly as he spun around to fall in step with her. He said nothing, only sucked his lip, until Vilja prompted, “Aren’t you going to say hello at all?”

Oscar covered his mouth. His eyes twinkled with the hidden grin. “Hello, Vilja.”

Something was off about his speech, and his attempt at secrecy made Vilja's gut turn over. In her thoughts, she prayed for only one lost tooth; aloud, she asked, "Are you done playing?"

"I'm almost out. Eva's really good."

Vilja stopped. With the longer phrases, his newfound lisp was more prominent. "Did you lose a tooth?"

The boy threw his hands aside and gave her a gap-toothed beam. "Two! You weren't home when I woke up, and I didn't want to wake Iris to make breakfast, so I took a piece of hard bread." He ran his tongue over the gap of missing incisors. "Will you give me pennies for them? Benjamin said you would."

Vilja's face felt paralysed, smile too rigid, broken. Hard. Like she was supposed to be. "Of course. And... I'll even take you somewhere very special."

"Oh? Where?"

They'd been with her for too long. She'd developed affection. Two months at most—that was the deal.

Emil had been with her for four years. Oscar for longer. He'd still crawled when the Sister of Silence brought him and... who was it with him? Anna? Martin? How long was it since they'd gone to the Nattfader?

She'd have to give him up, but not so soon. Not the same day she buried Emil.

"I thought..." Her voice came out dry. She cleared her throat. It didn't help much. "I thought we could go looking for fairies tonight."

The boy's mouth fell open. "Fairies! That sounds great! But... don't you think the others would like to come too?"

Vilja knelt to place her hands on his shoulders. "I'm sure they would, but I want you all for myself."

The boy grinned.

I'm surprised, angel maker," the Sister of Silence said, startling Vilja as she chopped the felled birch into smaller logs. She had appeared sitting on a stump, lantern wan under the sun. The waxen patches looked less sinister in daylight, made her almost pitiable.

"I thought you beyond remorse by now," she went on. "It's strange to see you've grown soft instead of more numb."

"Go away, corpsegrinder. I have a casket to make," Vilja said, returning to her work. "I'll fulfil my task, but I won't be mocked for finding no enjoyment in it."

"Mocked? Hardly. It's good to see there's still a shred of humanity in you."

Vilja struck the axe to stand from a log, let go of it with an inhale, and straightened her back. Oscar was exploring somewhere—Vilja had told him to stay within earshot, but his agreement lasted only until he found something interesting. "Why already? Did you not say the Nattfader was pleased with my giving up Emil?"

"Don't speak their names, angel maker. I don't want to hear them after I've exiled the children in your care."

"Answer the question."

The demon grunted at her sharp tone, but then chuckled. "My prince *was* most pleased. Perhaps you whetted his appetite."

"Can I give him the new girl?"

"Not unless you know of wounds I don't."

"Curiosity is her bane. If I howled like a wolf, hooted like an owl, could I chop off her hand when she comes looking?"

The Sister of Silence cocked her head from side to side. "You could, yes, but I'd advise against it."

"He never said I could not hasten his arrival—"

The demon grinned her fishy grin. “That’s not it at all. You’d give me more work when I have to bring you two candles at once.”

Vilja breathed harder, balling her fists by her sides. “I wouldn’t bring him Oscar tonight. Eva would go in his stead.”

“Do not speak—”

“Shut your mouth, corpsegrinder, or I’ll recite every last one of them, and then ask the Nattfader to tell me yours so I can add it to the list.”

The Sister of Silence leapt to her feet. “If you’re in one of your moods —”

“I’m in no mood.” Vilja grabbed the axe, sent the log flying off her sled when she yanked it loose. “This is your fault. They weren’t supposed to be with me for so long. I’ve come to love him, like I loved the boy I buried today, after betrayed trust made him a monster.”

The Sister of Silence regarded her with blind contempt, then grated, “The only monster here is you. You kept your life in exchange for theirs. That is the pact.”

Vilja’s gaze was hard, but her voice came out broken. “I never wanted this.”

The demon’s mouth fell open.

Then she laughed.

Laughed so hard her voice filled the forest. Vilja gripped the axe tighter, gritting her teeth.

“Self-pity doesn’t suit you, angel maker,” the Sister of Silence said, hiccuping even after her hysteria calmed. “And I’m getting tired of reminding you this is *exactly* what you wanted. On the night the storm surprised you, you cried like a lost little lamb, praying to be spared from the death you gave to so many. My prince offered to let you sleep, feed the foxes, rot when spring came until nightshades grew between your bones. You begged him for salvation, and when he embraced you, you

wanted more, more, more. He gave you back your home. He keeps you fed and warm. All that and everything you asked for in exchange for nothing but continuing your trade.”

Her good humour disappeared. “And still you have the audacity to claim you *love* the children?”

Vilja’s breath fled in billowing clouds around her face. “Oscar!” she then cried. “Oscar! Come to me at once!”

“Do not speak their names in my presence!” the Sister of Silence snapped.

“I think I’ll honour my threat,” Vilja sneered. “I’ll stay with Oscar, so he won’t have to be alone and afraid. I will let the Nattfader pry him out of my arms only in exchange for your name.”

“*He doesn’t know it!*” the Sister of Silence screamed. “No one does! I died without a name or marker!”

Vilja stammered a response, but a gale quieted her with chattering teeth. “My prince is here,” the demon muttered. “I suppose he’s grown impatient with you.”

“Not yet,” Vilja said, desperately shaking her head. “Not yet. Please. Let me part with E—with the new girl.”

A darkness of the deepest kind veiled the woods, and the Sister of Silence drove back a part of it with the defiant light kindling within her lantern. The enchanted flame reverted her features into the hellish visage Vilja best knew. “I knew you to be a hypocrite, angel maker, but not one this abject. I doubt a wretch like you could ever learn to love, even this boy—your own boy.”

Vilja’s stomach lurched.

“And I’m certain of my judgement,” the Sister of Silence continued, in tones more low and menacing, “because the replacement you offer is your daughter. Find the child, angel maker, and stop—”

Her voice turned into a gurgle.

Vilja struck again, sunk the axe so deep into the side of the demon's neck it broke the collarbone. The Sister of Silence slumped to her knees, and Vilja left her lying on crimson snow as she grabbed the demon's lantern and dashed off.

“Oscar!” Vilja cried. “Where are you? Answer me!” She gasped upon noticing footprints heading for the site of sacrifice, a cloven trail beside them. Another hoofprint appeared before her, then another, and another at the edge of the lantern's reach. Cold air froze her lungs and chilled the acid in her gut as she ran over the marks.

Oscar sat in the circle of candles. The gales of the Nattfader's arrival had put them out, but the boy held little Bea's candle in gloved hands, nose scrunched as though sheer force of will could let him inspect it in the starless dark. He shielded his eyes against the stolen lantern when Vilja emerged from the thicket and yelped when she scooped him up without stopping.

“What's wrong?” he asked, bobbing against her shoulder. The wind changed directions, erupting out of the candle glade, and Vilja's pace grew more frantic. “It's just a storm. You don't need to carry me.”

“A storm like no other, Oscar,” Vilja said, hoisting the lantern to shield herself from willow branches lashing against her face. “But I won't give you up. I can't.”

“What are you—” the boy began, then quieted with an “uh.”

Then he screamed, startled Vilja, and made her lose footing.

Vilja scrambled to her knees and toward the toppled lantern when the wind groaned. She slowly faced the Nattfader towering behind the trees. His beard was the blackness in depths of the earth. His body the dark in the eyes of mylings. Beneath his horns of swirling winds blinked the stars gone from the sky, the prey his teeth had gnashed and rent before his slumber in the woods.

Vilja had never seen him this way, so enormous, godlike, and the sight made her arms give. She had called him Satan when he first revealed himself to her as a great black goat, but the moon-eater was neither a fallen angel nor a demon. He was something beyond even the feeble lord of man Vilja once had thought heard her prayers, and the futility of resistance, the sheer *arrogance* of demanding its favours froze her tumultuous thoughts to the brink of shattering.

And so, in the absence of the rational, Vilja's primordial need to survive took over, and she flung the Sister of Silence's lantern at the god with all her strength.

The lantern shattered against a birch, spilling its fire in a cascade down the dead trunk. The fire caught and spread in a blaze, and the heat and the smoke jolted Vilja back to her senses and alerted her to Oscar's cries. She leapt to her feet and caught him in her arms as the forest became a roaring inferno around them. She broke toward a passage between the flames, hoping the enchanted fire would buy them time to escape and that the trees crashing in swarms of cinders wouldn't trap them to choke on thickening smoke.

The Nattfader fell unto earth and cut the burning woods in half with his cloak of the night. Vilja ground to a halt at the precipice appearing before her, sending snow flying into nothingness. The god's breath rolled over her, full of coaxing whispers as quiet as the flutter of moths around the children's candles in the summer.

"No," Vilja stammered. "No! You can't have him! I revoke the pact! *I revoke the pact!*"

A gale swept over her and sent her staggering back. The flame of the Sister of Silence wilted as the darkness conquered more of the earth, and the god whispered the demon had never governed fire truly impervious to his endless dark. He had allowed her its solace.

"I revoke the pact," Vilja said, low and hard. Oscar sobbed against her shoulder, clutched her as though he wanted to crack a rib. "Take me. Spare the boy."

Before her, in the small strip of land left, appeared the print of a cloven hoof; around her the flames died. Only the sparks on the tips of broken willow branches, like a circle of candles, still allowed her to see.

Breathing hard, Vilja kissed the boy's brow, brushed his hair, and pressed her cheek against it. "*Tyst nu, älskling. Allt är bra.*"

"How can you say that?" Oscar said. "Do something! Get us away from... from that..."

She nuzzled her nose against his ear and forced her voice to sound calm. "It's only a nightmare. You fell asleep while you were playing. You're safe on my sled, and I'm bringing you home."

His breath hissed against her neck, the skin wet with his tears as she rubbed his eyes against her in disbelief. "No, Vilja! It's real! *You have to do something!*"

"It's all right," she said, squeezing him tighter. "You're safe with me."

She covered the boy's ear. "I revoke the pact, you bastard," she growled, took a step forward, and fell off the edge of the world.

The angel maker revived to the smell of earth and mould.

Upon trying to rise from her dark place of rest, she struck her head against wood. It confined her within a box, the grain rough around her elbows and against her knees. Pounding the ceiling gave the dullest thud, and the realisation of being inside a buried casket sent her into a panic.

How long it took to free herself, she couldn't tell—but eventually bloody nails broke through wood and frozen soil. The angel maker emerged from an unmarked grave in the forest, trembling and pulling out clumps of dirt from her hair and coat. Aside from her fingers, she was unharmed.

The woods around her were calm and quiet, alive only with distant birdsong. It was early in the morning, the sun yet to fully rise, and the clouds would bring snow later in the day. A breeze made her shiver and

pull up her hood. In the pocket of her coat, she found her woollen hat and gloves.

With nowhere else to go, the angel maker returned home.

As she approached, the angel maker heard soft humming from the direction of the house. On the porch of her home sat the Sister of Silence, a bucket between her legs.

“There you are,” the demon said. “Is your tantrum over? My prince was most displeased. The next time you rebel, he might make me dig so deep you’ll never rise from your grave.”

The angel maker only stared at the demon, not with the malice that churned in her chest, but the shock that roiled in her mind. “I killed you.”

“You certainly did.”

“In the woods.”

“As I well know.”

The angel maker shook her head, kept her gaze on the wax eyes of the demon. “How can you be here?”

The Sister of Silence tilted her head, then slapped her hands together with a laugh. “Oh! You meant—ah, that was so long ago I’d forgotten all about it.” She grinned and pulled down the neckline of her dress. Her pale skin was unscarred. “And when you forget such trivialities, they might as well have never happened.”

The Sister of Silence went back to work on her candle. “I’ve brought you another child. A girl of three, who—”

“No more,” the angel maker said, voice thick with grief. “Take me to your prince. Let him separate my flesh from the bone.”

The Sister of Silence laughed. “Angel maker, it was never your flesh he wanted, nor the flesh of these children. They were only morsels; he feeds upon the grief and pain of those you lead astray.” She set her bucket

aside and stood to caress the angel maker's cheek. "You didn't kill me with an axe, you see, but a broken promise. I cannot tell you why it was my fear that roused my prince from his sleep when the woods were full of bones, but it did, and he offered me a blessing in exchange for feeding him. I pleaded for him to save all those lost in the woods—*all*, angel maker, even you—and because I'd fed him well, he obliged.

"He gave me a flame that would never die out, and I became a protector of the lost, guiding them back home, until you started burying them alive in their small white caskets. I am only a spirit, powerless to do more to the ground than walk on it, and not even my prince could reach far enough into the mortal coil to shovel aside the earth. All I could do was weep by the graves and try my best to comfort them until the muffled cries ceased." The demon tutted, but the sarcasm of the gesture was a thin veil over the fury hiding on her tightened lips. "That made him very, *very* angry. You, a mortal girl, had the impudence to deny his magnanimity, so he had no choice but to take their souls and hold them safe in his eternal night."

The angel maker swallowed hard. "Were they the children you brought me?"

"No, angel maker. I will never let you hurt them again. The ones I brought were yours, the stillborn you never bothered burying, the only ones who deserved your caskets." A gloom twisted her face, but it was gone when she brushed her waxen patches. "I did not enjoy their part in your torment. My prince graced me with blindness so I wouldn't have to know their faces."

"No," the angel maker uttered. "They were too many. I couldn't have ___"

"Two men stayed a season with you, and two children I have brought. One boy, one girl, poisoned in your womb."

"Eva, and Iris, and Beatrix, and Anna, and Maja, and..." the angel maker said, eyes turned to glass, voice as frail. "All mine?"

A twinge of bitterness visited the demon's features. "Names you never gave them, and each a vision of what could have been. You spent and lost your life murdering the children of others, so my prince saw it fitting you'd spend eternity betraying your own."

The angel maker collapsed onto her knees, and the Sister of Silence patted her head. "I won't do it," the angel maker whispered. "Torture me all you want."

"I do not torture anyone. My heart is too soft for it." She sat on her heels, lifted the angel maker's chin with a thumb. "But you will do it, not because I force you to, but because you're a hypocrite. Do you know what makes a myling go away, angel maker? It is not the holy ground nor the white casket. They scream and they rage and they fight, just as you do, but it is only once they quietly accept their own death they can move on." The demon bared her fangs, letting the hatred she'd held back seep into the venom of her tone. "All it takes to end the pact is for you to do the same, yet despite your posturing, here you are. As much as you claim to love the children, you'll never fear for them as much as for yourself."

She stood up, dusted snow off her knees, and started off toward the woods. "The girl of three loves to dance and has a tendency to forget her shoes. Her name is Lovisa. You will take her to my prince when she asks a question you can't answer."

"Corpsegrinder," the angel maker said feebly. "If your prince hates me, why has he given me so much?"

The demon stopped, turned. The angel maker did not face her. "Because you feed him well. For every child you say you love, you forget a hundred others."

The Sister of Silence vanished into the woods, leaving the angel maker sitting in snow glittering with the brilliant dawn. When the angel maker finally rose, she noticed her shadow had grown longer, and turned to a forest gleaming as though another sun had risen from the soil. She went to its edge, found innumerable candles the Sister of Silence must've

kindled sitting on every branch in sight. Before her, against a young willow, leaned an unlit one the demon had left behind, one that hadn't yet wept a single wax tear. The angel maker could not remember whose it was.

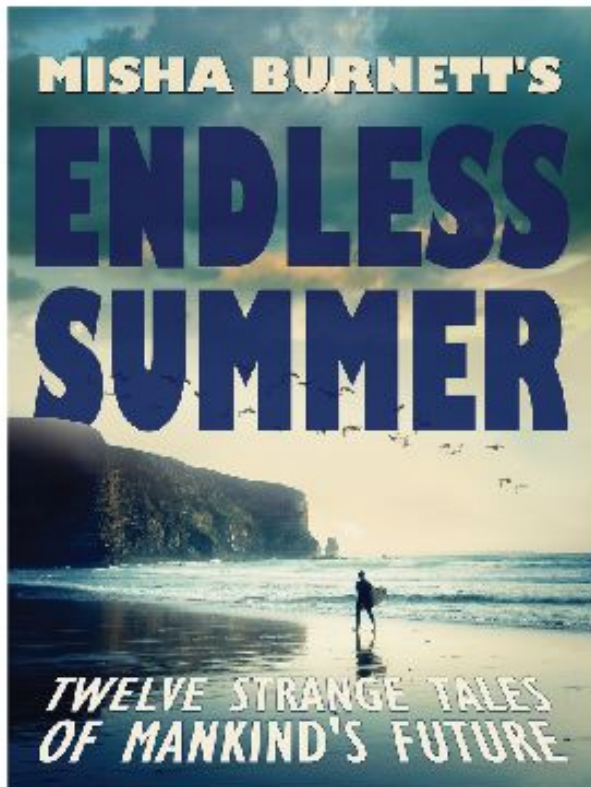
She stayed there, deep in thought, until the door of the barn creaked open and a barefooted girl with the blonde locks and soft features every incarnation shared joined her. "Vilja?" She took the angel maker's hand. "Why are you crying?"

The angel maker gripped the girl's tiny hand in hers, gaze wandering over the candles—so many, too many she could not name—and spoke no louder than a breath.

"I was only wondering if you'd like to go look for fairies tonight, Lovisa."

Ville Meriläinen writes fiction like the Finnish winter: Long, dark, and someone probably gets hurt. Find his short story collection and novels "30 Rounds of Silver" and "Ghost Notes" on Amazon.com.

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2020 is almost over...

Or is it?

The Murmurous Dead

By ERIC DEL CARLO

Corth has made his first kill as a professional assassin! Before his next job, he must first sit and speak with the Wise Man...but what does his cryptic advice mean?!

Corth sat upon the long fragrant grasses, alongside the cooling hush of the Soft River, and beheld the Wise Man. All was anticlimax. He hadn't wished to come this distance to visit the old one, but he had agreed to it. In truth, *agreement* had naught to do with the matter. A Bravo—particularly one so young, in the process of assembling his prestige—did as told by the Assassins Guild.

When he had learned, from a woman who had been in the guild a year longer than he, that the current Wise Man was the legendary Shink...it was then that Corth's reluctance had changed to eagerness.

But this was disappointment. On his journey across the desert and over a range of mountains, he had imagined the man, fashioning him from the tales still told of his exploits. Shink was an assassin of elegance, elevating the craft to an almost artistic level. He had practiced in all of the Four Cities, moving like a shadow, exterminating as a whisper might. A contract given to the great Shink would be realized with a deadly grandeur.

Who, then, was this gray-headed and gray-bearded old fool, who wished Corth to sing songs with him? Sentimental songs at that, full of juvenile melancholy. The Wise Man sat upon a wide, flat stone, umber in color and striated with glittering minerals, and plucked a three-stringed instrument. Corth supposed those were chords he was playing, though the "music" was nothing like what a proper nine-stringed instrument would produce.

Yet his voice was at once husky and mellow, well suited for song, and he radiated that air of contentment. He wore patched sage's robes.

Abruptly his fingers stilled, and he laid aside the modest instrument.

"You do not understand why you are here," said the Wise Man.

Corth had snapped off a long tongue of grass and wrapped it about his forefinger. "I know the intent, I believe."

"That is?" There was humor in the old man's eyes.

Corth sat up straighter. “I completed my first mission on my own. I am supposed to visit the Wise Man by the Soft River, and...unburden myself.”

“But you feel no burden.”

Waiting to see if this were a question, Corth finally nodded. He would not be disrespectful to this man. One day he might be old and could only hope for the forbearance of other younger folk.

The man who had been Shink continued, “You have taken something out of this world. You must put something back. That life you successfully ended is a portion. If you mourn the death, and extol the virtues of the one dead, you replace the portion—within yourself, Corth. Within yourself.”

It had the sound of sophistry to Corth’s ears. He looked into the Wise Man’s eyes and saw something behind the humor there. A long sorrow abided, matched by an equally lengthy and profoundly earned wisdom. Out of that must come this man’s contentment, he thought.

Yet the purpose of this sojourn was no more satisfying to him than before. Perhaps Shink, onetime renowned assassin, enjoyed his isolated riverside life and the continual presences of those Bravos who sincerely wanted his counsel and succor. Corth felt uneasy being this far from civilization. These were practically the lands of the Outer Barbarians.

The Wise Man reached for a basket behind the sitting stone. He stood with it and said, “Come, Bravo. We will pick some berries, and I’ll make us a meal. I’ve something long fermenting in a jar which shall pass the evening swiftly. Then, in the morning, you may return to your work.”

To be in Dinn was to be in Lekka, was to be in Ghenta, was to be also in Baffalork. The Four Cities had come from the mind of a single architect. Jealous Royalties had demanded the same plan for each of their municipalities, once the first had been built. So went the story, but Corth paid attention to stories, to history. He was no impudent youth dismissive of lore. The past often held the key to the present, and the present allowed one to unlock the future of one’s choosing.

He fully intended to make for himself a life in which his name was revered among the assassins, and even among the common people in the know. His would one day be to a callow Bravo what Shink's name had, up to a short time ago, been to him. A name worthy of the highest esteem. A name, even, to be feared.

Only, he would not retire to the riverside and pluck maudlin songs from a toy instrument.

Breathing in the streets of Dinn, he made his way. There were cooking smells and animal smells and human smells. His soft booted steps carried him along a route he could have walked in any of the Four Cities. Despite the sameness of those locales, few of their populations ever traveled among them. An unambitious peasant might never leave the quarter into which he had been born, whereas Corth as a boy had journeyed continuously with his merchant mother and father. He knew the Four Cities, and he had listened to their stories and histories. And he knew—or knew of—all the important players.

His deep well of knowledge had made him attractive to the Assassins Guild. He had been accepted as an apprentice in his sixteenth summer.

It would have been a simple matter for him to glide through the milling crowds on the streets, to ease fluidly without making even a brushing contact. He would have been as a wraith, leaving only a blinking impression of his presence after he had passed. But that, in and of itself, might draw attention from a guard with a keen eye.

Only a child, or a childishly minded man, would flaunt his talents like that, especially when he was about a serious business. As Corth was. This was to be his second mission. He had studied arduously for it.

However, at a junction of two streets, he paused. His eye was caught by the figure of a woman. She was dressed in yellow, in leggings which accented her taut thighs and trim calves. She walked with the ease of a dancer, slipping amongst the crowd as he might have, with a lithe grace. Only, this woman seemed offhandedly pleased to draw looks from those around her.

Corth saw her for only a few instants, yet her elegantly planed face stayed with him like an afterimage.

He bumped and jostled his way to the inn, where he had taken a room. The establishment of clapboard and ochre stone stood at the edge of its precinct. Beyond lay the aristocratic section of Dinn. It was the same in Ghenta, Lekka, and Baffalork; only the cast of characters shifted, like a long-running theatrical.

Corth lay on his rented bed and let the day bleed into night.

When he moved, it now was as a phantom. He was virtually silent. His breath was soundless in his nostrils; his heart seemed a distant, faint throbbing. He wore dark gray, from head to toes.

Even so, entering the adjacent quarter was a matter of timing. Well-paid guards of important families were watchful of any anomalies, suspicious of anything unfamiliar. Corth was the shadow that belonged among the wind-blown fronds of decorative plantings; his movements fit with the snap of proud clan pennants and the awnings of expensive shops.

On his first solo contract, he had dispatched a Lekka man of rank in the Alchemist Guild of that city. He had studied his object with care and cunning ahead of the deed, knowing the masters of his own guild were as interested in how he dealt with the preliminaries as in the outcome of his mission.

Assassination was rarely a matter of slitting someone's throat in a crowd, or even of poisoning, though some in the Assassins Guild had made a fine craft of this and taught its mysteries to eager young Bravos. Instead, assassination was generally a subtle venture. The best killing, it was often said, was the one which didn't reveal itself as murderous, no matter how much examination it was given after the fact.

Such had been the way with Corth's Lekka alchemist. After meticulous investigation, he had planned a rather simple death for the man. Each morning, at a particular watch, he climbed the outside steps of his old home to a high lone room. There he would stay for a short

period, and emerge and resume the business of the day. Corth's design was to sabotage the stairs.

But first, knowing his masters would expect him to investigate, he had to find out what secretive activity occupied the man in that room every morning. It was necessary to know. An unknown factor so intertwined with his proposed scheme was unthinkable in his profession.

In the end, it was nothing significant. The jowly man consulted a childhood prayer book every morning, there in the room he had dwelt in as a boy.

Corth replaced a support for the stairs with a rotted beam in the night. When the heavy man went up, he crashed through the step and plummeted to his death. Corth witnessed the fall, and reacted with horror, as did many others on the street. He lingered long enough to hear the initial cluckings: the alchemist lived in a shabby house; he should have replaced those dangerous stairs long ago.

For the man, Corth had felt nothing. Certainly he experienced no regret, no remorse. He had nothing to unburden himself of by the Soft River. The contract was fulfilled. He felt only a humble pride.

Tonight's task, should he prove successful, would only bring him a more generous portion of pride, he imagined. Portion? It was what the so-called Wise Man had mentioned. Something about portions and an incorporeal balance or some such. He dismissed Shink entirely from his thoughts.

He charted his cautious, silent, essentially invisible path through the wealthy quarter until he stood below the window he wanted. Ivy clung to the pink walls, obscuring the ancient frescos there. Corth knew the artist who had rendered those and why she had done so; but the information had no bearing on his plan.

His hand- and footholds had already been decided during his reconnoiter, when he had walked this same street in daylight in disguise. Up the wall, to the window. Then over the sill, into the room.

That room stank of pleasures. Corth knew about the blind nobleman who dwelt here—knew a *great* deal about him. Reaching up into the dark gray hood which shrouded his head, he pulled a curiously textured mask down over his face. A mask to wear before a blind man—but all had been carefully planned.

Deliberately, he scuffed his foot upon the littered marble floor.

“*Grnnhhhn...?*” came the inquisitive inebriated voice. An instant later, a lanky, half-dressed figure shambled past a painted screen. The nobleman’s sightless eyes were open, his knob-knuckled hands groping the air before him. “That you, boy?”

Corth smelled the sex the room had known, and the spirits and opiates, and the lack of hygiene from this damaged individual who had tragically lost his vision to a raging fever in his late adolescence. Yet he retained his family wealth and title, and even the perfunctory authority that went with his peculiar station.

This unlikely creature was an important man.

“Boy!” he called again. “Bring that ripe little rump here!”

“*Gaesco*,” Corth said in a voice very much not his own. It was a rumble of quiet speech, touched with weary tones. It would, Corth hoped, be not quite the voice this blind man would remember; rather, a voice older, aged another decade in the grave.

Gaesco was a private name, a pet name. A name shared only by brothers.

The nobleman froze in his groping advance through the untidy room. Raw confusion—and fear—and wonder—twisted his unshaven face. “*Symta...*” He started to shake, then couldn’t stop.

Corth watched him without pity. Whatever tragedies had befallen this person, he had done nothing to try to overcome them. Corth, at a relatively young age, had had to see his mother incarcerated in Baffalork because of a false claim brought by a rival merchant with influence. He’d

also witnessed his father's loss of his leg to an animal mauling when they were on the caravan roads one autumn.

“Yes,” Corth continued in the Royal's voice he'd heard as a child, when the blind noble's older, wiser brother had made political speeches in the square. “It is Symta. I come to you only this once, Gaesco. I pray you to take heed.”

When Corth had presented his plan to his masters, they had expressed surprise. He had taken that for a favorable response. The man he was meant to assassinate might be dealt with in any number of ways, but Corth was of the view that no method but his could be less traceable to the Assassins Guild.

The blind noble jerked into motion once more. He came directly toward Corth. “Let me touch your face....”

Corth allowed the shaky hands to alight on the special mask. It was made of woven bone, softened in steaming water. The texture caused the man to flinch, but the facial structure was that of his brother's. The mask also served to further distort Corth's speech, making of it a spectral murmur.

“There is no time to linger, Gaesco. My time is brief. Here is what you must do.”

Symta's death ten years ago had rocked the aristocracy of Dinn. He had been a popular figure, even among the commoners. He had been a man of intellect and accomplishment, willing to use his name and influence in civic matters that benefitted the population as a whole.

His younger brother had never had such ambitions. And now he was but a pathetic shadow of that older sibling. But he could serve one final purpose.

“I...” he choked. Tears gathered in sightless eyes. “I...will do it.”

Without farewell or sound, Corth slipped back over the window and evanesced into the night.

He waited in the inn's taproom. The mask was broken into pieces and scattered. The day lay bright on the busy street, which he could see from his table. A faded heavy tapestry draped one wall, depicting a graphic scene of ancient warfare. There were no wars any longer among the Four Cities. A lasting balance had been achieved. The red of the tapestry's thread, portraying the blood of the dying, was now a muted lavender.

The crier would come, with the day's news. Or if the tidings were particularly intriguing, they would precede the news bearer, passed along as rampant gossip.

One did not always know the reason for an assassination. Sometimes, the knowledge was necessary for the mission. Other times, the rationality behind the deed became obvious after one studied the object. Corth didn't know why the man who was his second solo assignment needed, in the eyes of the person who had drawn the contract, to be dispatched. It seemed nothing political. Nor did the motive appear financial. Personal, then. A jealousy, a long-held grudge. Or perhaps none of these.

Corth was interested only in the success or failure of his plan.

At that moment, he saw the woman again.

Today she wore white, a diaphanous garment of several intricate layers, bound with a scarlet obi. Corth's pulse quickened. Suddenly, he found himself on his feet and tossing down a coin on his table. He hurried out after her.

Last night he had slept, with his work behind him. But thoughts of the mission hadn't occupied him in those moments before slumber; everything had gone so according to plan, it was almost as if the events were a fiction he had read. What had intruded on his mind were images of the woman he had seen yesterday, in the yellow leggings, with the dancer's grace.

He followed her now. As had happened the day before, her movements drew gazes. She was exotic yet earthy. Her hair was barbered short. He

beheld her lush buttocks, his imagination supplying what the sheer fabrics sought to conceal.

In a moment he had overtaken her.

To be an assassin was to be so much more than one who performed homicides. The first step in the process of selecting apprentices to the guild was the weeding out of those drawn by the lurid taste for killing. An early instructor of Corth's had once told him, "The final ideal assassin would be the one who never has to slay anyone." He had thought on this for some while before deciding the aphorism was simply meant to emphasize the other talents a successful Bravo had to develop.

"Lady," he said, hold forth a white glove, "you dropped this." She hadn't, of course. The pair of gloves were tucked into her scarlet sash. His feather-light fingers had plucked one as he'd passed her.

She halted, and even *that* motion had a supple poise to it. She had high, firm breasts beneath the diaphanous white. Her eyes were a sparkling blue.

People were assemblages of tics and traits. They could be predicted, to an extent. Their responses could be, with some craft, directed. Corth did not address her in courtly custom. He met her frank stare, held that gaze, then let a hard, almost grim smile onto his rather sensual lips.

When she took the glove from him, their fingertips brushed. After that, he presented her a silence, and allowed her to fill it.

If anything was to undo him as an assassin, he knew it would be his libido. But he was almost helpless to these urges. Perhaps his vigor would fade in another year or two. He couldn't imagine ever being entirely disinterested in sex, but he might—he *must*—manage to bring his vernal desires under some measure of control.

But it had been hopeless with this woman. She had fairly bewitched him the first time he had set eyes upon her.

He knew the manipulation of words, of manner; and he had given her just enough words for her to convince herself to come back to his room at the inn. Now he caressed and clutched, plunged and retreated, withheld and released. She shuddered and emitted quiet mewls and gasps.

After, his mind began to clear once again. He should not have left the taproom downstairs. Still, he would hear the crier from up here. He hadn't explicitly jeopardized anything; yet this sort of behavior was...unprofessional.

Her name was Lieto. He had given her the false name he'd used since his arrival in Dinn. Their bodies slowly cooled. She held him against her taut form. Her hard flat belly rose and fell. She traced a scar on his shoulder, one he'd had since his adolescence. Anger had left him that mark; anger over his mother's incarceration and the burdens put on him by his father's terrible wounding. Corth had stupidly forced the hand of a man with a whip one night, but it was a lesson learned. From the time of that incident until he was accepted as an apprentice in the Assassins Guild, he never again acted out of anger, never again put himself in such danger.

He was prepared to tell Lieto a lie about the scar if she were to ask. She didn't; instead: "I don't normally do this sort of thing."

She wouldn't have seen his wry smile, but he suppressed it anyway. People could be categorized. They were assemblages of all those human traits and tics. He would not have approached her as he had, with his loins blazing and the bright day alive with sudden urgency, if he hadn't recognized in her a similar sexual recklessness. She, too, was at the mercy of her natural passions. She was youthful, vibrant, vividly physical. But evidently she felt a need to disclaim the very act that had brought her to his room for this very pleasant interlude. So be it.

"I was sure you did not," he said, reciting the appropriate countersign to reinforce her statement.

But immediately she said, "Not that I don't *wish* to. Regularly. Often. But I have to exercise some control."

He was surprised. He lifted his head, turned. “Control can be important,” he said, rather neutrally. But he was curious as to her specific meaning.

“Yes. There is a...guild. And I wish to join it.” She looked at him and ran her fingers into his tangled dark hair.

He understood in that moment. She was young, as he was. He saw her in his mind’s eye as she had moved on the street, the glide and ease of her, the dancer’s balance. But not a dancer. Hers was the poise of the sly killer, the death artist. But she shouldn’t be talking aloud about the Assassins Guild. Then he realized that she hadn’t. He further realized how he had been when he was clamoring to be an apprentice, how the drive had filled his every waking moment. He, too, had made cryptic statements to friends and lovers, desperate to share his ambitions with someone but bound to stay silent on the subject.

Suddenly he wanted her again. The familiar postcoital malaise dissipated. He shifted on the bed, moving into a more conducive position. She really was quite a lovely creature. She seemed more substantial to him now, more worthy of attention, even of affection.

She started to respond. Heat flowed again into her gracefully planed face. Her beauty would serve her if she were accepted into the guild. Such wiles as hers, when properly used, could give her a remarkable career.

Perhaps she was simply honing those skills here with him now, Corth thought with a droll giddiness. Somewhere beyond this rented room, there was a stirring, a slowly swelling commotion. The crier had at last come round. But Corth’s heed was for this fresh tumescence of his, for the lithe lovely form arrayed before him.

But Lieto’s blue eyes shifted past him, and darkened.

“I think...” she said hesitantly, “I just heard my father’s name called out.”

Unlikelihoods could—and should—be prepared for, Corth told himself as his steady plodding steps took him across the hardpan of the desert. But what, he further asked, was one to do about the lightning-strike coincidences, the ones which could hardly withstand logic, even after the fact?

The Four Cities were architecturally analogous. Their similar fortifications and ability to sustain themselves were part of what had eliminated widespread warfare. The Princes didn't send armies at one another any longer. There were just the Bravos, making a correction here and there.

But dissimilarities existed amongst the separate Royalties. In Dinn, just for instance, a half-crazed blind wastrel could still order the summary execution of a respected citizen, even after claiming that the shade of his dead brother had demanded the action.

Corth had stayed the day with Lieto, though he should have withdrawn from the city the moment the news came. He was on hand for the first shocks. He witnessed her disbelief, her sorrow, her fury. It was plain to him that she wished to kill the blind nobleman, but she retained enough self-discipline not to speak of it, not even to him.

She seemed to rely on him for the harrowing watches of that day. He gave her emotional support, never certain if his own feelings were genuine or just the expertly convincing trappings of sentiment. Such fakery was essential for success in the Assassins Guild.

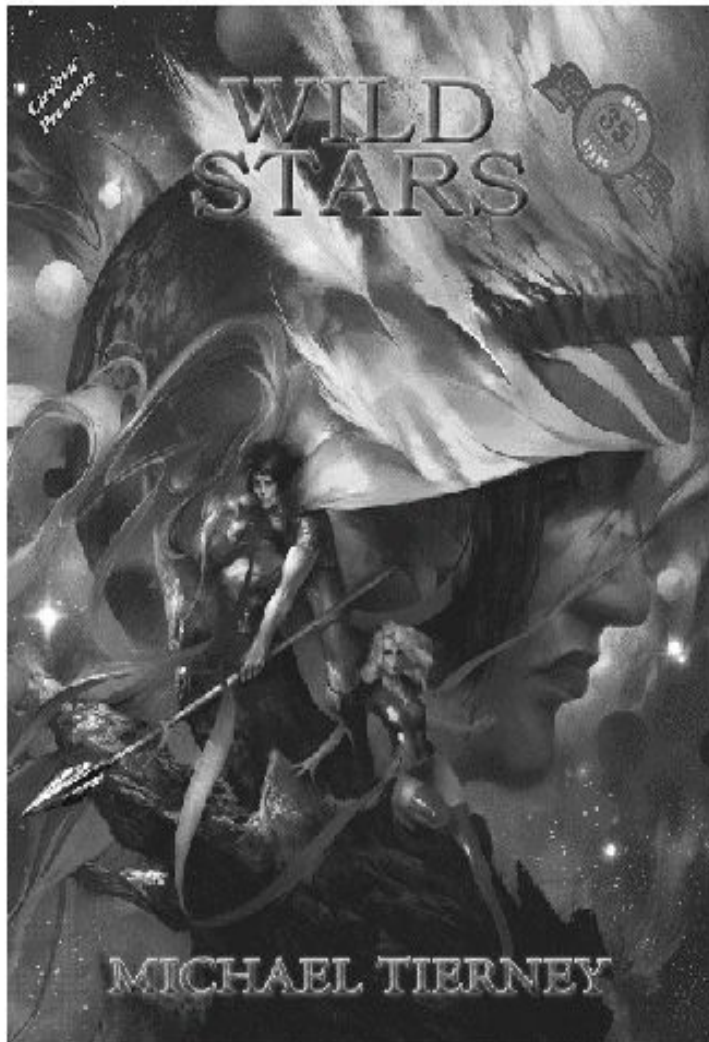
At the end of her traumatic day, she had kissed him with trembling lips and sent him on his way.

The strenuousness of the trek did something to clear his mind this time. When he made it over the mountain range, he felt himself in a curiously receptive state.

The Wise Man received him by the Soft River. They didn't sing. Not at first. Corth had learned much through Lieto about the man he had killed, and he told the gray-haired Shink many things about that woman's father. He spoke in murmurs of the dead. By the end, Corth felt

he knew the man. He felt too that his death was deserving of mourning. And so the Wise Man led him in the melodies of grief, plucking his three-stringed instrument with knowing fingers.

Eric Del Carlo's fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Analog, and Clarkesworld. 'The Murmurous Dead' is something of a sequel to 'Where the Wise Man Sings' written by his late father, Vik Del Carlo, published in Aberrations in 1996.



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Hunt of the Mine Worm

By JIM BREYFOGLE

A silvecite mine has been attacked by a giant worm! Kat and Mangos are among a band of mercenaries hired to deal with the threat, but who will claim the kill?!

Fourteen months after the fall of Alness.

“Back!”

Mangos watched Stiefnu’s mouth move, though he couldn’t hear the word. The cascading chain and ore carts crashing down the shaft drowned the foreman’s voice.

Mangos didn’t need to be told. He might be willing to fight demons or jilted husbands, but being crushed by tons of mining equipment seemed a stupid way to die. He joined the others as they moved across the cavern.

Beside him, Kat had her cloak across her nose and mouth to form a mask as dust blown by the wind of the chain’s impact enveloped them. In her other hand, she still gripped her spear, which was odd, Mangos thought, since she’d never used a spear before. Now, she refused to be separated from it.

Three other hunters, a man and two women—Mangos didn’t know their names—moved further away to avoid the dust. They appeared calm, or as calm as one could expect while in the deepest level of a mine with the only way out collapsing before them.

It ended, the echoes of the fall bouncing back from the workings. Dust swirled through the wall lights, giving the lanterns halos.

“Doesn’t usually work like that?” asked the man.

Stiefnu turned, glowering. “No, fool, and now we’re trapped down here with the worm!”

The older of the two women snorted. “If we feared the worm, we wouldn’t be here.”

That, Mangos allowed, was true. The women stood next to each other, and judging from their features, they were sisters, the blonde a couple of years older than the brunette. The blonde had a rough beauty in her

high cheekbones, curled lip, and strong chin. She wore a low-cut blouse, which seemed out of place hunting in the deep mines.

The brunette wasn't as rough. Her features were finer, more composed, her bodice not as revealing. She had a bow, a short re-curve with a wooden core and horn belly, and carried a short sword on her hip.

"It will take days, maybe weeks, to fix the lift," Stiefnu said.

The man shrugged. He had long black hair he tied in a ponytail. A scar twisted across his neck, as if Death had grabbed him but couldn't hold on. His left eye looked slightly askance, not quite the same direction as his right. He wore a great sword with scalloped edges strapped across his back. "Throw down rope. Tie to chain, lift back up. Easy."

"There isn't a rope strong enough to lift the weight of that chain up to the machinery in the upper levels," said Stiefnu. "We'll fix it, never you mind. That's our job. Yours is to kill the worm."

Stiefnu took a deep breath, but it didn't seem to calm him. The dust made him cough, and it took a minute before he could stop. "We're likely safe," he said. "The worm would have to cross the fissure to get here from the workings."

"So," said the older sister, "tell us of this worm."

Giving the pile of chain and ore carts one last look, Stiefnu nodded. He performed introductions by jabbing a thick finger at each and saying their name. "Mangos. Kat." The man was Corjon, the blonde sister, Daini, the brunette, Kairi.

"The worm," Stiefnu said and began to tick off characteristics on his fingers as he said them, "is eight feet in diameter. It has two sets of teeth, one to tear rock and another to grind it. It can breathe acid. While not fast, it can outrun a person for a short distance."

"It can out-crawl," murmured Daini, and Kairi smiled.

Stiefnu pretended not to hear. "It is immune to fire; no blade can penetrate its hide."

Corjon didn't seem interested. He wandered around the chamber. He looked into crates and tapped the sides of water barrels. He stopped at a stack of crates with words stenciled on the sides. Mangos had difficulty reading *NitroBarite*.

"Nothing we have tried has the slightest effect," Stiefnu was saying. "That's why we put out a contract."

"This makes the bangs?" burst out Corjon, thumping his hand on the crates.

Stiefnu pressed his lips together but gave no other sign of displeasure. "More or less, yes."

Corjon grinned, displaying a set of white but crooked teeth. "Worm go bang."

"We've tried—" Stiefnu cut himself off, shrugged. "Blow yourself up. It won't hurt the worm."

"Have you tried to asphyxiate it?" Kat asked.

Stiefnu nodded, as if reforming his opinion of her. "We have. But there's enough bad air down here that the worm can go without air for — well, we don't know how long."

"We'll find a way," said Daini. "Just fix that lift so we can get out when we're done and have our payment ready which," she added with a meaningful look at the others, "we're not sharing with anyone."

"Payment is made in silvecite. Twenty percent of all refined ore for the next two years will go to those who kill the worm. If you prefer cash," Stiefnu said, "we will arraign the sale of the silvecite and forward the proceeds to you."

Mangos wiped his sweaty, dusty face. It was hot this far down, and the air felt thick. He would face the discomfort and the worm for the silvecite, or rather the money from the sale. Silvecite was very rare, very difficult to mine, and made the best weapons, if you could find a smith

competent enough to work it. The proceeds should be enough to buy friends and good times for a year.

“Have ye ever fought a worm like this before?” asked Kairi. All five adventurers headed toward what Stiefnu had called ‘the workings,’ the places where silvecite ore was actually mined and the worm lurked.

“Twice,” said Corjon from in front of them.

“Somehow I doubt that,” said Mangos, pitching his voice so only Kairi could hear.

“I heard that,” Corjon snapped.

“Snake—yes,” Mangos told Kairi as he ducked a lantern, “worm—no. You?”

Kairi shook her head.

“How much is silvecite worth?” Mangos asked, wondering how many drinks he could buy.

“Plenty,” Daini said. “The Dukes of Endras mined it in the Karras mountains until Balmis built a reservoir to help irrigate their northern farms.”

“Why would that matter?”

“They accidentally flooded the mine.”

Mangos glanced at Kat, who confirmed this with a nod.

This seemed to offend Daini, who apparently didn’t like being doubted. “So, no silvecite for almost fifty years until this seam was found,” she said. “Small wonder Stiefnu doesn’t want to give it up.”

It also explained why most silvecite weapons and armor were old. Mangos knew his steel, and he knew most silvecite was really a steel alloy. Pure silvecite, while better, was too expensive and difficult to work.

“Twenty percent of the refined ore for two years,” he mused.

“Look around,” Daini said, a hint of a sneer on her face. “This whole level of the mine was opened to get to the silvecite. They built a new smelter for it, in case you didn’t notice on the way down. They may be offering twenty percent because they’re desperate, but they won’t be losing money by doing it.” She tossed her head. “Stiefnu’s not offering so much because he wants you to be happy.”

“Or,” Kat said, “once the worm is dead, they shut down the workings for two years. Then you get twenty percent of nothing.” She smiled sweetly.

“They wouldn’t—” Kairi stammered.

“Stiefnu’s not doing this because he wants you to be happy,” Kat repeated mockingly.

“Do you really think they would do that?” Mangos asked.

“No,” Kat said.

Kairi laughed, but Daini muttered, “Bitch. Thinks she’s some kind of queen or something.”

“Ah,” said Corjon with a note of satisfaction in his voice. They had nearly reached their destination.

The miners had dropped the shaft down then tunneled horizontally to reach the seam of silvecite; because, according to Stiefnu, silvecite ore was so difficult to mine, they repeatedly opened new tunnels to approach the seam from different angles so they could mine multiple faces. Once they crossed the fissure, Mangos expected an extensive maze of tunnels to reach the workings.

Lanterns at each end, and one in the middle, illuminated a thin bridge while the fissure extended down into darkness. The bridge was a dozen yards of steel holding cart rails with a wooden walkway between them. There was no handrail. The workings, and the worm, were on the other side.

Corjon puffed out his chest and, with a grin on his face, stepped onto the bridge. The wooden slats creaked, and his grin vanished like he had dropped it. He faltered, just a little, and hesitated.

Kat stepped after him, one hand on the strap of her pack, the other holding her spear.

Corjon began to creep forward, flinching with every creak of the bridge. He shuffled his feet as if afraid to pick them up.

Excited voices came from the tunnels on the other side, and a pair of miners burst into view, running and shouting. Crazed, they dashed onto the bridge.

“No! No!” shouted Corjon, waving for them to stop and back up.

They didn't. The miners kept racing forward, screaming, eyes bulging in their grimy faces. One man clutched at his arm, which had no hand. Blackened bones protruded from the stump, itself blackened past the elbow and turning to angry red, mottled with huge white blisters. Too panicked to take care, he barreled into Corjon.

Corjon grabbed the miner, both shouting incoherently, swung him around, and thrust him behind him.

Right into Kat.

Kat gave a cry of surprise as the impact knocked the spear from her hand. It clattered on the cart rail, and the panicked miner kicked it into the abyss. In one fluid motion, Kat shrugged off her pack and dove after the spear.

“No!” shouted Mangos, jumping to catch her. Strong hands grabbed him.

“You'll fall too,” said Daini.

Mangos pulled away from her, stepped onto the bridge and grabbed the thrashing miner. With a heave, Mangos threw him to safety, grabbed

Corjon and steadied him, and held the last miner so he couldn't knock anyone else over.

“She,” Kairi said, “just...dove.”

“Didn't expect that,” Daini agreed.

Mangos crawled to the edge and looked down. Kat hung to the underside of the bridge with one hand, feet dangling in the darkness.

“Was that necessary?” he asked.

Kat looked up at him, her brows knit and lips turned down. “I didn't catch it.” She swung her free hand up as he reached down, and Mangos lifted her back onto the bridge. “That was our best chance to kill the worm.”

“Will you at least tell me what it was?”

“A candeliere—a thrusting spear,” said Kat as she retrieved her pack. “It had a hollowed tip and shaft filled with poison. Nasty stuff, made from toad glands or some such thing. Kill you to even smell it.” She looked outraged. “It cost a fortune.”

“Can you get more?” Kairi asked.

“Can you climb that shaft without a lift?” Kat's voice was hard and mocking, and Mangos guessed she had placed more confidence in the spear than any other plan.

“Looks like you're not killing the worm, now,” said Daini. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

Kat shrugged back. “We'll see how you fare.” She finished crossing the bridge; Mangos followed a step behind. Daini and Kairi came last, Kairi cautiously peering over the side and shaking her head.

Corjon, now safely off the bridge, looked confident and eager again.

Mangos clapped him on the back and, feeling vicious, said, “Well, to make the worm go bang, you only need to cross that bridge at least two

more times.” Corjon blinked, and Mangos explained. “The nitrobarite is still on the other side. No handrails.”

“I get later,” Corjon muttered.

The tunnel divided shortly after they crossed the fissure. Down the right branch it divided again, giving them three choices.

Corjon did not hesitate. “I go this way, none of you follow. Worm be mine.”

“Yes, Corjon,” said Mangos, “the mine worm is mine.”

“Not yours,” said Corjon, glowering. “Mine.”

Kairi stifled a giggle.

Corjon glared at her, bushy eyebrows drawing together, and rested a hand on his sword.

“Push off,” said Daini, making a shooing motion. “Your worm is waiting for you.”

Corjon stomped away, back straight, not looking back.

Daini ran her hand through her hair, sizing up Mangos and Kat. “Guess we’re stuck with you for a bit, eh?”

“A little while,” said Kat. “After that?”

The two women started down the tunnel, side by side, both clearly assuming their partners would follow, and Mangos and Kairi did just that.

“Daini and Kat seem a lot alike,” Kairi remarked.

“And neither seems to like the other,” Mangos replied.

“They both know where they’re going.”

“They’re smart enough to follow the trail of blood from the wounded miners,” Mangos said.

“Ah.” Kairi touched a red drop with her boot. “That makes sense.”

The blood spatters became more evident the further they went. They did not pass any other miners, and Mangos noticed the sounds of mining had stopped. No more steel on steel, no more distant shouts, only absolute silence filled the mine.

They came to a face wall where miners had been cutting away at the tunnel. Pickaxes, steel rods, a water barrel, and a giant bellows lay strewn about. A natural tunnel moved off to the right.

Daini sniffed. “No bad air. The bellows must be just a precaution.”

“Here,” said Kat, crouching down amongst large splashes of blood. A few feet away lay a pitted hammerhead, its handle eaten away by acid.

Kairi strung her bow and nocked an arrow.

“What are you going to use?” Mangos asked her. “Not the bow?” But he took a closer look and realized runes curled up and down the belly of the bow.

Daini heard his question and cut off Kairi’s reply. “We’re going to use our guts.”

“Oh, you’re going to overfeed it then,” quipped Kat. She didn’t even look at Daini, but kept examining the tunnel wall.

“Kairi,” Daini said, “If she’s blocking your shot of the worm—take it anyway.”

Mangos glanced at Kairi. Her eyes were wide. “I’m pretty sure she’s joking,” he whispered. Kairi nodded.

How, Mangos wondered, did they have a chance of killing the worm? He liked his odds in a fight with anything. *We’ll see if its hide is proof against my sword*, he thought. But suppose it was... Corjon was going to use explosives; Daini and Kairi had a magic bow. Without Kat’s poison spear, they had nothing.

Kat drew a heavy leather cloak and hood from her pack and put it on. It didn't make sense to Mangos until he recalled the acid eaten hammer on the ground. Kat started down the right-hand tunnel, Daini hurried to keep up, and again, Mangos found himself following.

They did not have far to go before they found the worm, or it found them. Another tunnel joined theirs, and just at the edge of the lantern light, the worm filled it. The worm was quiescent until they stepped into the junction—then it quivered, its tapered snout questing for a scent or taste. It started to move toward them.

Its back scrapped the ceiling, though Mangos wondered if it mattered which side was up. Its mouth, covered by thick, rubbery lips, closed down around the cone of its outer teeth. It drew back its lips, and its teeth opened and closed like stiff-jointed fingers. The smell of hot iron drifted toward them.

“Shoot it!” screamed Daini.

Kairi drew her bow, the runes flared orange, and the glow moved to the string and along the arrow. She released. The arrow shot true, sparkling across the mine to shatter on the worm's hide. Kairi drew another, released, and it too had no effect.

The worm rumbled forward, scraping lanterns from the wall, pushing darkness and small stones before it.

“What is it, really?” Mangos asked as he drew his sword.

“How should I know?” Kat said.

“You know everything!” Mangos stepped forward, putting himself between the worm and Kat. “I thought you might know because the fourth king of Terzol kept one of these as a pet or something.”

Kat laughed. “The fourth king of Terzol was Alhemptzol, and he kept miniature lemurs. That's why he was overthrown.”

“You actually know who the fourth king was? You really do know everything!” Mangos stopped bantering as they backed down the tunnel,

further into the mine.

Kairi still drew and shot arrows while Daini stood beside her, sword ready. Finally, Kairi lowered the bow and said, “It needs to cool down.”

Daini grabbed her and dove aside, back the way they had come. The worm reached the junction and turned toward Mangos and Kat, grinding its way around the corner and blocking them from the others.

The worm probed toward them. It retracted its foreteeth, exposing a second set of wedge-shaped teeth, tightly closed to form a disc. These teeth opened, and a stream of liquid shot out.

Mangos spun aside while Kat dove forward to attack with her sword. The liquid hissed as it splashed against the tunnel wall. Kat’s attack skittered along the worm’s side to no greater effect than Kairi’s arrows.

Mangos lunged, sword extended, and stabbed the worm in the mouth. His sword passed in and stuck, jarring his arm. The worm closed its inner teeth and broke his blade. It closed its outer teeth on the remaining end and flicked up, tearing the hilt from Mangos’s hand. The worm opened its mouth, dropping the useless sword, and breathed out a spray of acid.

Mangos threw himself back, and the acid settled over Kat.

“Kat!” he shouted.

The worm moved forward again, and Kat scrambled to escape. Smoke swirled off her cloak as she tugged at the clasp and let it fall. Angry red spots covered her hands.

The worm worked its mouth back and forth, moving lips and teeth. Finally, it opened both sets of teeth and twitched, sending the tip of Mangos’s sword shooting past them.

“Seen enough?” Mangos asked.

“For now,” Kat said. She began to back slowly away.

“Faster than a man can run over short distances, remember?” Mangos said.

“You suggest we run?”

“Yes.” Mangos spun, and the two raced away. The walls shook, and Mangos hazarded a glance behind him. The worm filled the tunnel, growing larger in his vision as it drew nearer. He wondered how long “short distances” actually were.

The tunnel curved, and they came up against a dead end. The worm slowed down as it approached. It flexed its rubbery lips and opened and closed both sets of teeth. A long round tongue, as big around as Mangos’s arm, cloven-ended and rough-textured, snaked out.

Mangos grabbed the last lantern off the wall and swung it, but the worm didn’t flinch.

“Time to go ‘Bang,’ Mister Worm!” Corjon shouted nearby before lobbing the explosive.

The worm didn’t react, but the tunnel rocked, and small stones fell from the ceiling. Mangos staggered, the light dancing as he swung his arms to regain his balance.

“This way!” Kat cried, grabbing him and pushing him toward a tight crack in the wall. Mangos didn’t question if it was opened by the explosion or just overlooked. He held out his hand and followed the lantern through.

“Keep going,” said Kat, “so Corjon doesn’t catch us in his next ‘bang.’”

Down, far below, something glowed deep orange, almost red. Heat rose up, more intense than the already hot mine, along with the smell of sulphur.

Mangos moved carefully, feeling his way downward. The tunnel fell away steeply, and only his care and strength saved him when he stepped

on a loose stone. If he hadn't been steadying himself with his free hand, he would have followed the stone down.

At the bottom, they stepped onto a small ledge overlooking a half-cooled lava field. Cracks ran like veins through the darker cauliflower-like surface. Small pools dotted the chamber. The light of lava crept through the cracks and pools, giving the chamber a hellish atmosphere.

An explosion rumbled above them. Mangos could feel it through his boots, and a few stones clattered down the tunnel. "The first bang must not have killed it," he said.

Kat stepped forward, turning her head back and forth, testing the air. "This air is too cool, and it moves. There's another opening somewhere."

"Are those diamonds?" Mangos pointed to the lava pools and the crystals encrusted around the edges.

"Noooooo," Kat said thoughtfully. "But they may be..." She lowered herself onto the crust of the lava field and moved over to the nearest pool. The glow illuminated her face from below, and rising heat lifted her hair. She pulled on a glove and reached down to break off a crystal.

Pulling back from the updraft, she studied it. Mangos approached and looked over her shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nushadir Salt," she said. "Alchemists use it, but never as pure as this." Up close it didn't look like a diamond, rather a mess of interlocking icicles. "Now, we have something to try. We need as much as we can carry."

"Is it poisonous?" Mangos asked.

"No." She did not wait for his next question but began to gather more crystals, working quickly.

Another explosion made the chamber tremble, and stones rained down. The largest drove into the crust and stuck.

“Hurry,” Kat said, “before Corjon brings down the roof.”

Mangos set down the lantern so he could help. The heat seared his throat, and just touching the crystals made his fingers burn. The bottom of his feet prickled on the hot crusted lava.

He glanced up. “I wonder if the worm can come down here.”

“Hopefully, it’s enjoying playing with Corjon.”

Mangos wiped sweat from his face. “And it doesn’t like its food well done.” He kept picking crystals.

“That’s enough,” Kat finally said. “Gather them up, and let’s go.”

Mangos juggled the last crystals to make them balance in a one-armed load so he could pick up the lantern. Kat prowled about, trying to follow the cooler air.

“This way,” she said.

Another explosion staggered both of them. Kat went down to a knee and rose up with an exclamation. Stones, detached from the roof, showered down. Mangos looked up to see a large shadow resolve into a stone and plunge through the crust, splashing molten lava a dozen feet in the air.

The crust rippled like jelly, and a wave of intense heat slapped them. They hurried, Mangos first, to discover another ledge and a steep tunnel up. Warm air rose with them as they climbed, but mixed with cooler and more tolerable air. When Mangos squeezed through a crack and fell into another mine tunnel, the air was no worse than a hot day.

Kat leaned against the wall, hair hanging in sweaty lengths, breathing heavily.

“Now what?” Mangos asked.

“We need to get some nitrobarite if Corjon hasn’t used it all going ‘bang.’ You get that. I’ll get a fire, a barrel of water, and two of those big bellows.”

“They overthrew him because he kept lemurs?” Mangos asked as he ground the nushadir salt into powder.

They worked in a dead end, perhaps the start of another approach to the silvecite. Kat had chosen it because she found two bellows, massive things that could push air great distances, which the miners left there.

“Who? Oh, Alhemtzol of Terzol,” said Kat. She had heated the nitrobarite before dumping it in the water barrel. Now, she fished white crystals from the water and laid them out to dry. “Well, lemurs were sacred to the moon goddess. Keeping them as pets was an insult. The priestesses led a revolt, and while Alhemtzol tried to put it down, his cousin overthrew him to become Albalada the Second.”

After testing to see if they were dry, Kat began to grind up the white crystals, being careful to keep her powder separate from Mangos’s growing pile.

“Then,” she continued, “Albalada had the priestesses killed and the moon temples closed,” she said.

Mangos laughed, appreciating the irony of Terzoli politics. His laugh echoed back to him. A thought wiped the smile from his face. “I haven’t heard an explosion for a while. I wonder if Corjon killed the worm.”

“It’s possible,” Kat allowed. “Not likely.”

“It would save your life if he had.” Daini approached, limping, sweaty, and grimy. Blood trickled from several small wounds, streaking her face. Kairi appeared behind her, one arm hanging limply at her side, barely holding her bow in loose fingers. Her other hand clutched her shoulder, but it didn’t begin to cover the blood that soaked her tunic.

“Looks like you’ve been badly used,” Kairi remarked.

“Us?” said Mangos. He glanced at Kat and realized how tattered she looked. With her singed hair, drawn and sweaty face, and charred clothes she did indeed look badly used.

“Giving up?” Kat asked, ignoring Kairi’s comment.

“Regrouping,” Daini replied.

Kat paused from grinding her powder and studied each of them. A slow smile crept over her face. Rather than speak, she merely shrugged and resumed grinding.

Daini curled her lip. “Go crawl back into whatever hole you hid in.”

“What are—” Kairi stopped as a faint scraping sound came from the down the tunnel. “The worm!”

With a quick look around the dead end, Daini said, “To the bridge before we’re trapped.” She reached out to help steady her sister, and the two hurried away.

Mangos started to rise and follow them.

“Fill up your bellows,” ordered Kat. She started to shovel powder into the back of her bellows. “We can’t risk the worm destroying this. We’ll do it now.”

“Do we have enough?” Mangos asked. Almost a third of both the nushadir salt and the heated soaked nitrobarite remained unground.

“Pray we do and that this works.”

The worm came around the corner. It made straight for them, slowly, as if it knew they couldn’t escape.

“Wait behind me,” said Kat, turning the bellows and lifting the handle. The worm bore down, making her look small. She began to frantically pump the bellows.

The powder billowed through the air, enveloping the worm and clinging to its rough skin. It took a ghostly appearance from the grey coating.

“Now!” shouted Kat, abandoning her bellows and diving away. Mangos had a clear path to the worm.

He began pumping his bellows. The worm came closer, acid drool dripping from its mouth. Fear shot through him; he wanted his sword. As it was, he felt like a baker having a flour fight.

Mangos's powder covered the worm, overlaying Kat's coating. When the last of the powder puffed up, Kat yelled, "RUN" and he didn't need to be told twice. Acid sprayed over the bellows as he turned to flee.

"Run where?" he shouted as he realized the worm blocked their way to safety. Kat already stood with her back against the tunnel wall.

"Now what?" he asked as he grabbed an iron rod and turned to face the worm. Panting and sweating they pressed back as the worm came toward them.

Kat didn't answer, but she watched the worm with an intensity that told him she expected something.

The worm ground forward, pushing cool air before it.

Cool air? Mangos couldn't believe it, but he shivered. A pungent smell filled the tunnel.

"Die, you bastard," Kat breathed.

The worm shuddered, making small stones jump. It crept closer, more slowly, its tongue probing sluggishly. Mangos ducked and parried. Suddenly it slapped its tongue at him, and the blow tore the rod from his hand.

Water beaded on the worm's hide. The pungent smell clung in Mangos's nose, clawed at his throat. The air was *cold*, and it looked like ice was forming on the worm.

Slowly, ponderously, the worm rolled. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth, slapping the ground with a wet smack. A shiver ran its length, and it lay still.

Mangos couldn't believe his eyes. "How did you do that?"

"Magic?" Kat suggested with a raised eyebrow.

Mangos snorted. “You may know magic, but you can’t cast it.”

Kat laughed. She rubbed her arms against the cold coming from the frozen worm. “Alchemy, then. This thing is used to the heat. Not surprising that it can’t stand the cold.”

“So we...”

“Froze it.”

Mangos toed the worm’s tongue. Seeing no reaction, he ground it under his boot. “I would never have believed it.”

“Some things you mix together and get heat,” Kat said. “Some things you mix and get cold.”

“Mr. Worm,” said a voice, “you are about to go bang.”

“A little late for that, Corjon,” Mangos called.

“What you mean?”

Mangos stuck his head around the worm. “We just killed it.”

Corjon slumped a little at the news. He held up a sack, “Biggest bang yet. You sure worm is dead?”

“Very sure, and very dead,” said Kat.

“Maybe Stiefnu will let you keep the bang,” Mangos said.

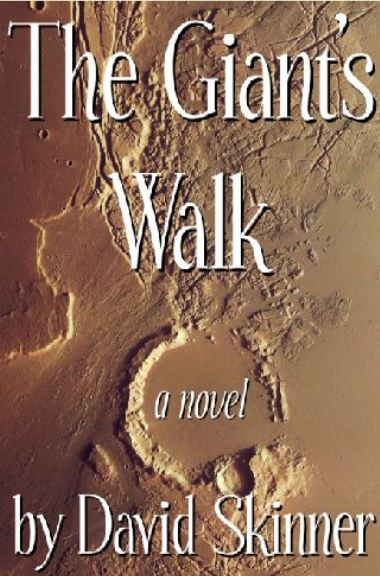
“Not as good as money,” Corjon muttered.

Mangos smiled, for he agreed completely.

A note on “alchemy”—Nitrobarite is Barium Nitrate, a major component of the explosive Baratol. It can be rendered into Barium Oxide with the application of heat, and the Barium Oxide can be turned into Barium Hydroxide by putting it in water. Nushadir Salt is naturally occurring Ammonium Chloride; it can be found around volcanic vents. By combining powdered Barium Hydroxide and Ammonium Chloride, Mangos and Kat create an endothermic chemical reaction that reaches temperatures of negative

thirty degrees. It also creates the water Mangos saw, and gives off the smell of ammonia.

Jim Breyfogle is the author of Tales of the Mongoose & Meerkat. Volume one, Pursuit Without Asking, is available on Amazon and other fine purveyors of books, out now through Cirsova Publishing.



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The Cunning of Artocris

By JEFFERY SCOTT SIMS

It is not enough for Artocris to be the greatest in all the land—he must surpass his mentor, the powerful Imhotep! But to what diabolical lengths is he willing to go?!

Artocris the mage, favored of Pharaoh, envied by the priests, counted himself the finest sorcerer of the Two Kingdoms by the Nile. His wisdom and cunning astounded the masses, and disturbed the nobles and the keepers of the temples. Long the acolyte of great Imhotep, he of inestimable memory, Artocris claimed to have assumed the mantle of that departed worthy. It irked him that the parasites of Pharaoh whispered into the royal ear snide insinuations, designed to lay traps for him.

Artocris toiled amidst the tools of his trade in his private compartment, deep within the underground chambers of the palace. Jars of arcane materials and steaming tubes, all of colored glass, surrounded him. Papyrus scrolls, already of antique inscription, lay about his long cedar table.

Said he, "They blaspheme my name for the crime of ambition, and scorn me for falling short of most holy Imhotep. They dare, because my marvels, however they bedazzle the common folk, rise not to the extraordinary heights of my predecessor. There, I find unfairness. I amuse Pharaoh, but Imhotep held our lord to his bosom. How did he that? Why, by still more spectacular miracles.

"Imhotep I obeyed, aided, and—of most value—observed. I kept at his elbow when he conjured, peered over his shoulder at manuscripts, learned what he knew. With the passing of years, I achieved. My seven scrolls of wisdom incorporate his accumulated lore, with commentary, and productive additions. Yet I must admit (if only to myself) that some factor eludes. There exists a secret matter that Imhotep withheld. Fruitless search, united with intelligent deduction, convinces me that the answer lies within the ebony box that my mentor insisted be buried with him."

Imhotep had been interred, with stately ceremony fitting an esteemed noble, in a stone vault sealed with a mass of packed earth, a copper-banded door, a plug of granite, and the appropriate series of unctuously pronounced curses against those who would tamper with his resting place or its lovingly preserved contents. The tomb lay within the

precincts of the large stepped pyramid rising from the sand, the intended domicile of Pharaoh when the gods collected his soul. This fact loomed in the mind of Artocris, since royal guards patrolled the area, armed men who received rewards and bonuses only when they slew grave robbers. Because of this, they were renowned for their vigilance.

All of this mattered so much to Artocris because he had determined to invade the vault of Imhotep in order to prise from it the special secret of the departed. Knowing the endeavor was not to be lightly contemplated, Artocris gave much thought to the dangerous affair. Breaching of the tomb was sacrilege by any measure, an act to anger the gods, bringing retribution in the afterlife—curious how little that counted in the grand scheme—but it was the ire of flesh and blood men that most concerned him. They could lay physical hands on him, torture and kill him, a process they would surely stretch out for an infinitely agonizing period.

Nevertheless, life is risk, at least the gratifying life, so Artocris shrugged and set to his plans for grave robbery. Being extremely clever, he pulled it off with ease, admittedly leavened with heart-pounding caution. He moved, naturally, by night. Heaping measures of wheat and massy jugs of beer, sweetened with a handful of cheap, gaudy baubles, bribed the guards sufficiently to have them look the other way. A trio of hungry ruffians proved willing to dare temporal or otherworld torments to aid him in breaking into the vault, on promise of valuable grave goods. They shoveled the earth, hacked through the copper bands, chopped up the door, and extracted the plug. The inscribed curses, they strove to ignore.

They entered by torchlight that flared in a foul gust. Once safely within the vault, learned Artocris writhed his fingers, assiduously muttered a charm of doom, and slew his three compatriots. They died swiftly, with croaking cries. Said the magician as he surveyed his sorceric handiwork, “Of no account to me that they lift common treasures from the tomb, for that costs me nothing; yet they were the sort, I deduce, to chatter in their cups, which could prove inopportune. They will not be missed, and it is better this way.”

So at the midnight hour Artocris, alive and aware, stood amidst the dead and the funereal offerings in the sepulcher of Imhotep. It was a cramped, noisome place. Within the small chamber, he beheld the three unimportant corpses, plain timber shelving decorated with gold and silver ornaments, a wicker basket of stale comestibles and a goblet of evaporated liquor (food and drink for the death journey), and a limestone dais bearing a long sarcophagus of willow wood. Artocris placed the torch in an urn, then busied himself. Hurried examination of the metal items led him to concentrate on the coffin. With a copper pry bar, he splintered the lid and knocked the pieces aside. He laid eyes again on Imhotep the fabulous conjurer, whom he had last viewed at the extremity of his life.

Not being of royal birth, Imhotep had not received the fulsome treatment of funeral preparation bestowed on those grandees. Callous and indifferent Artocris might be, but he could not help but blanch at the pathetic remains he disclosed. Imhotep had rotted, moldered, blackened and crumbled, and on prior occasions had emitted a daintier aroma. The live mage idly hoped that the soul of the dead one had soared to deservedly choice parts. Well and good, yet of far more significance was the square cube of polished ebony clasped by the fleshless fingers of the cadaver. Inside that box resided . . . something vital.

Said Artocris, "My old friend, I crave pardon for untwining your desiccated digits from this prize. I mean you no harm, though my haste implies otherwise. Forgive me, but it is not my fault that your spidery extremities snap and disintegrate rather than bend." He brushed powdery debris from the box and removed it from the sarcophagus.

He rested the ebon box on the edge of the dais. It opened readily. It contained merely a papyrus scroll. No cause for distress this, if Imhotep had inscribed a dazzling, world-shaking spell. Artocris scanned the oddly few characters on the unrolled sheet. "What be this? Did he play a silly trick to frighten babes and fools? No spell here, but a warning: 'Damned all who seek the Eye of Xenophor.' And a commandment: 'Let the Eye rest with me, for my peace and yours.' By Isis and Osiris, what does it mean?"

Yet as he whispered to himself, a strange, nervous energy coursed through his hands and throughout his body. The papyrus was magically impregnated, as blessing or curse Artocris could not fathom. There was inherent power, as used to flow from the nib of Imhotep into his writings, still curiously strong. Artocris crumpled the document, wadded it into the box and knocked the thing aside. He had been sure that its contents would grant what he sought.

Then Artocris saw that the chief purpose of the papyrus's esoteric infusion was to bring about, upon its handling, another effect.

Imhotep sat up in his coffin.

A process rather than an event, the dead wizard accomplished this grotesque feat gradually, his uncertain movement accompanied by the dry creaking of bones and the liverish sliding of still moist internal organs. Artocris did not care for the way the corroded head, revealing a grim plenitude of skull, ground stiffly to face him. This Artocris could not abide; too driven by lust for gain to flee, he must turn away and shrink against a wall. Therefore he heard only the unsteady rising to a standing position within the sarcophagus, the clumsy struggle to set foot on the dais, the painfully noisy drop or fall to the floor. A few interminable seconds of silence were followed, at disturbingly long intervals, by the approaching padding of bare feet.

Artocris braced himself, whirled. He stared into a hideous grin of exposed, yellowed teeth. Sunken eye sockets stared back. Quoth Imhotep, in halting, lungless tones, "So it is you, my faithful acolyte, who comes. Or is it my envious student? You know of old I could catch echoes from your brain. You came seeking treasure one may not peddle in the commoners' market. That, I appreciate; it is the way of the mage. Will you trust me when I declare that no wealth of the intellect lies here for you?"

Artocris dodged sidewise to escape the worst reek emanating from the talking corpse's awful mouth. He snapped, "That I will not. Think me an idiot, when you tantalize with delicious hints of Xenophor's Eye? I remember those times when you indulged too freely, how you bragged of

the Eye's efficacy. Otherwise, you withheld from me. You had, surely, excellent play with it while you breathed man's air. Now it is my turn."

Imhotep shook his head, a horribly protracted action giving the appearance of pain. "Artocris, you know not the import of your own desires. I remember our old days with pitiful clarity. Among your failings and flaws was an unwillingness, born of carelessness, to dig behind the pragmatic to uproot the ideal. Obviously, you covet the power of the Eye, yet do you understand what it is, what it means?"

"Harken and learn, my student. Our gods be pale shadows of the majestic actuality. Genuine deistic substance lies beyond them, in no more concentrated form than mighty Xenophor, styled by initiates Lord of All Things, the Creator and the Destroyer. He is the Ultimate Master who wears the cosmos as a garment. From Him flows all boons and—more importantly—all dooms. Heed this lesson: bow to Xenophor, do not toy with Him."

Artocris interrupted with a sneer. "Be it fair report or pretty fable, I care not. The names of gods serve to fill the oaths that trip off of men's tongues, naught more. I want the Eye."

Continued Imhotep, as if the other had not spoken, "At the very dawn of man the proud sorcerers of the Rhexellites—no myth they, but true history—fashioned the Eye, stealing its power from great Xenophor Himself. For that crime they perished, but the Eye lives on, indestructible, tempting the wise to destruction by the promise of riches in the form of eternal mysteries unveiled. I acquired the Eye (ask not by what unwholesome methods), I put it to use, I . . . benefited.

"Aye, my fame stems from its employment, but I utilized it too long, until it permeated my soul. Now I am part of it, or it part of me; regardless, I must retain it, lest my soul suffer oblivion, dispersed as chaff in the wind. It is my only poor salvation. Heed the wisdom of my words, thereby saving me and yourself."

Artocris regarded the deceased speaker, his brain fulminating. Instead of responding, he commenced a more thorough search of the funeral

ornaments. Having satisfied himself on a critical point, he turned again to his no longer living companion, declaring imperiously, "The Eye of Xenophor lies not among these trinkets, nor in your coffin. Part of you, is it? Indeed it is, confirmed by the process of elimination. You managed an ingenious concealment. Imhotep, I fear you are lost, for I shall have the Eye, and in your feeble, deteriorating condition, there is nothing you can do to stop me."

"Have you not listened?" moaned Imhotep. That dreadful caricature of a man staggered awkwardly backward, sluggishly waving limp arms. "I have told what will become of me. Have pity, I beg, and beware for yourself."

Said Artocris, "Nay, for I am your superior in talent and shrewdness, and I harbor no fear of repeating your failures. I take the Eye, now." Then Artocris did a terrible thing. He clenched his hands with the fingers crooked like claws, and he reached out in force, thrusting his talons into the dry midriff of the standing corpse. Imhotep's knees buckled with a hideous cracking noise, sinking down as his persecutor pierced, tore, and probed. With an exultant cry, Artocris dragged out of the gouged belly a scintillating orb that glowed with inner fire beyond that caught from the flickering radiance of the torch. Its sparkling, animate colors exceeded the rainbow. Artocris held it in both hands, his eyes flashing a weird blaze. White foam flecked his lips.

Imhotep, prone now, gazed up helplessly, gasping words from his liquefying throat. "I am destroyed. My soul rots faster than this putrid flesh. Your evil has finished me for all eternity. Nevertheless, Artocris, I take leave with mocking laughter." And he did laugh, a sound to anguish the sane. "Your arrogant stupidity shall lead you into the same errors and worse, and in the end you too must bow before the merciless justice of Xenophor." Imhotep spoke no more; he was gone, leaving on the floor only the residue of corruption behind.

Artocris went forth from the tomb in triumph, the Eye hidden in his robes. Said he, "The era of my greatness begins. Nothing shall be denied me. Imhotep would have me fear the justice of Xenophor? Once I have

trained my powers to their zenith, I will give not a fig for Him or any other. Xenophor shall serve as my footstool.”

So Artocris avowed, and so he surely believed. With such a talisman at his command, he did verily work marvels that were like to charm the masses and flabbergast his detractors. He counted on a long life of favor and fortune.

The chronicles of those days tell of a different outcome. That mage, they relate, did not long enjoy the wonders of the Eye. Artocris, in the midst of his amazing magical conquests, in due course suffered a ghastly fate, one so loathsome that it would be impolitic to describe. The papyri hint at a blasphemy against an unknown god that called down unspeakable punishment. Xenophor—if it be He who reached through the supernatural orb to deliver judgment—allowed not time for Artocris to equal or exceed his dead mentor, which must have made the doom that much harder to bear.

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The Cat, the Hand, and the Plight of the Sacred Bull

By CHRISTINE LUCAS

The High Priest of Anubis has a bad case of the cramps—and finds himself haunted by myriad livestock... All while his cat insists on dragging home various body parts!

To Duat with this heat, to Duat with those flies, and to Duat with every pestering idiot who crossed his path. Too many curses crowded at the tip of his tongue today. The townsfolk of Thebes were fortunate that Ankhu, High Priest of Anubis, wasn't some loose-tongued novice to spit curses carelessly. Had he employed the ceremonial tone he used to deliver ghosts to the Land of the Dead, Osiris' back yard would be crawling with beggars, fishmongers, scribes, and probably the pharaoh himself.

Another assortment of expletives, along the lines of "*spoiled, flea-ridden spawn of a hairball-hacking goddess*" reached his lips when he tripped on his cat Nedjem and almost fell face first in the dirt. The cat darted through Ankhu's feet, ears twitched back, eyes wild, and in his fangs, something mangled that shouldn't be there.

A hand. A *human* hand. Where had his cat found a *Bast-help-him* severed human hand?

Ankhu's shoulders slumped. Other cats caught mice. And rats. And snakes. But not *his* cat. Nedjem had found some flock of severed hands prancing about and caught one. Obviously. Where in Anubis' name had he gotten that? What kind of trouble had he dragged home *this* time? Ankhu clenched his fists. As if his constricting gut wasn't enough of a bother today. The moment Ankhu set foot into the inner garden of his residence, two more idiots awaited him. The first one scurried closer and grabbed the arm of Ankhu, who bit his tongue. The fool had no idea how close he came to being slingshot to Duat, within sniffing distance from Anubis' posterior.

"My Lord Embalmer!" He had youthful skin aged prematurely. Not from work—those grabby fingers on Ankhu's arm hadn't known any sort of work. The yellowish tint indicated a love for wine. Those ever-darting eyes, the perpetually creased brow... Ankhu had the honor of the visit of a master gossip-monger from the pharaoh's court. And clad in the white linen of a priest. Not from Ankhu's temple. Where had *this* fool come from?

"My lord Ankhu, I beg your assistance on a most grave matter!"

“What?” Less of a word and more of a grunt, Ankhu had to force the reply through stiffened jaws. He shook his arm free from the sweaty clutch. He already sweated a whole Nile on his own. Even in Thebes, such heat was unheard of. And where had that cat gone?

Ankhu had left the Temple of Anubis early, appointing his duties as a High Priest to his subordinates, and endured the walk home under the scorching afternoon sun. Waves of cold sweat alternated with burning sweat, their combined stench strong enough to overpower a caravan’s worth of perfumes from Punt. To add to his discontent, the cramps in his gut splintered to stabbing pains at every step. Of all the times in a year to get constipated, it had to happen now.

“My lord,” begged the fool who reached for Ankhu’s arm again. “Please. You are my last hope. The Apis Bull ails with discontent.”

Who? Ankhu opened his cracked lips to reply, but no sound left his parched throat. He glanced down. These were his sandalled feet, those his linen robes. He glanced about. This was his garden, with the ancient sycamore tree. From somewhere inside, his servant’s curse followed the sound of broken pottery. That over there was his cat, sprinting through the length of the house as if all the demons of Duat breathed down his fur—without that damned hand. So this couldn’t be one of those absurd dreams sent by Apophis, God of Chaos, in which his servants argued over dead blue parrots or walked in silly manners.

This had to be real. He blinked away sweat and fixed his gaze on the fool. “Why are you bothering me?”

“The Apis Bull ails, my lord,” said the fool in between fast and breathless bowing. “The Chief Administrator to the King spoke highly of your skills and your connection to the divine. Perhaps you can aid with the Sacred Bull’s distress, lest it results in dire consequences for the crops and the virility of the court.”

“The *what?*” Ankhu’s hand rose on its own to slap the idiot who’d come to bother him in *his* time of distress. But then Nedjem darted out from the kitchen with Ankhu’s servant Khemes in tow, the cleaning

brush still in his hand. Ankhu possessed enough self-control yet to direct his raised arm to wave at his servant instead of slapping the fool. Khemes limped closer, side-eyeing the cat who'd left his mangled prey at Ankhu's feet, amber eyes half-closed and body trembling with proud purring. Not the hand, thankfully, for everyone to see and gossip about. Just a catch from the barrel of salted fish.

"Khemes," Ankhu whispered, "who's that fool?"

Khemes glanced over his shoulder. "That's the *Neru Phyt*."

"Not *that* one. Are you drunk again?" *What?* Ankhu craned his neck to take a better look at the other fool, the one with the expensive wig and the fine linen robe, leaning against the sycamore tree and busy studying his nails. "Khemes, if you think this is a good time to make such a joke..."

Khemes shook his head. "No, I swear, that's his title. *Neru Phyt*."

"Shepherd of the Anus?" Ankhu scowled. One of these days, he'd track down the court's clerk with the vivid imagination responsible for all those ridiculous titles. Anubis help him, when he did.

Khemes raised a finger. "No, 'Shepherd of the *Royal* Anus.' Apparently, your... ailment has reached the pharaoh's ears, and he instructed his personal physician to ...assist you. My lord."

Ankhu's face burned, and his servant's obvious effort to not laugh added to his shame. So his condition was the court's favorite topic now? Weren't there enough affairs, enough stealing from the state coffers? Had the vineyards of Lake Mareotis failed to produce enough wine to keep those drunkards drunk? He straightened as much as his pained abdomen allowed and fixed his eyes on Khemes.

"Send him away."

"But..."

"I said, *send him away*. And who's the other one?"

Khemes leaned closer, in full gossip manner. “That’s Hapi, appointed Herdsman of Apis. Apparently, the newly-found Apis Bull, on his way to the Memphis Temple, fell ill. Hapi’s the apprentice to the previous Herdsman who retired last month.” Khemes leaned even closer, his eyes dark, his voice quivering. “I heard he retired so he could run off with one of the queen’s Nubian slaves.” He nodded repeatedly. “I heard it from *Him-who-is-dear-to-the-king’s-head*. He knows *everything*.”

The pharaoh’s wig-maker? A respectable source indeed. Or not. Ankhu had stopped caring three abdominal cramps ago. With a grunt, he stepped up to Hapi. “Go. Away. Unless your Divine Bull needs embalming, you need a *sunu*, not the High Priest of Anubis.” He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder toward the general direction of his front door. “The healers can be found out there. Go. Away.”

And there’s the hand again.

The command had barely left Ankhu’s throat when the severed hand appeared clutched on Hapi’s linen robe. It climbed up to his shoulder like a grotesque spider from dreams sent by the Chaos Serpent. Ankhu held his breath, expecting screams from everyone present. Which of them would scream like a little girl? And which would faint?

Nothing.

Only Nedjem watched the hand with his tail twitching wildly enough to stir up a sandstorm. When more severed hands appeared clutched around Hapi’s robe like beads and silver ornaments, Ankhu noticed their lack of substance. Those were ghostly hands: this man’s words and deeds. And a sign from the gods he spotted too late.

Before Ankhu could stop him without losing face, Hapi scurried past him, his face beet-red, pouting like a toddler denied a honeyed date. Ankhu sucked in a deep breath and turned to the other man, who stood with a cold, calculating stare. Was he memorizing every last word to report back to the court? Or was he evaluating how ...deep his intervention was going to be?

“You too can go,” said Ankhu. “My gratitude, but I won’t be needing your services.” Not yet, at least. He wasn’t that desperate, but the coming evening could hold too much discomfort. Better not anger the one who might venture in his most private places.

The *Neru Phyt* nodded and left, his eyes still cold. Once he was out of earshot, Ankhu turned to his servant, keeping his eyes and his voice low.

“Go find Shepshet. Tell her that I require her services.”

Khemes blinked. “Shepshet? The midwife? Why?”

“I want to consult with her on a private matter.” Ankhu’s own mother was a midwife, and he recalled her using an assortment of concoctions to aid pregnant women with similar ailments.

Khemes’ gaze lingered on Ankhu’s stiff abdomen one moment too long. “My lord, if you need a midwife’s aid to ...expel what ails you...”

“Khemes! *Now!*”

Ankhu’s roar drove his chuckling servant out of the house as fast as his limp leg allowed, with Nedjem following his heel. Ankhu made his way around the garden to his chamber, trying not to think what Nedjem would drag back this time.

Shepshet didn’t come; a difficult birth demanded all her attention that day, but she assured Ankhu she’d visit first thing in the morning. Ankhu willed himself to a pained, uncomfortable nap. Still pained and unrefreshed, he awoke to an abominable stench much later. Ghostly visitors often crossed his bedchamber, and none of them smelled like lilies. But this... He sat up and found himself surrounded by a herd of spectral cows. Beside Ankhu’s headrest, Nedjem crouched wide-eyed, ears drawn back. He sniffed the air heavy with the stench of cow dung and darted off.

The cows moored and shook their heads. Ankhu sat up and hid his sweaty face in his palms. Which god had he offended to be tormented so?

Amidst the herd, one cow approached him, her ethereal legs unfazed by mundane obstacles like his bed. This one, this Divine Bovine, wore a solar crown on her head. When the ghostly muzzle approached his nose close enough to smell fresh grass and clover, Ankhu knew she carried a message from the gods.

He'd studied forgotten tongues and forbidden papyri, but he'd never learned to speak bovine. What did their divine grace want *now*?

He sighed. "Fine, I'll see what ails the Apis Bull."

The moment he spoke those words, the spectral herd vanished, all but one busy grazing ghostly grass by the corner of his chamber. Their stench did not. Anubis help him, he'd have to compose a ritual to banish ghostly manure.

Ankhu settled under the sycamore tree and pulled a soft linen shawl over his shoulders to shield them from the swarms of mosquitoes. So much for his plan to purge his chambers from ghostly stench. No spell his tired mind could compose had worked. Worse yet, some misspoken incantation had summoned ghostly goats and a mangy spectral dog trying to herd the bleating spirits. When it failed, it had tried to herd Nedjem, who hissed, clawed air, and fled. When that canine *akh* tried to herd Ankhu himself, he admitted defeat and came down to the garden. Tonight, ghostly livestock had murdered sleep.

He sniffed his arm and cringed. All of Nile's water wouldn't wash that stench from his skin. Trust fickle deities to enforce their will in an odorous manner.

Nedjem whimpered somewhere close, and Ankhu patted his thigh, inviting him on his lap. He needed his cat's purr to comfort him, a comfort Nedjem was too stingy with. The cat whimpered again, his eyes reflecting the light of the sickle moon twofold. Another soft, tentative mew, and he approached from amidst the rose bushes and ferns. And did so with the hand in his fangs.

“Oh, no! Nedjem, put that down!”

Of course, Nedjem didn't. Ankhu crawled closer with a groan, his gut a bundle of writhing snakes gnawing on his insides. Which poor soul's tomb had Nedjem broken into? To whom should he have to atone this time? He'd atoned to many gods from many lands for his cat's offenses, praised be Bast and her never-ending prank of a cat.

“Put that down.”

Nedjem growled.

“Now.”

Another growl.

“You can't eat that. You'll get sick.”

A twitch of the tail, a half-hearted growl. Nedjem dropped his gory loot on the ground and darted off.

Ankhu's shoulders slumped. Trust his rascal to dump human remains at his feet and go find fresh prey. What now? Ankhu broke off a thin branch from the acacia tree and poked the hand. It seemed like a man's hand. No rings on it. No tattoos, either of ownership or debt. So unless the *akh* of its owner appeared at him screaming about the desecration of his remains, he had no way of knowing to whom it belonged. He glanced about. There, by the palm tree, he'd had Khemes bury several gutted pigeons over the years. Three steps to the left, a mangled, decapitated thing that could be one of Duat's monstrous denizens. Where should he lay that hand to rest in peace, in his necropolis of a garden?

He managed to stand with a groan and headed to where Khemes kept the tools. Ankhu loathed any manual labor, but the fewer people knew about this particular loot, the better. Digging up a hole in his condition would be a challenge. He sighed. When he'd donned the priestly garb, he'd assumed the title of *hem-nedjer*: servant to the gods. And now, in his old age, he'd devolved to *hem-Nedjem*: servant to Nedjem. So be it. And may the gods and the honored dead perceive his nightly struggle as his penance for his cat's offenses.

He returned beneath the sycamore tree to retrieve the hand, dragging the shovel behind him. Nedjem was back. And this time, he'd brought an entire arm. He stood over it like a living Bast statue, purring proudly. He nudged it with his forepaw and offered Ankhu his catch with a mewed trill.

“Nedjem! How many times do I have to say, ‘*not humans*’?” The shovel slipped from his grip and landed with a clank on the garden’s cobblestone path.

The cat arched his back, hissed, and bolted. And left his catch behind.

Only neither catch was as dead as they'd initially appeared to be. The moment the cat fled, the first hand jumped up on four fingers, the thumb stretched upwards to an impossible angle, as if sniffing the air.

What madness was this?

Like a malformed crab from the Nile’s shallows, the hand scurried to the arm. The thumb traced the length of the forearm until it reached the limp hand. It poked the palm a few times, until the fingers responded with weak spasms. When its sibling thumb perked up, the hand burst into a series of leaps and convulsions that would shame even the pharaoh’s best acrobats.

If his distended abdomen didn’t hurt so, he’d think it another of Apophis’ absurd dreams. None but the Serpent God of Chaos could pull the strings of severed limbs and make them hop about in some grotesque mating dance. He gulped, and his parched throat burned as if it were lined with Nedjem’s murdered pottery. *Wine*. He needed wine. Lots of it, even the cheap, acrid kind Khemes gulped down nightly—strictly for medicinal purposes for insomnia, of course.

But not yet. *Take care of those damned limbs first. Then wine*. He sucked in a few deep breaths, his eyes on the still-dancing hand, and forced his mind to focus. He raised his right hand, as much as his cramping gut allowed, and spoke the words of warding and banishing.

The hand spun around, the thumb measuring him up and down. Anubis help him, it didn't look impressed. Definitely not banished. It looked ...annoyed. To Duat with this night that seemed to have no dawn, he might as well have sneezed. Or farted. Now, there's a plan. The stench could accomplish what magic hadn't. It had driven him out of his own bedchamber, hadn't it?

Perhaps he should try again? He raised his hand once more. One word of the incantation and a ghostly goat's head appeared at the narrow window of his chamber overlooking the garden. It fixed beady eyes at him, then bleated.

"No, I'm not talking to you," Ankhu grunted. "But feel free to return to whence you came."

The goat yawned. Before Ankhu could utter another word, a feline growl shattered his already fragile concentration. *No*. No feline had made that cursed, strangled sound. What lurked in the bushes? Ankhu squinted. Nedjem's nether regions appeared through the foliage, first his twitching tail and then his hind legs. Anubis help him, what now?

A severed head. His cat had brought home a severed yet growling head, dragging it from long, matted hair.

The severed hand started another happy little dance around the head it apparently once belonged to. It jumped around like a drunk crab, pinching blackened cheeks and hooking fingers at the corner of the mouth, as if trying to force a smile. But only growls came out, from a purplish face with a bloated tongue and ever-rolling, opaque eyes.

Nedjem took three steps to the side and collapsed beneath the sycamore tree, panting like a dog. His ears perked up when the *akh* of the goat bleated again. A twitch of his tail and he rested his head on his forepaws.

Ankhu's eyes narrowed. Dragging a human head from Anubis-knew-where couldn't have been an easy task, even for a cat as headstrong as Nedjem. He reached down and stroked his cat's head. The purring waxed

to thunderous levels. Ankhu forced himself upwards, despite his discomfort.

“Thank you, boy,” he whispered, well aware that he only encouraged him to a repeat performance. But he’d brought him those for a reason. Or so he hoped.

He approached the head, and the prancing hand scurried backwards, the thumb aimed at him like a lance. Who was that man? Why was he so important that Nedjem had abandoned his nightly adventures of slaughter and copulation to bring it home? He sniffed his hand that had stroked the cat’s head. Where had he ventured into?

Grass and flowing waters and, unsurprisingly, manure. He glanced at the long hair. No man of Egypt would wear his hair in this fashion—but a Cretan would. They favored their hair in long, oiled tresses crawling with lice. A firefly flitted before his face; no, not an insect, but a moth-sized spectral cow with wings and a solar headdress. It didn’t buzz but mooed louder than the cat’s purr. Ankhu blinked and found himself in an open field, ankle-deep in manure.

The field stretched far, until it met the languid flow of the Nile. Cows grazed in the distance, and before him stood a magnificent beast: the Apis Bull. The animal bore the identifying mark on his head, but now, at this moment, he was not the embodiment of the divine. He was just a bull with his mates and offspring in the distance. And there stood a man, a short, dark-skinned man, barefoot and wrinkled, his hair in long tresses, feeding the beast apples and figs. Then the vision became fragmented: yells of robed priests and armed guards. The farmer with the long braids hefting his staff like an ax. A priest on the ground, his face into a pile of cow dung. Wounded pride. Pain.

The mooing *akh* flapped its wings again, now shrouded in emerald glow, and Ankhu’s vision ended with a flash of ivory teeth. He blinked away the remnants of the vision and shooed off the bovine firefly to check the spots where this man’s body had been torn off. His heart clenched. Not torn—bitten off. In his youth, when he still worked in the *per-nefer*, the embalmer’s house, he’d seen plenty a corpse mangled like

that. They'd never find the rest of this unfortunate man; he'd been a crocodile's supper for days now.

He glanced at his cat beneath the tree, who faked deep sleep with one ear twitched back and one vigilant eye half-closed. Nedjem had ventured into dark, dangerous places amidst teeth and scales to bring him the poor man's remains. Why?

He knew why. This death had not been an accident. The poor man wouldn't part with his beloved bull; Ankhu knew how Cretans revered their bulls, too. But Egypt needed an Apis Bull as well, and this man had stood in an ambitious young priest's way.

The winged cow nodded one time too many within a grass-green cloud of bovine flatulence. That had been the divine message all along: not only to aid the Apis Bull but also to ensure justice for a farmer untimely killed. But the gods' plan had been too cunning for their own good; they didn't take into account that *why in Sobek's scaly ass would he speak bovine?* With his sincere apologies to the Crocodile God for his blasphemous mention of his posterior.

He sighed, the opaque gaze of the dead man heavy upon his shoulders. How could he fix this? He couldn't prove the murder, but there were many forms of punishment: human, divine, and in-between, from the realm of tiny winged cows and spectral manure. He gathered the remains, which lay calm and quiet now, wrapped them up in his white linen shawl, and headed to the kitchen.

Khemes snored on his cot by the far wall, an empty wineskin as a headrest. Cats curled atop his chest, cats stretched across his torso and between his legs, tiny muzzles daring to near where no living being should, lest they choke. Two of Nedjem's consorts and their litters, drawn to the smell of smoked fish Khemes favored for supper.

Ankhu nudged his servant with his toe, hoping that *that* stench too wouldn't stick on him.

“Khemes. Get up.”

Khemes mumbled something and clutched the cat on his chest tighter. The cat started from deep slumber and jumped up with her back arched. One heartbeat later, all cats had jumped up in unison, hissing and spitting at every possible direction, a bundle of panicked felines with needle-sharp claws. They scattered the moment Khemes yelped at the many cuts and pricks. He sat up, his eyes unfocused, reaching for his walking stick. He gripped instead the tail of a cat, which clawed his hand for the offensive tag then bolted out of the window.

“What?” Khemes managed between sucking his bleeding thumb and blinking sleep away. “Are you feeling worse, *neb-per*? Should I go and get the *Neru Phyt*? The midwife?”

“Yes, but not just yet. First, go to the south part of Thebes, where the Cretan immigrants live. They have a small shrine, don’t they? Yes, Khemes, the one with the bare-breasted priestess. I see you’re already familiar with it. I wish to consult with this priestess.” The poor man needed a proper burial according to the customs of his people. “And then go fetch the midwife and deliver a note to the *Neru Phyt*. Actually, I’ll go write down a note for each one, so you’ll have time to preen yourself before visiting the Cretan lady.”

Ankhu made his way back to his chambers, his eyes stinging from lack of sleep and his abdomen a burning knot. Come dawn, he’d set everything straight.

Bast be praised, Shepshet’s brew of senna leaves worked wonders. An old friend of his late mother’s, Shepshet stayed by his side until the first gurgling sounds indicated that her concoction had worked. Did she notice that his chambers had turned to a pen for ghostly livestock and one damned dog? That dog tried again to herd Nedjem back with the ethereal goats, one remaining cow, and the newcomers: one loud flock of geese. Shepshet did cock one perfectly kohl-lined eyebrow when his cat bolted out of the room hissing and spitting, but spoke not of the ghosts. In her trade, she’d seen many things and had learned the value of silence.

Silence, in certain things only. The many wrinkles on her face deepened when she leaned closer and disclosed everything she knew about Hapi, the young Herdsman of the Apis Bull, of how he'd weaseled his way to that position.

"I heard it from *She-who-is-intimate-to-the-Pharaoh's-fingertips*," she added.

The Royal Manicurist? Ankhu blinked, the gurgling in his gut waxing. *At last.* "A most reliable source. Pray tell, then."

An hour later, with his body lighter, clad in his ceremonial garb of white linen, and the leopard skin draped over his shoulders, Ankhu led his spectral herd through Thebes. He prayed to all the gods he knew that the townsfolk wouldn't notice the cows, the goats, the geese, and a donkey—when did that one come along?—and that damned dog following his heel. Most common folk were blind to the world of spirits. And those who weren't knew better than to speak of the entities following their high priest.

They might speak, though, of the entities following the high priest's cat. Nedjem came along, followed by a swarm of frogs and locusts and sparrows and pigeons and countless creatures that crawled and flew. His victims from many years of slaughter followed in line. From time to time, they took turns pestering him with spectral beaks and croaks and stings. This could explain Nedjem's participation in last night's events. He had his own penance to do.

The pen where the sacred bull waited to be transported to his pasture in Memphis was just outside town. Hapi awaited there, in the shadow of a parasol a thin Nubian slave held over his head. Ankhu's grip around his own parasol tightened.

But then his eyes focused elsewhere, beyond the slimy little priest who fancied himself too good to carry his own damned parasol. There, in the midst of the pasture stood the Apis Bull in the flesh, born black with the star-shaped mark on his forehead. And he didn't stand alone. His great

muzzle sought the hand of the short man beside him, the Cretan man with the long tresses. But the muzzle found nothing to rub against, for beside him stood only an *akh*.

“They feed bad food,” said the man, his accent heavy, his words unschooled. “Cheap food. Tummy hurts.”

Hapi caught up, first bowing repeatedly, then slightly hunched. He kept his hands clasped on his chest, a torrent of words flowing out of his mouth.

“...and there’s the crops to consider, because if the Apis Bull won’t fertilize the land, the crops will fail, and we’ll all starve, and his breath won’t heal those who ail, and...”

Breathless though he were, Hapi’s *rehearsed* speech was void of emotion. So unlike the whispers of a dead farmer, who tried to tend to his animal even in death. And a flock of spectral hands—too many hands—clutched on his clothes, turning the white linen red.

How many?

Too many.

Ankhu made a valiant effort to not listen to the fool and focused on the animal. Once he saw them approach, the bull pounded the dirt and bellowed. And still, there was some stiffness in his motions, and a pained gaze in those great eyes. One low whine followed by another bellow, and Ankhu knew: the poor beast was constipated, the result of ill-suited feed.

He glanced askance at Hapi, who kept rambling on. How deep did the corruption go in this one? He had little evidence of the farmer’s murder—his visions wouldn’t be enough to prove murder. But the animal should be safe now. Once in Memphis, many more priests and novices would tend to the bull, so a similar incident would be unlikely. And the murder? In this place and time, the High Priest of Anubis had the means of delivering another kind of justice.

He closed his eyes and uttered his command to the dead. And behold, his spectral herd, cows and goats and geese and the donkey and two pigs

—pigs? *Pigs?*—crowded around the oblivious, murderous fool. Nedjem’s host too, their beaks and stings at the ready. *And may Hapi’s nights smell of manure and echo of never-sleeping livestock.*

Hapi glanced over his shoulder, then crinkled his nose, then slapped his neck as if stung by a horsefly. He’d had his last moment of peace. Across the pasture, the dead farmer nodded and dissolved in the breeze.

Ankhu flashed Hapi a wide smile.

“Rest assured, Hapi, Herdsman of the Apis Bull, that Harmony and Balance shall be restored, both in this pasture and in Egypt. I will personally contact the appropriate healer in the royal court to come and tend to the animal.” If the *Neru Phyt* had been so eager to explore a high priest’s innards, let him have fun cleansing a massive bull. “And worry not about the crops.

“There will be blessings aplenty.”

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A Touch of the Lokiean

By REV. JOE KELLY

Arnbjörg has been sentenced to die for killing a rival without honor! Can Oddr and his apprentice defeat the vengeful spirit when his victim returns as a draugr!?

“Listen to me very carefully. You will answer all my questions truthfully. If you lie, I’ll know it, and I’ll force you to tell the truth. I don’t have to use my hands to force you, and believe me, you don’t want to find out what I can do to force the truth out of you. Do you understand?”

Arnbjörg, down on his knees, hands bound behind his back, grinned up at the giant berserkr. “Sure, I get it.”

The berserkr was typically dwarvic looking in features and build, but definitely not in height. Towering over everyone else in the mead hall, at just an inch or two below six feet, his size turned what would have been a typically stocky dwarvic build into a massive, elfish frame. But his air of authority did not pour from his huge shoulders and barrel chest, nor from the copper ring around his middle finger that bore the seal of Chieftain Hrafn wrapped around a short spike.

It came from his eyes.

Blazing balls of blue ice, they pierced through a shaggy mane of rusty brown hair. Their gaze carried an authority that bowed to no crown, that yielded to no blade. They were imbued with the authority of Wotan, the Dead King.

Arnbjörg answered their icy gaze with an impish, wild grin, the grin of a Lokiean’s mad fearlessness, all the more wild looking for his hollow cheeks and bulging, heavy-lidded eyes. “I’ll tell the truth. No need to use that oh-so-terrible mind-bending magic I’ve heard so much about.”

The berserkr smiled coldly. “You were always an idiot and a braggart, Arnbjörg.”

“And you’re still an asshole, Oddr.”

“Shut up, Arnbjörg!” Hrafn yanked at his graying beard, the wrinkled bags under his eyes twisting as his flashing eyes narrowed with simmering anger. “Answer his questions and shut the fuck up!”

Oddr turned his steely cold gaze to Hrafn. “Sire, my deepest apologies for my presumption, but I have to ask you to remain calm. I need to concentrate, and your shouting will distract me.”

Anybody but Oddr and Arnbjörg might have missed the Chieftain quailing ever so slightly before the berserkr’s authority. He hid it well enough, relaxing back in his chair and waving to Oddr. “Fine. Carry on.”

There was one other, though, who seemed to pick up on the implications of the exchange. Sitting next to the Chieftain, head even with his despite Hrafn’s chair being raised on a small wooden dais, wearing a rich continental dress, was a dark elfish woman, the magician Isabella. Her long, curly black hair was held back in a bun to show off her handsome face and the perfect teardrops of her folded ears. Her onyx-black eyes flicked from Arnbjörg, to Oddr, and to Hrafn, drinking in the scene with rapt attention, the cup of expensive, imported wine unattended by her hand.

The rest of the men sitting in the mead hall, the Chieftain’s thegns and the town merchants, made a point of keeping their gaze on Arnbjörg. It was plain to see, though, that their attention flickered frequently to the Toscan elf-woman by the Chieftain, and in those glances were looks of curiosity, of suspicion, of disgust, and more lust than any one of them would care to admit.

Arnbjörg and Oddr, meanwhile, had fixed each other’s gazes once again.

Oddr spoke after a pause, the faint smell of magic hanging persistently in the air. “Did you kill Leifr the Fair?”

“I did,” Arnbjörg answered without hesitation.

“How did you kill him?”

“I hit him over the head with a paddle, tied him up while he was stunned, then threw him overboard.”

There was an angry grumbling at this. One man spoke up: “Coward!” Oddr raised a hand for silence and received it without delay.

“Why did you kill him?”

Arnbjörg’s eyes were as cold as Oddr’s. “You know why.”

Hrafn’s fist tightened until he looked ready to pull his own beard out.

Oddr shook his head slowly. “You must tell us all why.”

“Because he raped my sister.”

Hrafn leaped to his feet. “That’s not true!”

Arnbjörg spoke on, ignoring Hrafn’s shout. “And because my sister killed herself afterwards. He may as well have killed her with his own hand.”

“That’s not true! Bastard! Leifr was found innocent in my court!” Hrafn jabbed an accusatory finger at Arnbjörg.

“You never questioned him, Oddr.” The lids of Arnbjörg’s protruding eyes narrowed, an accusation in them. “You never found out if he told the truth.”

“Three eyewitnesses vouched for him!” Hrafn shouted on. “None were there to vouch for you on that day, were there, Arnbjörg?!”

Oddr’s expression remained cold, but Arnbjörg answered it with a sly, knowing smile. Isabella couldn’t help but smile a little herself; Arnbjörg saw something behind Oddr’s stern mask. But there was no sympathy in Oddr’s voice when he spoke. “Regardless, you admit you murdered Leifr the Fair, without giving him a chance to defend himself, and in such a fashion that he had no chance of gaining entrance to Valhalla.”

Arnbjörg nodded slowly. “I did.”

A silence followed, made all the more prickly by the faint miasma of magic. Hrafn sat down slowly.

Oddr nodded. He turned to the Chieftain. “Chieftain Hrafn, sire, I find that this man is guilty by his own admission. I find that he has not lied or distorted the facts in any way.”

Isabella's opal eyes flickered back to Hrafn. If he picked up on the implications of what Oddr meant by that, he didn't show it.

Hrafn tugged at his beard. "What is your recommendation, sir berserkr?"

"I recommend that the accused be drowned at sea."

Hrafn nodded sharply. "So be it."

Arnbjörg turned to Hrafn, still on his knees. "I would like to appeal that decision, Hrafn."

"Piss off, Arnbjörg!" Spittle flew from Hrafn's mouth. He wiped it clean before speaking on: "I have made my decision. No appeal will be granted."

"Sire, we must hear his appeal before deciding whether to deny it." Oddr's eyes were cold with Wotan's authority once more.

Hrafn yanked angrily at his beard. "Fine. What is your appeal, Arnbjörg?"

"Sahwain's Eve is a week hence. I request the right to face Leifr's shade at a summoning."

Hrafn's eyes went wide. His hand released from his beard, and he stood slowly to face Arnbjörg, his chair's dais making him look taller than he was, his voice a deadly calm. "Arnbjörg, you denied Leifr a chance at Valhalla on purpose. Don't try to deny it."

"I don't."

"Then why, in the name of black, gnawing Hel, should I afford you the opportunity you denied to the man you wish to face?"

"Because if I'm wrong, Leifr's shade will most likely pull me back with it into the water, and I'll be drowned anyway. I'm right, ain't I, Oddr?"

Oddr hesitated, then nodded slowly, still facing Hrafn. "That's what's most likely to happen."

“But if I’m right, and I know I’m right, Leifr will not return as a shade, but as a draugr.”

At these words, an offended gasp and angry, hissed whispers went up among the crowd.

Arnbjörg nodded. “And I’ll be vindicated.”

Hrafn looked up at the ceiling, raising his hands. “King Donar, lend me your patience before I strangle this son of a bitch.” He turned to Oddr; despite standing on his dais, his eyes were barely even with the big berserkr’s. “Sir Oddr, what is your recommendation?”

Isabella watched Oddr carefully. There was a slight delay before he spoke again; she hid her small smile behind her wine cup.

“My recommendation does not change. The accused should be drowned at sea.”

“Good. So be it. My decision stands.” Hrafn sat heavily, waving at the two guards by Arnbjörg. “Take him away.” He turned to another servant: “We have supper now.”

“To Leifr the Fair, the greatest dwarf to walk Thule in his time!”

There was a round of ayes to the toast.

The eyes of the man raising the toast grew hard. “And to cold, gnawing Hel with Arnbjörg, the coward, Lokiean bastard!”

This time the ayes were shouted. Hands thumped the table, men spat on the floor, and other curses were hurled upon the condemned man’s name.

Examining the crowd for a moment, Isabella turned to Oddr. “Lokiean. I’ve heard that term a number of times since coming to Thule, but I don’t exactly know what it means.”

The berserkr was sitting on Isabella’s other side from Hrafn. He took a sip of beer before he spoke. “Do you know the story of the fight with

Níðhöggr yet?”

Isabella shook her head, staring into Oddr’s eyes. She enjoyed looking him directly in the eye. It made the big dwarf just a bit uncomfortable, just enough to be amusing. Oddr was plainly not used to someone like her, someone only a couple inches under his own height, and someone equally learned in scholarship and magic, albeit in different fields. And that someone also happened to be a woman, an elf, and an Imperial. As worldly as Oddr tried to be, Isabella could sense he felt a bit insecure around her.

Oddr cleared his throat. “Well, it’s easiest to tell in the context of the story. At the close of creation, the first King of the Gods, Tiw, battled Níðhöggr, the worm of chaos, with his three sons, Wotan, Donar, and Loki. During the battle, Tiw’s sword broke, and he rushed off to grab another without telling his sons what had happened. Only Wotan saw his sword had broken; Loki and Donar only saw their father flee the battle. Before he could return, Wotan was killed, and he dragged Níðhöggr down to Hel with him.

“When Tiw returned, Donar accepted his explanation, and Loki didn’t. That’s why Donar was named Tiw’s successor in place of Wotan, not Loki. Donar represents the law, order, and forgiveness. But when Tiw died of grief soon after, Loki said to everyone that the crown had been stained by cowardice and betrayal, and it should be vacated. To be Lokiean is to reject all authority, just as Loki rejects not just his brother’s kingship, but the very concept of kingship itself.”

He paused to sip his beer again. “It’s common for a faithful warrior to call upon Loki’s courage and fearlessness, but very few men truly embrace Loki’s whole spirit. The only loyalty in their lives is personal loyalty; the only thing that counts to them is a man’s word, and once that is broken, it can never be repaired. It’s a brutal, lonely life, and true Lokieans are trusted by few men.”

Isabella nodded. “And Arnbjörg is a Lokiean.”

She could see the sadness behind Oddr's impassive, blue eyes. "He didn't use to be. When his sister took her own life, it changed him. Everything about that changed him."

"But surely the people here didn't hate him solely because he was Lokiean." Isabella sipped her wine before she spoke again. "It's one thing to be an outcast, it's quite another to arouse the sort of ire I've seen here."

Oddr nodded. "Quite true. And it wasn't just because of how he killed Leifr. People saw Arnbjörg and Leifr as opposites; Leifr the fair, the well-liked, the brave warrior, the boy who made all the girls swoon. The ideal dwarvic boy, the paragon of the faithful Thulean, who loved honor, his clan and Donar. Arnbjörg... he was always dark, glowering."

Isabella smiled a little. "But there was more to the story. Wasn't there?"

Oddr shrugged. "Nothing in life is as cut-and-dry as all that. Nothing is as perfect as the Gods and their ways, no matter how much we try to believe it so. Leifr, he hated Arnbjörg, and that was a most un-Donarean thing."

Isabella frowned. "Hated him? I would think he would pity or scorn a man like Arnbjörg, not hate him."

Oddr cleared his throat and took another drink of beer. "He hated him because he knew in secret that Arnbjörg was as mighty a warrior as he, perhaps even mightier. For all Leifr's greater strength and size, for all the glory he claimed in battle, Arnbjörg was a tougher bastard than him, because he had to go it alone." He turned to Isabella. "He showed up Leifr badly, once. Leifr had a rivalry with a man in another clan, one of those things done as much for show as for any real feeling of animosity. Leifr kept talking about how he was going to kill the man in a raid, and he took his time talking others into joining him. It was to be a grand affair. But one day, Arnbjörg took off, disappeared from the village. Three days later, he returned with a notched shield, fresh wounds, and the head of Leifr's rival."

Isabella smiled again, her small, knowing smile. “And I’ll wager nobody wanted to believe Arnbjörg had done the deed himself.”

Oddr shook his head, looking back down at his beer. “It was more complicated than that. You’re right, people didn’t want to believe, even when the other man’s clansmen confirmed the story. I was called to confirm it as well. But even then, people declared it had been Leifr’s fight. A feud is meant to be the business of the whole clan, but the word on everyone’s lips was that Arnbjörg had stolen Leifr’s glory.” He took a big swig of beer and shook his head, his stern eyes glowering. “Utter nonsense.”

“You feel sympathy for Arnbjörg.”

Oddr nodded.

“More, it seems, than anyone else in the clan.”

“More than anyone is willing to admit, it’s true.”

Isabella paused, took a sip of her wine, then set the cup down, and leaned over. She spoke quietly: “And do you believe him?”

Oddr’s stony gaze was like a mask, like the same mask he had worn while Hrafn held court.

Isabella persisted, speaking even lower now. “You know if he tells the truth about Leifr and his sister. It’s Wotan’s gift, as you say. I wouldn’t have believed such a subtle yet powerful spell to be possible, had I not seen it with my own eyes, felt its power myself—”

“Don’t confuse the blessings of a god with a simple spell,” Oddr spoke low as well, his mouth partly hidden behind his cup. “I know you southern magicians try to mix the two up, but there’s a fundamental difference that someone without true faith can’t really understand.”

Isabella bit her lip, keeping her eyes on Oddr’s even as he avoided her gaze. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Oddr paused before speaking again. “Not here. After supper, in my house.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“But you know he is innocent!” Isabella’s brow furrowed in confusion and frustration. She leaned over the small fire that lit the turf house, peering into Oddr’s inscrutable blue eyes.

Oddr shook his head. “I didn’t say he was innocent. He told the truth about Leifr, but that doesn’t excuse what he did. He should have provoked Leifr into fighting him in single combat. He was strong enough; he had a fair chance of winning. But he denied Leifr his fair chance in a fight. That was inexcusable.”

Isabella stared into the fire. The blaze was small, but the evergreen branches and the dried dung-sod mix produced a heavy smoke that dominated the small house. “Arnbjörg said that Leifr would return as a draugr. What, exactly, does that mean?”

Oddr took a deep sigh before he replied. “The souls of truly wicked men, especially those who die at sea, sometimes don’t leave their body. They stay inside their rotting carcasses, clinging with the strength of pure malice, refusing to accept death, until they are reborn in unlife as draugar. Nobody knows how they do it. Perhaps they fear Hel so much, that they will themselves back to life. Or perhaps a draugr is a form of demon that is attracted to such men, and forms a facsimile of them, a sort of puppet imitating their worst aspects.”

“Well, it must be the latter, if it’s even true.” Isabella smiled. “In all my years of study and travel, I’ve never heard of anything like true resurrection.”

Oddr shook his head. He pulled a porcelain bottle of rye out of a sheepskin sack, uncorked it and took a drink right from the bottle. He offered it to Isabella, shrugged when she declined and returned it to its sack. “I’ve looked into the eyes of draugar myself. There’s something...

human... disturbingly human, about them. Something I've never seen in the eyes of a demon or devil."

Isabella snorted. "Oh, come on. You're better learned than that."

He wagged his finger at her, in that irritatingly chiding way he used once in a while. Isabella repressed her urge to roll her eyes, and listened to him speak on: "Your southern skepticism may serve you well in weeding out old folk tales and unfounded superstitions, but don't discount every strange story you hear as nonsense. Some of the most powerful magic is summoned by pure will, driven by powerful emotion, by those who have never used magic before and know nothing about it. Precisely the kind of emotion that a man experiences in his dying moments."

Isabella smirked. "Do you mean to imply the Weird can feed off the will to live alone?"

Oddr shook his head, his face stern. "Don't be glib. You and I know quite well what the Weird's capable of in the presence of powerful emotion. We both have enough experience with magic, don't pretend you haven't seen such things yourself." He paused, then leaned forward, elbows resting on his legs, his stern eyes ominous in the flickering light. "True draugr don't rot. They cease the processes of decay very early on, as though the Weird is feeding off the miasma of decay itself, choking it out so it can't continue normally. And when they reawaken, they begin to feed, voraciously, like ghouls, only they're less discriminate. I've seen a draugr drag off and eat an entire sheep in a single night. And its stomach didn't even distend. The bastard just grew bigger and stronger." He sat back heavily, with a grunt, his eyes still flashing. "You may have seen and read about plenty of different demons and devils in your time, girl, but a draugr is something beyond anything you'll see in Borea. It's evil incarnate, a ghoulish with the blackest of hearts, with incredible physical and magical strength. And draugar are obsessed with one thing, and one thing only: tormenting their former enemies and family members alike."

Isabella was not smiling anymore. Her dark eyes were furrowed, her mouth pursed. "You're afraid."

Oddr blinked. “Afraid?”

Isabella nodded. “Yes. You’re afraid of the draugr.”

Oddr scoffed. “Of course I— well, of course I fear meeting a draugr. To deny your fear of such things is Lokiean. It’s foolish. A draugr is—”

“You’re evading again. I meant you’re afraid of Leifr’s draugr.”

Oddr’s mask returned. He looked down at the fire.

Isabella looked at him with sympathy. “It wasn’t Hrafn you feared. I could see that when he held court today. But I thought you feared reprisal from Leifr’s followers...”

“Leifr’s little retainers were even bigger braggarts and fools than Arnbjörg, and none of them had the courage or the skill to back it up. I fear none of them, even all at once.”

Isabella nodded. “That’s why you were willing to condemn Arnbjörg to drowning, even though you know it’s not right.”

Oddr shook his head. “He drowned Leifr instead of facing him. That was a crime, and the punishment is just.”

“And if Arnbjörg drowned Leifr, on purpose, because he knew that Leifr would return as a draugr? He said as much at trial, that it would vindicate him.”

“Then he was a fool. If Leifr returns as a draugr, he’ll kill Arnbjörg without hesitation, and then he will threaten us all. And I...” Oddr shook his head, still staring into the fire. “I will have to face the draugr, alone. The brave berserkr, Wotan’s holy warrior. It will be my duty to kill the beast, and of course, nobody will get in the way of me performing my duties.” He spat into the flames.

Isabella reached over and put her hand on Oddr’s. “You won’t be alone. I can help you. I owe you—”

Oddr pulled his hand away. “You don’t know anything about dealing with draugar. And you don’t owe me.”

Isabella laughed. “Don’t owe you? Oddr, do you know how many berserker I contacted before you accepted my request to study with you? Sixteen. Sixteen rejections, and the polite letters may as well have been written by a pulpit-thumping priest. They were protecting the sanctity of their knowledge, and all that. To read the ruder ones, you’d think me a blood-drinking witchwoman! You, Oddr, you were the only one willing to open his mind, the only one who realized that the sanctity is in sharing knowledge, not keeping it locked up. That’s a rare enough quality in the Empire; out here, you’re a living treasure. I owe you more than I could possibly repay any other way.”

Oddr turned his stony gaze back up at her. “Don’t think flattery will get you anywhere.”

Isabella shook her head, smiling, this time with real warmth. “I speak no flattery, only the truth. I am grateful to you. And I want to repay you by helping you to do what you know is right.”

Oddr stared off into space. “Look, even if I were willing to face the draugr, I can’t make the Chieftain change his decision.”

“Come on, Oddr. I saw you in court today. You decided Arnbjörg’s fate, not Hrafn—”

Oddr shook his head. “I advised him on the proper course of action in accordance with my knowledge of the law of the Commonwealth. It is not in my power to decide anyone’s fate.”

Isabella fixed his eyes with her gaze again. “Oddr, there’s a difference between what you can do legally and what you can do in reality. If you changed your advice on Arnbjörg’s fate, Hrafn would change his decision. He might not be happy about it, but he’s afraid to go against your will. I could see that, plain as day.”

Oddr stared into the fire. “That still leaves the draugr.”

“Do you really think Leifr will return as a draugr?”

Oddr shook his head. “I don’t know. Arnbjörg is convinced of it, and his conviction frightens me.”

Isabella pursed her lips. “It’s okay for a man to be afraid. You said yourself; it’s foolish to ignore your fear. But you and I, we’re alike. We do not let our fear of the unknown prevent us from facing it.”

“I know exactly what I will face. You don’t.”

Isabella smiled. “Then let me prove myself to you.”

Oddr looked up into her eyes.

She nodded. “Let me show you what this witchwoman from the south is really capable of.”

Oddr gave her a stony gaze for a moment, before his face cracked into a grin. He chuckled. “You’ve a touch of the Lokiean in you, girl.”

The setting sun of Sahwain’s eve cast long shadows across the windswept rocky beach. Arnbjörg stood, stripped to his waist and painted with an ode to Loki in runes of black grease, in the middle of a magic circle of ashes. His sword and shield lay nearby, forbidden to be touched unless Hrafn said otherwise.

Round and round the circle shuffled the town druid, Ragnarr, sprinkling a heady mixture of herbs on the ground, muttering a palindromic mantra of concentration, over and over: “Sator arepo tenet opera rotas... sator arepo tenet opera rotas...” His eyes were glazed with concentration, barely watching his own feet sliding over the rocks. At last, he finished his last circle, and wrapping the bag of herbs back up, he stood still, watching the sinking sun.

A few feet away, where the stones turned to sward, Hrafn stood, shifting his feet, glowering at Arnbjörg’s back. With him were Oddr and Isabella, as well as several of his battle-hardened thegns. Hrafn snorted loudly, hacked, and spat. “Damn it.” Hrafn spoke barely above a whisper, in a voice that tried to hide his fear beneath irritation. Nobody but the most brazen and foolish could help but feel the air of dread that drifted through Sahwain’s Eve. “What the devil are we waiting for?”

“The sunset.” Ragnarr had overheard him. “We dare not start early, my Chieftain.”

Hrafn turned his glare to the druid momentarily. He muttered, even quieter: “What in the name of Hel for?”

Isabella smiled knowingly and whispered to Oddr: “As a matter of fact, that’s a good question.” Oddr gave her a stony glare and nudged her with his elbow.

The time crawled by, the air growing rapidly chilly with the cold autumn of Thule. This far north, the winter came on early; already its harsh bite was in the air. Even so, Arnbjörg stood still, without so much as a shiver, the steam of his breath billowing out in deep, even puffs.

The instant the sun disappeared below the horizon, Ragnarr turned to the sea, and in a deep voice, spoke his incantation: “Upon this night when Sahwain wakes, and the veil between the worlds he breaks, I call from this world to the next, to those who’ve died but do not rest: who would call this man to accounts? Whoso list, come out, come out, and face this man ere night’s gone by, or else in peace eternal lie.”

There was a long silence. No scent of magic caught the air; no shimmering announced the emergence of a spirit.

Hrafn rubbed his arms fiercely. “Come on, get on with it.”

Ragnarr turned and nodded to Oddr. From a blanket, Oddr drew Leifr’s old sword, walked to the water’s edge, and with a strong hurl, cast it into the sea. Ragnarr waited until he had returned to his place by the Chieftain’s side before repeating the incantation.

Again, there was nothing. Hrafn growled to himself. “Waste of my fucking time.” He spoke louder now, seemingly emboldened by the lack of anything supernatural: “Nothing’s going to happen. The Gods have spoken, it’s plain to see. We’re to drown Arnbjörg, and—”

A huge burst of bubbles erupted from the sea.

Hrafn gasped, his hand grasping for the hilt of his sword. Oddr had to stop him from drawing the blade.

Something was moving beneath the waves. Something big, something that pushed a lot of water out of its way.

“Oddr?” Hrafn’s voice shook. “Ragnarr? Do the spirits ever emerge from the water?”

Ragnarr was backing away from the water, back towards the others standing on the sward. He shook his head furiously. “They appear at the edge of the circle. “Th... that’s not a spirit.”

Oddr drew his sword, slowly. Isabella clenched her fist tight and extended her arm out rigidly, the spike of her magician’s ring aiming at the wake of the thing emerging from the water.

Something pierced the waves.

It was Leifr’s sword.

The hand holding it emerged after a moment. The skin was pale gray, with a horrible blue tinge, and it was not swollen as a drowned man’s skin should be, but saggy and cracked, more like the tough hide of a walrus than the skin of a man. And it was massive, the bottom fingers wrapped around the pommel, making the sword look more like a long dagger in its huge grip.

Hrafn’s eyes went wide. He shook his head wildly. “No. No, this can’t be!”

But it was. All at once, the bulk of the thing that was once Leifr pushed itself out of the water, stark naked, bloated and huge, looking indeed very much like a hybrid of a man and a walrus for all its bulk and bluish-gray, saggy, cracked skin. Inhumanly massive muscles and rolls of fat rippled beneath the thick hide as it shuffled its way onto shore, pushing a spray of water before it with each step.

Sitting on top of the draugr was what had been, in life, a handsome face. Now the head was so bloated and overgrown it no longer had a

visible neck. Cracked lips grinned, showing blackened gums, lined by a dirty blonde beard that was stretched thin across the turgid visage. On top of the mound of flesh, the fair hair was turned to a sea-logged, muck-glued plait.

But worst of all were the eyes. They were still Leifr's eyes, still the bright blue-green eyes of the fair boy everyone had loved.

Everyone standing on the sward was frozen in shock and fear. Despite herself, Isabella's arm shook, and her breath quivered. Be calm, she told herself. This isn't the first devil you've fought. But she could feel the Weird pouring off the thing, could smell the crackling miasma of magic heavy on the air. And despite herself, she was scared shitless.

The draugr chuckled, a horrible, gurgling, bassy noise. "Hello, Arnbjörg. Do you really wish to settle accounts?"

Without waiting for the Chieftain, Arnbjörg grabbed up his shield and sword. As he did, Isabella glimpsed the wild, Lokiean grin again. Arnbjörg smacked the shield with his sword and bellowed back at the draugr: "You're damn right I wish to face you! I'll send you to Hel, where you belong, you son of a mangy bitch! Have at you!" And Arnbjörg charged the draugr.

In a flash, Oddr had closed half the distance between him and Arnbjörg. He hollered as he charged in great leaps, sword in hand: "Arnbjörg! Stay away from him!" But Arnbjörg didn't listen.

He swung for the draugr's legs, shield held up to deflect the draugr's returning blow. The draugr danced back with a hideous speed. Its flashing sword swung down too fast for Arnbjörg to block. The first blow knocked him off balance, and another swept his sword clean out of his hand before Oddr could reach him. The draugr lifted Arnbjörg by the neck and grinned at him while he choked to death.

Oddr took a swing at the giant's legs as well, only to be deflected by another lightning swing of the draugr's sword. He danced back, sword in one hand, the other held in a fist, his magician's ring sparking Weirdfire. "Leifr! Leifr, put him down and face me!"

Isabella came up behind Oddr, not wanting to get in swinging range, but trying to get close enough to avoid Oddr getting caught in the crossfire of a spell. Not that she had to worry about that much: the draugr was massive, over ten feet tall, towering above her and Oddr like a mountain of rotten flesh. But Arnbjörg was too close, almost touching the thing's face.

The draugr turned from the gurgling Arnbjörg to grin down at them. “Oh, we’ll face each other in time, sir berserkr. And you, witch, I wonder what you—”

Too late, the draugr noticed Arnbjörg’s shield had dropped from his hand, noticed the flash of steel coming up from his belt. With a swift stroke, Arnbjörg slashed his dagger clean through the tough hide of the draugr’s wrist, severing tendons and opening veins that bled a horrible, black ichor with a stench strong enough to gag a maggot. The draugr howled in rage and pain, its hand going limp and useless, and Arnbjörg dropped to the ground, gasping, reaching for his sword.

Isabella fired her spell—and had to drop to the ground, casting another spell of warding, as it came flying right back at her. Fast as a whip, the draugr had brought up its useless hand and aimed a spell of reflection at her, throwing her burst of fire back with the expertise of a crack magician. She pushed herself off the rocks, stumbling back, feeling her singed hair to see if she had been burned. She had escaped, barely.

Arnbjörg was back on his feet, and together with Oddr they pressed the draugr back towards the sea. But they were unable to press for long. With its unnatural, lightning speed, the draugr was able to parry their swings and stabs, and their attempts to flank it were thwarted as the draugr danced to the side, rotten fat rolls jiggling, laughing its awful gurgling laugh. Oddr and Arnbjörg soon found themselves pressed back instead.

Isabella looked back to the others for help. But everyone else was still frozen in fear. In fact, as the draugr slowly advanced up the beach, they backed away, looking like they would break and run for the town

palisade at any moment. Isabella howled at them: “Cowards! Help us!” Her words had no effect. The fear was in their eyes.

She turned back to the desperate battle. It was going badly. Oddr and Arnbjörg were struggling to keep up with the draugr, unable to get a swing in, now trying only to keep from being hit.

And then the inevitable happened. One of the draugr’s swings got through, and its sword cleaved down through Arnbjörg’s collarbone, down into his ribs and left lung. Arnbjörg dropped like a sack. Oddr tried to push closer, but the draugr’s lightning swings held him at bay, and a lucky backhanded swing caught Oddr in the head with the back of the draugr’s fist and knocked him prone.

The draugr took the moment to kneel over Arnbjörg. The stricken man was wheezing his last breaths, one hand still gripping the sword he had no more strength to lift. The draugr raised its own sword, a boiling rage in its eyes as it glared down at Arnbjörg. “Die, you Lokiean bastard—”

This time, Isabella’s spell struck true.

The draugr’s hand exploded into flame. It howled, the sword falling from the useless, charred hand.

Oddr was back on his feet, and he charged the draugr once again. The monster lifted itself to its feet, and reached its arms out, trying to strike him down with a mighty, stinking blast of demonic magic. Oddr stepped deftly under the path of the spell, and with a swift two-handed stroke cut the creature’s guts open.

The draugr shrieked as black, reeking guts spilled from the massive gash. It fell to all fours, rotten blood and ichor pouring from its mouth. Oddr turned and brought his sword down on the back of its neck. The creature fell, apparently dead, but its head remained attached to its neck. It took several more hacking swings with the sword before the head came completely loose. Oddr pushed against the bulk as Isabella ran up, cursing at the dead draugr.

Isabella grabbed him. “Stop! Oddr, it’s dead!”

“To Hel with that!” Oddr snarled. “I’ll put my sword through its heart!”

Isabella pushed in front of him and glared into his eyes. “Enough!”

Oddr stopped. He took a breath, then turned to the dying Arnbjörg. He knelt down to catch his last words.

Arnbjörg smiled. “I’ve... earned... my way.. to Valhalla... for sure.”

Oddr nodded. “You have.”

“And you... Oddr...” His eyes grew fuzzy for a moment, then cleared again. “I think... you’ve... a touch... of the... Lokiean... I...” His last breath drew out, became ragged, and he exhaled slowly, his eyes glazing over with death.

Oddr closed them, then stood. He looked down at Arnbjörg’s body a moment more, then turned to Hrafn and his thegns, who were edging back slowly. Ragnarr was long gone, already run back to town.

Hrafn suddenly assumed a bold expression. “Good work, Oddr!” He marched ahead of his thegns, nodded approvingly at the corpse of the draugr, coughing, his eyes watering at the horrific stench coming from the body, and put his hands on his hips. “I hereby declare Arnbjörg to be innocent, and—”

“Arnbjörg doesn’t need your word to declare his innocence.” Oddr’s steely blue eyes blazed fiercely. “He’s with the Gods right now, receiving toasts for his bravery. He proved himself innocent and right for what he did here today. You, sire, you worm of a man, you’ve no damn right to judge him.”

Hrafn stepped back, a shocked look on his face. He assumed an expression of anger. “You forget yourself, sir berserkr!” He coughed again, retching a little, and backed up from the corpse as he talked. “It’s my right and duty as Chieftain to judge who is guilty and innocent in my town! Not you, not anyone else’s!”

Oddr glared at him a moment longer, then spat on the ground. “Fucking coward.” He stomped off towards the palisade.

Isabella followed as fast as she could. In the dying light of the evening, she had a little trouble finding her footing on the uneven ground. Nevertheless, she smiled at him. “Arnbjörg was right, you know.”

“About wh—oh.” Oddr stopped and turned to look back. Hrafn was not following yet; he was too busy venting his anger at his thegns. He shook his head. “My sacred duty is to Wotan, and no other. I spoke out of turn there, and I’ll pay for it, but I spoke as a man devoted to Wotan, and no other.”

Isabella smirked and fixed him with her onyx eyes. “You may be speaking the truth, but you’re not speaking the whole truth.” Oddr looked down at her. She nodded. “You may be devoted to Wotan, but deep down, there’s a touch of the Lokiean in you, all right.”

Oddr looked into her eyes a moment, and nodded. “As, I suppose, there is in all good men.”

Isabella raised her eyebrows. “In all men?”

Oddr’s face cracked into a smile. “And some women, as well.”

Isabella laughed. “Good enough.” She glanced back at Hrafn, then nodded back at the town. “Shall we?”

Oddr glanced back as well; Hrafn was marching on them, fuming, his thegns following sheepishly behind. Oddr nodded. “Yes, let’s.” They turned and marched swiftly again towards town, ignoring the furious Chieftain’s shouts. Hrafn could wait until tomorrow.

Rev. Joe Kelly is a connoisseur of cheap beer and quality sword and sorcery. He has been previously published in Cirsova.

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Out Here

By S.H. MANSOURI

A young girl has been taken from her homelands and forced to live as a prisoner in the frozen wilds—only one companion offers her comfort in her savage captivity!

There was no one to love Zephi out here—

Three years in the hands of the Throk had taught her that much. The lessons were etched into her dark skin, scarred beyond the humdrum cuts and scrapes afforded to a rambunctious child of Togaz.

No one loves a prisoner.

Everything was frozen out here, worlds apart from the soft sand she remembered now only in waking dreams brought on by the delirium of starvation, and when the bear-skinned man wrapped his fat fingers around her tiny throat.

“Do you know I’m only twelve?” Zephi asked the wolf.

She had watched him the entire week—watched the notches between his ribs slowly fill themselves out with the raw prize of the hunt. Even if he did happen to leave a scrap of something warm and sinewy behind, it would not go to her. The Throk ate first.

Another lesson if they starve, she thought.

Fish, warned by the incessant tremble of her bones, scattered beneath her feet as she approached the ice. Out here, stillness meant life. That is how Gazal did it. He was still and pale, white as the wash of snow that ran for what seemed an eternity. Out here, white meant life. Hidden.

Gazal bared his teeth as she stared at him from the edge of the frozen lake. Her fingers bled through gray wraps, now red from the friction of thrusting her spear. She was sure he smelled the blood, but he never pursued beyond a snarl.

She spent the last hours of daylight crouched on the lake, thrusting her spear through the ice, praying for the sensation of sequined scales pierced by jagged stone. Dark empty holes in the ice closed their mouths, and Zephi gave in to exhaustion.

The night sky smiled at her emptyhandedness.

Do you know that I am starving?

“Is it too much to ask?” said the bear-skinned man.

He snatched her spear and drove the tip into her thigh. She fell to one knee.

Some of the others laughed, their wild eyes reflecting daggers from the light of the hearth. Zephi did not dare to look them in the eyes. She did not dare to cry out. She knew the pleasure it gave them. They laughed now in much the same way they had when her parents were thrown in the pits, left to fend off beasts like Gazal with naught but bare hands.

If she cried out now, he would surely revel in squeezing the sound silent.

Do you know that I am bleeding?

“Outside, little bitch,” the bear-skinned man ordered, swatting at her shins with the blunt end of the spear. “Don’t return until you’ve brought us meat.”

Zephi limped back to the front door, supporting herself by gripping the length of the dining table along the way. When the table ended, she crawled.

Though the wind cut across her cheeks, and she crawled through snow that buried her up to her elbows and thighs, and the moon was her only source of light until she reached the woods, Zephi was glad to be outside again. A bit longer and it would make her numb. She crawled to where the snow bled into moist earth near the woods and listened to the pale voices.

The shrill cry of an owl became her brother’s laughter when she tickled him. It was all she could do to tire him out. She would dig the tips of her fingers into his ribs and in the crooks of his armpits, and he would let out the most beautiful music she had ever heard. He was dead now, his fragile frame probably left to fester beneath ash and bone and snow. His music was silenced.

Out here, silence meant life.

The wind became her mother's breath, a warm lullaby laced with the scents of the desert: wild cactus flower, lilac, gardenia, and sandalwood. *Little girl of Togaz*, her mother would whisper as Zephi drifted off to sleep. *You will make fire one day.*

All the colors of Togaz—mahogany faces smooth as obsidian, bronze anklets with golden bells that tinkled with each cushioned step, emerald sarongs and blood red banners flapping in the arid breeze—burst inside her head as the numbness overtook her.

Do you know that I am dying?

The cautious clamp of Gazal's jaw on her shoulder became her father's sturdy, callused hand. He did not drag her like the wolf was doing now. He tugged playfully, coaxing her outside to slide down the dunes of Togaz along with him. Snuggled comfortably inside the hollow dip of a giant turtle shell, they would push off from peaks that had taken them all evening to climb.

Hold your arms up. Let go, Zephi, he would shout. *The whole world will be your turtle shell one day.*

The pale voices waned, and Gazal crept back into the woods to hunt.

A sharp kick from the bear-skinned man woke Zephi from her sleep. All the colors of home faded into drab shades of gray and black and white again. Her leg stung, evidence enough that her prayers to fade away had not been answered. She was indoors for a change, carelessly buried by soiled rags and sweaty furs that her captors had tossed to the ground on their way in from another raid, far from hospitality.

“The little bitch can *hunt*,” said one of the Throk to the bear-skinned man as he sliced through the belly of a young buck sprawled across the table.

Zephi retched and rose to her feet.

The bear-skinned man grabbed hold of her shoulders, spun her around, and pushed her to the wall. He furiously ran his hands over her quivering body, digging them into every fold and crevice he could find. Zephi stood stiff, a trickle of blood pushing its way through the nascent scab on her thigh. The bear-skinned man shot his hands through her hair, catching coarse strands between his fingers, swiveling her head around like a ragdoll.

Finally, after sifting through the pile of dank rags and furs she had slept beneath, he gave up and strode to the table.

“Where is it, then?”

Out here, it was tricky business answering a question.

“Sir?” she mumbled.

“Don’t play dumb with me. Where is your weapon?”

“Nothing...I have nothing, sir.”

The bear-skinned man slammed his palms on the table, smacking them against warm blood that pooled around the carcass. The Throk carving the buck sniggered to himself. “Sneaky little devils, these Togazi,” he said. “This one will burn you up in your sleep if you’re not careful.”

“She has no fire,” said the bear-skinned man. “That is why she eats last, or she doesn’t eat at all. We starved you out, didn’t we, little bitch?”

“Yes,” she said.

“This buck’s been torn apart—stabbed so many times I’ve lost count by now. I took that ragged spear of yours last night. So, what did you use to take him down?”

Zephi had no idea how to answer him.

Not only had her prayers been ignored, the gods of the pale woods had cursed her. They had laid the young buck at her side while she prayed to them to give her that eternal sleep. They were laughing now alongside

her captors while she stood without a word. It was all their fault. Out here, the gods did not exist.

He snatched an empty mug from off the table and thrust it out to her. “Fill it with snow,” he said, then pointed to the door.

“Little bitch,” he barked across the hall as she hobbled away.

Zephi looked back at him, keeping her gaze low and her hand wrapped tightly around the handle on the door.

“I’ll find your weapon, soon enough.”

Do you know I have no family?

This time, Gazal watched *her*.

The sheen of slick phosphorescence from the sun above on the ice below warmed her frozen face. Through the thin layer of ice on the lake, Zephi could see all the colors she longed for—all the colors of home—splayed out like a glass prism. It was bright, and blinded her, slightly, so she did not notice him approach from the shade of the pale woods. She did not see him snatch her mug of melted snow.

He held the mug between his teeth and crept.

“Amber,” she whispered. “You have amber in your eyes.”

His shoulders slowly shifted as he stalked, snowy mountain peaks alternately pointing to the sky. He gingerly set the mug next to her and rested on his haunches.

Zephi was not afraid. She had been beaten and starved and stabbed to the point where death was a welcome guest that never arrived.

“Where I come from, the sand is made of amber too,” she said, smiling.

Gazal’s ears perked up. He was thinner than the last time she had seen him, the notches between his ribs now shallow trenches.

“May I see your tongue?” she asked politely.

He was a rare beast, even in the land of the Throk where the men and women towered over her. She had seen wolves and wild dogs before, but not in Togaz. The bear-skinned man collected them. In the pits where her parents were torn to pieces, she had seen them. But those were not nearly the size of Gazal, nor were they gentle, as Zephi felt he was.

He opened his mouth, and a bright red tongue flopped out, lazily hanging down between yellowed teeth as long and sharp as hunting knives. The fur around his mouth was red from the hunt, also.

“Red,” she proclaimed, this time loud enough to frighten a squirrel up a nearby tree.

“The fires of the women of Togaz are red, too.”

At that, her gaze drifted into dream.

Zephi’s mother had never needed oil, or flint, or fire brought from the hands of another. Her own hands, kept soft and nourished by cactus sap that Zephi would rub into her palms, was all she needed to start a fire. It was a most curious gift, summoned from the bellies of Togazi women only, her mother had said. She would hold her open palms over the kindling, and furious swirls of crimson flame would erupt.

The first time Zephi witnessed her mother create fire from thin air, she was frightened.

Don’t be afraid, her mother had said with the sweet fragrant breath of the desert rain. *We burn because we are loved.*

The crunch of sinking snow shook Zephi free from her melancholy. Gazal was sprinting back into the woods, trailing deep paw prints in his wake. In another hour, the sun would be gone. How had the time passed so quickly?

She guzzled the cold water and picked up a length of rope with three fresh fish attached to rusty hooks. Though she had not eaten for two days, she was not hungry. The wound on her thigh did not hurt so much

anymore. She made her way back to the Throk camp with a slight spring in her step. It was not the anticipation of supping with her captors—after they were done, of course—that put a smile on her face. It was how she had spent the daylight.

Do you know that I was happy today?

The bear-skinned man held out her spear. “Take it,” he said.

For the first time since she had been captured, Zephi looked him in the eyes. There was nothing there. He might as well be blind for all she knew. Her hand was steady as she took hold of the shaft. He yanked back and cracked the spear in half over his knee.

“Where is it?”

Do you know that I have nothing?

Zephi stared vacantly at the flames of the hearth.

“Bring back meat,” he ordered.

She walked back to the front door along creaky planks worn out by her coming and going.

“If you don’t bring me your weapon by morning, the pits will open early.”

Although the wound on her thigh had not fully healed, it no longer held her back from putting weight on her leg. How would she pull fish from the lake without a spear? If she was lucky, the fish would bite on baitless hooks. It was all the bear-skinned man had allowed her to take. She picked up a large rock and began to break a hole in the frozen lake. Time passed and nothing bit. Out here, luck did not exist.

Gazal drug the dead buck through the snow, his lanky hind legs nearly buckling from the strain. He came to the edge of the lake and panted, puffs of hot air rising from his mouth. He was thinner still than she remembered.

“It was you,” she said. “You dragged me back to camp. You left the young buck beside me. I’m in a lot of trouble now because of what you did.”

Gazal cocked his head sideways.

“You should leave,” she sighed. “The bear-skinned man would love to have you in the pits. That is where I am going, come morning light. At least I’ll be home again.”

Do you know I’ll be torn to pieces?

He walked over to a large rock snuggled against a tree. He gnawed on it.

“That’s not very smart. There is food right here. Unless you want *me* to have it, again. This would all be much easier if you just let it go. Let go of the hunt. Feed *yourself* for once. If you really want to help, let me die.”

A sharp cracking sound cut the silence. Gazal’s tooth was broken, severed just below the gum line. It shone lonely in the snow like a fallen icicle. He winced, let out a low bark, and walked back into the woods.

How he had managed to bring the buck down without leaving a single mark, Zephi did not know. He had kept her alive, asking nothing in return. He wanted her to live for some strange reason. When she took hold of his broken tooth, a warmth rose up inside of her. It tickled her and spoke to her of red flames rising from frozen lands. She was comforted as she tucked the tooth inside her tattered rags.

Out here, friends did not exist.

They sat on cold benches with their legs spread far apart, howling in the misty morning air while the bear-skinned man hung scraps of rotten meat from Zephi’s clothes. “Now we will see where you’ve hidden your weapon, unless you wish to die. Inside,” he said.

He pushed her through the makeshift gate, crisscrossed with wet twig and twine tied loosely into knots. A fresh layer of snow concealed the

blood-stained soil beneath. He pulled the gate closed behind her and plopped down on the bench with the clearest view.

The Throk exchanged whatever items of value they had plundered from their raids. They took bets and jeered as Zephi stood motionless in the center of the pit. She caught a flash of emerald green from the corner of her eye; the colors of Togaz now stacked against the odds that she would live to bask in them again.

“I say the little bitch survives,” yelled the man that had carved-out the young buck. “You see the one she brought back last night? Snapped its neck with her bare hands, from what I can tell.”

The bear-skinned man ground his teeth.

“Bring the dog!”

A Throk woman led the beast around the far side of the pit. It was looped around the neck with a short piece of rope attached to the shaft of a naked spear. The far gate was opened. The beast was set free. Zephi’s hands were tucked deep inside her pants.

They might have thought that she was praying, calling out to the foreign gods of the desert to save her from being ripped to pieces. They might have even thought she was afraid.

“Look at her,” said the Throk woman. “She’s about to piss herself.” And they laughed. They laughed as the wild dog caught the scent of rotten meat. They laughed as its dirty hair stood on end. They laughed as it bared its teeth and lunged into a run.

Do you know I’ve found a friend?

“I’m sorry, sir,” she whispered to the dog. “But I wish to live.”

A high-pitched whimper drowned out the laughter, piercing the silent aftermath. It laid on top of her, the last of its foul breath assaulting her senses. She pulled the tooth toward herself, shifting her shoulders from side to side to free it from the beast’s oozing throat. The steam of warm blood wafted up like a prolonged exhalation. It covered her.

A lone cackle rose up from the benches.

“I told you, didn’t I? The girl’s got fire in her yet.”

Zephi pushed up and rolled free of the thing.

“Give it here,” said the bear-skinned man, leaning over the gate with his hand held out.

She handed him the bloody tooth and took a step back.

His dead eyes scanned its length as he ran the end of his finger over its tip. A wicked smile slashed across his face. “You will eat with us tonight, by the fire if you like,” he said.

He had never offered Zephi a single comfort, especially a warm meal by the hearth at the same time as him. He opened the gate and she hesitated, looking back at the dead dog now being gutted for the night’s supper.

Out here, comfort did not exist.

“You needn’t hunt in the morning,” the bear-skinned man said to her, his portion nearly finished. “We have enough meat to last us through the week.”

Zephi sat next to him near the fire. Though the meat was fresh, and the soup was piping hot, and the bear-skinned man had said she could have as much as she wanted, Zephi could not eat.

“It’s rude to let your meat sit idle,” said the buck carver. “He gave his life that you might live, worthless as you are.”

“I *took* his life,” Zephi muttered.

“Yes, you did at that,” said the bear-skinned man. “Do you like it here?”

Zephi froze, her eyes plastered on the splintered table.

They laughed.

“Of course you don’t—it’s hell out here. Nothing grows, nothing moves, there is no warmth but the fires we build with our own withered hands. Did you wish to show the dog mercy today?”

“I did,” Zephi said. “But I also wish to live.”

“And so you took his life in place of your own,” he grunted. “Take or be taken...spoken like a true Throk. Let me tell you something, little bitch. Out here, mercy does not exist.” He twirled the wolf’s tooth between his fingers.

When morning came, they walked her to the pit again. The bear-skinned man handed her the tooth and closed the gate behind her. “There will be no betting today,” he said to the half-dozen Throk seated around the pit. “Today, we break the little bitch.”

The sun was bright, brighter than Zephi could ever remember. Shades of home splayed out across the melting snow. She gripped Gazal’s tooth and felt the heat slowly rise up from her belly.

“If you win,” said the bear-skinned man, “I will set you free.”

From a bench high up on the slanting rows, the buck carver stretched his bow.

They led him around the far side of the pit, much as they had led the dog from the day before. A soiled sackcloth covered his hanging head. With each labored step his bones slid beneath thinning white fur and rubbery flesh, arrow fletchings dancing as he heaved. He was much thinner still than she remembered.

The Throk woman yanked the sackcloth from his head, his amber eyes waning in the sunlight.

Zephi pulled her hood down and looked over to the bear-skinned man.

“I told you I would find your weapon,” he said with an impish smile.

Zephi's throat tightened. Her arms went limp. The bear-skinned man had choked her before, but not like this. There was no need for fat fingers wrapped around her throat, no need to pray to non-existent gods for death. The wolf had kept her alive, sparked a fire in her that grew with each passing day. He starved while her fire grew. And now, staring across the same pit that had taken everyone she ever loved, the wolf offered her freedom from the pale world in which he lived.

She ran to him across the wet pit, sloshing through the scattered remains of her people.

Gazal slumped sideways on his haunches, arrow shafts crackling beneath what little weight remained. Zephi held his throbbing tongue in her cupped hands. His saliva was warm still, mixed with the color of blood from punctured lungs.

"Calm yourself," she said, stroking the side of his face with her lathered hands. "We will die together. We will both be free. Just a little while longer."

The great wolf twitched as the buck carver's arrow sank deep into his shoulder blade. He did not cry out. He did not give them the satisfaction.

"Move it along, little bitch. Only one of you will die today," mocked the bear-skinned man.

Gazal snapped at her.

"Please," Zephi urged, "please, don't do this."

He snapped again, this time tearing a scrap of clothing from her arm.

Backing away, staring at amber eyes that had never pursued beyond a snarl, Zephi knew. She knew where the fires of Togaz came from; she knew her brother's laughter beyond the beautiful music it made; she knew the meaning of fragrant whispers in the dark; she knew that letting go had nothing to do with lifting her arms; she knew she must live.

Zephi embraced him, plunging the tooth in his side until the laughter died and the murmur of his heart was finally silenced. He did not

whimper or resist. He simply dug his chin into the crook of her neck and faded.

The bear-skinned man howled.

“Now I’ve broken you! I’ve stripped you of all that made you soft—your colors, your desert sun, your worthless mercy. Now you are Throk, and as I live and breathe, you will never make fire, little bitch.”

Zephi rubbed the wolf’s warm blood into her palms.

Do you know that I am loved?

Before they could rise from their seats to prep the fallen wolf for supper, the flames of Togaz engulfed them.

Crimson streams poured from her palms, reaching out with each frozen breath she took. The flames curled up to the highest benches, catching the buck carver ablaze before he could nock another arrow. She walked patiently toward them, making sure that none escaped from the rocky rows of the arena. They stumbled and threw themselves against the gate, screaming and rolling in the melted snow for relief.

The dog handler rushed at her from the far gate, flailing and swinging the naked spear out in front of her. Zephi held her palm out, and the flames turned the Throk’s sloughing skin to ash. One by one they fell, black and gray smoke rising from piles made of pale bone and sweaty fur.

The bear-skinned man leaned against the burning gate. He was the last of them left standing.

“You bit the hand that fed you, little bitch,” he laughed. “You will never see your home again.” Through curdling blood and skinless bone, he laughed.

Zephi’s fire ceased. She stood a breath away from him and watched his dead eyes burn. Then, she took Gazal’s tooth and drove it through his heart. “Out here,” she said, “mercy does not exist.”

After the fires died down, Zephi dragged Gazal back into the woods. It was where she remembered him best. Daylight was gone, and the frozen lake thickened again. She could not hear the pale voices anymore, only the stifled sound of a gentle snarl echoing through the trees.

Even though she could make fire from thin air, it was not enough to keep her warm. She would soon freeze to death. Out here, fire was not enough.

But she would not give in to unanswered prayers, she would not suffer the pale world's numbing touch. She would answer her own prayers through the love of a pale beast with one missing tooth. Zephi wished to bury him, to put him back in the cold earth he had trekked so many times before to feed her.

Do you know that you saved my life?

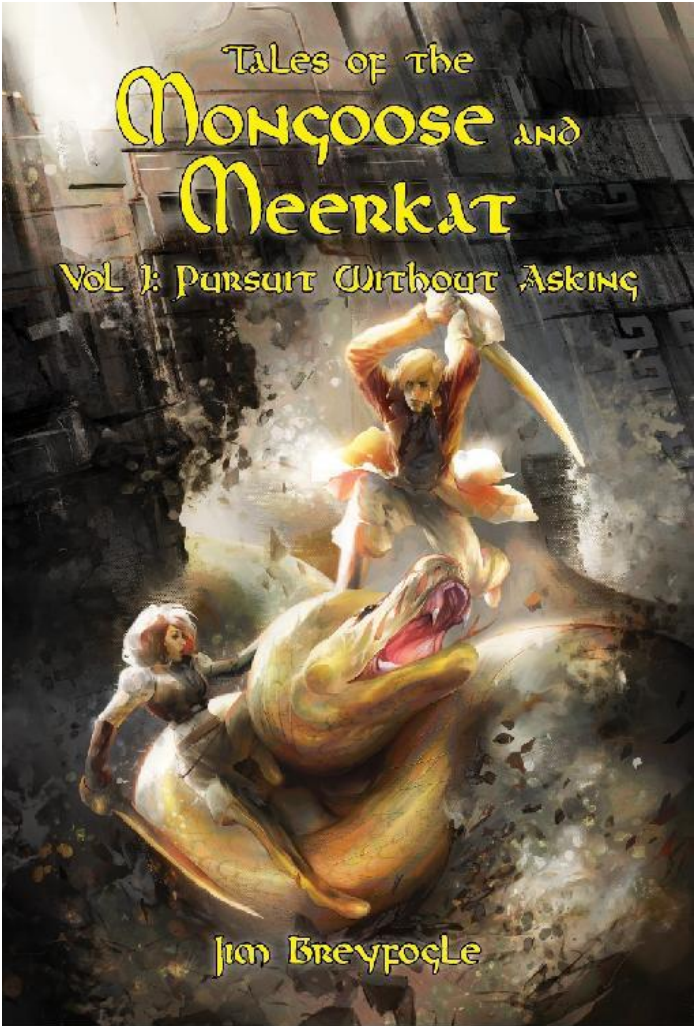
“I’m sorry,” she said to his lifeless body, “but I need you to keep me warm again.”

She took the buck carver’s knife and gently ran it down the length of his belly.

From the bowels of the Throk—frozen wastelands that had nearly broken her spirit and extinguished her fire—Zephi trudged toward the land of Togaz, covered with love.

Out here, *hope* existed.

S.H. Mansouri is a biologist and writer of all things fiction. He lives with the love of his life, Cymphonee, in sunny California.



OUT NOW ON AMAZON!

Notes From the Nest

Wow! 2020 was a crazy year! Thank goodness it's finally over, huh? Or, well, almost over... We've set a record this year in the amount of content that we've published: 7 issues worth of content across 5 issues [3 regular issues and two specials]. Roughly 350k words of fiction. Not to mention Jim Breyfogle's *Mongoose and Meerkat Volume 1: Pursuit Without Asking* and Misha Burnett's *Endless Summer*.

In some ways, it may seem like we're scaling back in 2021—and to an extent we are, as I'd like to keep the Magazine somewhat more manageable than it was in 2020. But we have some HUGE things in just a couple of months for you all.

First, we are serializing Michael Tierney's latest *Wild Stars* novel, *The Artomique Paradigm*. When we last left the alternate reality Nazis, they'd failed in their efforts to restore their timeline when the Brothan lost their war against Earth and the Wild Stars... But while our heroes were dealing with the Brothan remnants and other intergalactic threats, the Artomiques got their hands on some pretty high-end *Wild Stars* tech and have been building up in secret ever since. Two centuries have passed since the events at the beginning of *Force Majeure* [though what's a couple hundred years to time travelers and immortals?], and the Wild Stars are in diplomatic contact with Terra again. But the Artomiques have since become one of the dominant political factions. This is a rip-roaring, high-octane adventure that we're excited to be printing. Even though *The Artomique Paradigm* stands on its own, we strongly recommend picking up the *Wild Stars Omnibus* or the 35th Anniversary Editions out now from Cirsova Publishing.

Second, we're getting deep into the *Mongoose and Meerkat* saga—things are picking up and the duo will be arriving in their new home in *Alomar* next issue, where the first of several urban adventures await.

Third, we're publishing a novelette-length *Dareon & Blue* adventure from Robert Zoltan. I'm a huge fan of this duo and I'm thrilled that we'll be running a pretty significant story that's a sequel to *The Blue Lamp*, one of his best tales in the first *Rogues of Merth* anthology.

Fourthly, Paul O'Connor has given us permission to serialize his 1989 short comic series *Badaxe!* This is a first for us, but when I was reading these, I was like "Wow, if I could get in touch with the rights holder, I'd love to be able to reprint this!" Lo and behold, Cirsova regular Donald J. Uitvlugt got me in touch with Paul, and arrangements were made to reprint this fantastic comic, which has been digitally restored by Michael Tierney.

Finally... ART! People have been asking for years—since the first issue—if and when we'd have interior artwork. Well, the answer is NOW. DarkFilly did such a fantastic job on *Mongoose and Meerkat*, we figured "Why wait until we put out the collections to have her illustrate the stories?" We'll have more illustrations and bonus content when we anthologize them, of course, but those of you following *Kat and Mangos* serially will be able to enjoy it right away. Plus, we'll be tapping her to do some work for *Wild Stars*. And there may be more surprises in store.

Thank you all for sticking with us over the years! Did you know that the spring issue is our 5th Anniversary Issue? Crazy, huh?!

"Alex" P. Alexander, Ed.