

DARK TALES



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A LESSON IN THERAPY

ANGELINE HAWKES-CRAIG

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He had found her in the parking garage outside of his apartment. He wasn't quite sure how long she had been gone, or where she had gone; but she was dripping wet. Her thin summer nightgown clung to her like a transparent second skin. Lucky for her, she hadn't wandered too far—who was to say whether or not she would have returned in this storm, in this night, in this city.

He helped her up, dazed and weak, cradling her gently and cooing reassurances in her ear. These sleepless nights for him and sleep-filled nights for her had all begun a month ago when she insisted on going to that damn hypnotist crackpot, she referred to as a doctor. She said she was seeking inner peace. To get in touch with her subconscious or some bullshit like that. Whatever had happened to good old-fashioned religion? What was all this new age mumbo jumbo shit anyway? It messed with people's minds, that's all it did.

She walked one foot in front of the other, still mesmerized by whatever dreams danced through her mind. He pushed the hair out of her face, her eyes were frozen, unblinking, unchanging.

He heard the rustle of pigeon feathers overhead in the cement eaves and glanced up. Black wings outstretched swooped past him and dived deeply, plunging down and soaring out into the night.

"What the hell?" he gasped, huddled over her against the wall. "Damn bat!"

She didn't blink. She didn't flinch.

"I'll report it to the maintenance man in the morning, don't worry," he said to her as if she was listening. He helped her onto the elevator and the door closed.

He made some herbal tea for her and dressed her in a dry gown. He watched the rain drip down in rivets on the pane; he watched the night-lights and cars down below in the street.

"I was sleepwalking again?" she asked slowly, rubbing her eyes.

He rushed over to her.

"Yes. Damn it! This is growing old very fast! What the hell do you think you were doing out there? This has got to stop, Elise! It has got to stop."

"I've tried. It's not my fault!"

"Bullshit. It's all your fault. All of this crap wouldn't be happening if you had screwed around with your mind. I want you to stop seeing that, that, that quack Dr. Whatever-his-name-is."

"Dr. Rudov. Alex, we have already talked about this..."

"...and you refuse to listen to reason, for god's sake! Elise, this has gone on for a month now! Every damn night for an entire damn month."

"What makes you think it will all stop if I quit seeing the doctor?" Elise sipped her tea sluggishly, as if she were still entranced.

"It didn't start until you started these 'treatments'," Alex mocked her.

"Let's talk about it in the morning. I feel drained." Elise got up and walked weakly to the bedroom.

Alex picked up Elise's cup and put it in the sink and turned out the kitchen light.

The next morning, Elise was chipper and exuberantly getting ready for work. She was a seamstress for a fashion designer. He looked at her own clothing. Old, by modern standards. She preferred laces and fabrics cut in styles of a more old-fashioned persuasion. Elise would have been just at home 100, 200 years ago as she was now.

Alex checked his watch, grabbed his briefcase and kissed Elise hurriedly.

"See you tonight," he called over his shoulder.

When he came home, Elise had already put supper on the table. No meat again. Another quirk she had picked up from that Dr. Rudov or whatever the hell his name was. "Cleansing for the body and soul" Elise had said. Alex sighed, but didn't feel like arguing.

"I have some great news!" Elise sang while pouring the wine into the goblets.

"Oh?" Alex kicked off his loafers.

"I've rented a fantastic house in the country for the summer. It's terrific, really! Got a great deal, you've been saving up all that vacation time, so I thought maybe we could use a change." Elise tossed the salad.

"I don't know. The whole summer?" Alex crunched on a carrot.

"It will be great! It's a huge, old stone house. Looks like something straight out of an old movie! It's roomy, and there's plenty of room if we want to invite some

people up. Say yes, please! Please!” Elise danced around his chair. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen her so happy.

“Okay. Okay. We’ll go. When do we leave?” Alex laughed at her.

“Next week!” she chirped. She sat down but only nibbled at her food. He couldn’t remember the last time he saw her eat a full meal either.

“I suppose it would be good to get away for awhile.” Alex poured salad dressing over his salad.

“It’ll be fun!” Elise smiled seductively.

* * * *

When the car pulled up to the old house, Alex was struck by the immenseness of it. He had been stuck in that city and apartment for so long that he felt suddenly suffocated and then set free. He breathed deeply. It was perfect, just like something out of an old photograph. Elise in her billowing chiffon skirt, looked like she had stepped out of that same old tintype.

The house was full of nooks and crannies just ripe to explore. A child could entertain himself forever in a house like this! He found an old library and leafed through the leather-bound books and sat down among a pile of the choice selections. They were so old.

He had hardly realized that time had flown by so quickly! Suddenly, he heard Elise calling him to dinner, her voice echoing down the halls.

He walked into the glowing dining room.

“I can’t believe what I found, it’s an 18th century,” Alex stopped in mid-sentence when he looked up and saw Dr. Rudov seated at the table with a cold, thin-lipped smile on his face.

“We have company, Alex. Can you believe the doctor has a summerhouse right over the hill behind our house? I won’t have to forego my therapy after all!” Elise poured wine into the crystal stemware.

“That’s nice, good evening, Dr. Rudov.”

“Please. Call me Vladimir.”

“Vladimir it is then!” Alex tried to sound jovial and sat down in his chair.

Elise chatted away with old Vladimir hardly touching her food. Alex surveyed every inch of the good doctor. He was a pale, muscular looking fellow in his late forties, maybe. Alex couldn’t tell exactly. He was one of those odd ageless sorts who had always looked the same throughout their life from infancy to the present. He wore a satin trimmed tuxedo with tails—formal attire—as if he had expected a dinner invitation. In his pocket, he withdrew, several times, a large, heavy gold pocket watch on a gold fob chain. The watch was heavily engraved.

“That’s quite an impressive watch you’ve got there, Doctor,” Alex attempted small talk.

“You wish to see it?” Vladimir passed it over to Alex.

Alex turned it over in his hand. It was huge, fitting perfectly in his palm. Comically, he envisioned the rappers and their huge clocks hung around their necks.

He flipped it open and inside was Rudov’s name in beautiful scrolled writing:

Count Vladimir Rudov, 1850.

“It is a family heirloom,” the doctor offered.

“It is beautiful.” Alex handed it back to him. “So, your name is an old family name?”

“Yes, it is passed down every generation, as Elise tells me, your name is as well?”

“Hmm. Yes. Alexander is my father and grandfather’s name. I’m afraid it doesn’t go back quite as far as yours does.”

“Years do not matter. It is the respect that comes with the name that matters. A good name is a priceless treasure,” the doctor slurred with a thick accent. Maybe this guy wasn’t all bad after all.

Dr. Rudov stayed for a few hours and sipped brandy before the fire listening to Elise and her excessive chatter. He never tired of her ranting. Always nodding and smiling that same thin, colorless smile.

At last, he asked to be excused, and thanked both Alex and Elise, and then left.

Alex closed the door behind their guest.

“Did you know he had a summer house near this one?”

Elise squirmed a bit. “Well, not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“I knew he lived here more than he stayed in the city, but I didn’t know he would actually be here at the same time we were. But, I invited him for dinner when I heard.” Elise smiled. “After all he is my doctor.”

“If you can call him that. Rather looks like a senile man who has taken to wearing ridiculously antique clothes and prying around in other people’s minds.”

Elise threw her hands up in the air. “Oh! Alex, you are so jealous!”

“I am NOT jealous!”

“You are TOO!” Elise turned out the light and headed upstairs.

Alex dozed fitfully. He kept reassuring himself that they had come here for rest and relaxation, to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Yet, he couldn’t shake a constant uneasy feeling he had had ever since Elise announced her plans to come here.

He dreamed. Dreamed heavily, deeper than he ever remembered dreaming before; but he awoke screaming and in a puddle of sweat—soaked sheets—his pillow stuck to his face and matted to his hair.

“What is it, Alex?” Elise flipped on the light. “Are you okay?”

Alex sat up and looked around the room. It was empty except for the massive pieces of furniture and the two of them.

“Are you okay?” Elise asked again, her cool hands on his flesh; her cold blue eyes distant like the ocean.

“It was a dream. A horrible, bad dream,” Alex mumbled.

“Tell me about it?”

“No. No. Just go back to sleep.”

“They say if you tell the dream, it won’t happen again.” Elise smoothed his hair, her cold fingertips icy against his sweaty brow.

“No. No. It’s nothing.” Alex punched his pillow and lay back down.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Elise turned out the light. Alex wasn’t sure. The dream was terrible. Those horrible black wings that overshadowed and dived towards him in the parking garage had hung over him like a black cloud in the dream. Soaring closer, closer like an eagle after her prey. And, that bat soared through the open window into their room hovering over Elise, and then in an instant the black wings transformed into the black clad figure of Rudov who lingered over Elise—his cold hands upon her breast and his lips upon her neck.

In the dream, Alex watched and Rudov turned and looked at him coldly, looked into him, past him, and through him...and smiled that bloodless, thin smile, but his lips were tainted with a thin film of blood—Elise’s blood.

Alex panted heavily as he tried to dispel the dream from his memory, but it hung there heavily and darkly like the very bat in the dream.

In the morning, when Alex awoke, Elise was gone.

He found her at Dr. Rudov’s house out in the garden. The maid had let him in and led him through a cluttered house full of musty books and artifacts that seemed like they hadn’t been disturbed in centuries. She took him through two wide French doors to a beautiful garden brimming with exotic flowers and lush roses.

“Alex!” Elise ran over to him, her yellow cotton dress billowing behind her, she looked like a pale flower herself, all yellow and white.

“I woke up and you were gone. Why didn’t you leave a note?” Alex tried to control the anger in his voice.

“I went for a walk and Dr. Rudov was doing the same. We just ran into each other,” Elise said cheerfully.

“Oh, how convenient,” Alex mumbled barely audible.

“Excuse me?” Rudov asked.

“Uh, I was just thinking that your garden is magnificent,” Alex stumbled over the words that covered how he really felt.

“Yes. Thank you. I have over 150 types of flowers growing here. This house has been in my family since before the colonies. One can grow a lot of flowers in that allotment of time!” Rudov waved his hand in a sweeping arch of gesticulation. “Come, I will show you the interior.”

Alex took Elise’s arm, wanting to say that she should be at home resting, she looked so pale and thin, but followed Rudov obediently into the house.

The halls were crammed with strange and ordinary items. Old and foreign, new and local. And, all over there was a peculiar odor, odd, stale, nearly a stench, but not quite. Several incense burners of various shapes and forms that a maid tended to covered it up well.

It was a cloudy day to begin with and now within this huge castle of a house, Alex could hear rain beginning to come down like waves and wind banging shutters somewhere in the house.

“All of this stuff must be worth a fortune!” Alex whispered to Elise.

“Ah, yes! A fortune, indeed! But, money is no match for the sentimental value I place on each object in this house. Each object represents a memory, or perhaps, a tale I heard as a boy from some relative.”

Alex blushed. He had not intended for his comment to be heard.

“I don’t like change. I don’t like to get rid of the old. Elise understands. She and I are of the same breed. Wishing for a way to return to the past, clinging to clothes and items from a different era, another time. We are of the same spirit, the same blood.” Rudov rolled the word ‘blood’ off of his tongue with a hungry tone; somewhere in the recesses of Alex’s mind he pictured a frog snatching a fly.

“Well, the house is magnificent! You must be really proud that your family has kept it up so well,” Alex tried to sound pleasant. His comment seemed to break the trance Rudov was in, staring at Elise like she was a delectable morsel to be savored.

“My family...shall we say, likes real estate? Houses in many countries are among my assets.”

“I bet they’re all as beautiful as this one,” Elise purred.

“Well. I hate to break up the party, but I think we should get home before it starts raining heavy again.” Alex took the temporary pause in the weather as an escape from the dismal surroundings.

“But, you must come again soon to dine with me!”

“That would be fun!” Elise gave him a parting hug. Dr. Rudov pressed something into her hands.

“Something to clear up the matter we discussed earlier, my dear.” Rudov smiled that smile again.

Elise thanked him and ran to catch up with Alex.

“What did he give you?”

“Only a small book.” Elise slipped her hand into Alex’s. It was cold and clammy.

“Your hand is cold. You shouldn’t have come out. You look sick.” Alex rubbed her hand as if the rest of her would glow with the friction.

“You worry too much.”

“You don’t eat, sleep or do anything normal anymore. You’ve lost weight, your color is death-like, and I worry too much? You need to see a doctor,” Alex said afraid he sounded more frantic than he wanted to come off as sounding.

Elise just laughed.

“What book did he give you, anyway?” Alex tried to see the small volume that Elise clutched to her side.

“Oh, a book about something that happened in one of my dreams. He felt if I know more about it, perhaps I’d stop dreaming about the subject.”

“What is it about?”

“Vampires,” Elise said.

Alex laughed. “You’ve been dreaming about vampires?”

Elise remained serious. “This is the exact reason why I didn’t tell you. I knew you’d just laugh.”

“But, Elise, those are kid nightmares. Bad dreams caused by late night movies. You know they aren’t real. Just like ghosts or the boogie man, for god’s sake!” Alex chuckled.

“How do we know they aren’t real? They seem pretty real in my dreams.” Elise clutched the book tighter as if she was afraid that Alex might try to take it away from her.

Alex opened the back door for her. “Get out of those wet clothes,” he called after her as she went up the stairs. He followed her up after a moment of locking the door behind them. She was in the bathroom changing. She had laid the book down on the vanity near the bed. The title read: *The Rules of the Vampyre*. Alex laughed. Some sort of book you buy as a kid. The kind you form made up clubs around and all your friends want to read the book and be in the club, but you won’t let them. Tree house sort of stuff.

Alex flipped open the yellowed cover. The publication date was 16 something; it had been smeared. But this book was beautifully preserved, just like the other million items in Rudov’s museum of a house. It was a book, a rulebook, some sort of god damn monster Cub Scout manual. “Rule 1: Adapt to the times.”

Damn ironic. Well, Rudov was no vampire that was for sure! Alex flicked the book shut and dried his wet hair with a towel. Elise came out in another dress nearly identical to the first one, only pale pink.

“Laugh if you want to, Alex, but it might just help.” Elise snatched the book off of the vanity.

“I wasn’t laughing.”

“Oh, bullshit.” Elise went downstairs with the book. He heard her call up the stairs on her way down, “Oh, Have you seen the cat?”

“No,” Alex called after her. He hadn’t seen the cat for a while. Must be hiding somewhere in this enormous house. Poor thing wasn’t used to so much space.

Over dinner, Elise found it necessary to bore him to death with her newfound knowledge on vampires. Not that he cared, but he found it amusing that she was taking it so seriously.

“Did you know that it is a total myth that Vampires can’t go out in the day? The older they are, the longer they can stand the sun,” Elise said.

“Oh, really?” Alex tried to keep from laughing. Alex lifted the lid from the silver platter before him...there sat two large steaks surrounded by whole, small potatoes.

“Steak?” Alex asked in a shocked voice.

“Yes, it’s steak. What did you think it was?” Elise laughed.

“We haven’t had meat for awhile. I thought you had taken to old Vladimir’s kooky vegetable diet.”

“Oh, I have. It’s very cleansing. I just felt like a steak that’s all. Never hurt to cheat every now and then!” Elise winked and placed a steak on his plate.

He cut a huge piece and plunged it into his mouth without so much as forethought. Suddenly, he spat the piece of meat, rather undignified, back onto his plate.

“Damn! This thing is raw!” Alex grabbed his linen napkin and rubbed at his tongue, forgetting his manners.

“You don’t have to spit.” Elise looked pissed and hurt at the same time. She ate her bloody, oozing steak as if she had eaten bloody squirting steaks all her life.

“How can you eat this shit?” Alex gulped his wine unable to remove the sticky, bloody taste from his mouth.

“I happen to appreciate meat in its natural juices, and...”

Alex cut her off. “Natural juices? What, blood?”

“A little blood never hurt anybody, Alex.”

“It’s dirt.”

“What is dirt?” Elise chewed on.

“The saying. It’s not blood, the saying goes, *A little dirt never hurt anybody.*”

“Well, I imagine you’re right. Dirt never hurt anybody either.”

Alex threw his napkin down. “I think I’ll go up and read.”

“What, and not eat?” Elise asked.

“Sorry. I’ve lost my appetite.” Alex went upstairs and flopped on the bed. The cool breeze blew the curtains up and down, bringing with it the fresh newly rained on grassy aroma from outside. He lay there for a few minutes then realized he was truly hungry. He decided to go get a little something from the kitchen. If he used the back staircase, Elise would never know that he was hungry and just didn’t want her

disgusting steaks. By admitting he was hungry, he almost felt guilty for practically storming out of the dining room.

In the kitchen, he could hear the violin concerto coming softly from the CD player they had brought with them from home. Then he became aware of voices. He snuck around the corner and peered into the dining room. There sat Rudov. Not only was he sitting there, but he was eating his steak. Well, at least that cleared his dreams up. All those old movies and books always said that vampires did not eat meat. So, Alex sighed, Vladimir was just an old kook, and his thoughts were simply wild thoughts and his dreams childish nightmares.

In fact, Alex felt incredibly stupid this time. All of his fears and suspicions, spying on Elise, and second-guessing Vladimir, all seemed so foolish. Maybe he was jealous as Elise claimed.

Maybe he should be glad that Elise had found a solace in the ramblings of a senile old man with a habit of being a pack rat.

Alex purposed not to bother Elise about her “therapy” anymore; instead, he’d do what this vacation was meant for...rest.

Alex explored the house on a daily basis, read the old books, looked through the old crates and trunks. The supply of old stuff was endless.

Elise took rambling walks with Rudov. Wandered his gardens, and slept late, till nearly four in the afternoon, everyday. She’d awake like a lazy cat and then transform into a fluttering fairy beaming and going about all of her activities with new zeal and happiness. They kept separate dinner hours. He slept at night. She slept during the day. In a way, the time alone did Alex good. Elise’s long nights of sleepwalking had tired him, and were now replaced by the sheer change in her sleeping patterns. There was no more sleepwalking, because she didn’t sleep at night anymore.

Every once in awhile, the old vampire notions popped into his head, but Alex would laugh it away. Rudov allowed Alex free reign of his house, well most of it anyway. Certain doors were always locked, but there was so much he could snoop through. It was like being a child again and being allowed to look through things and touch things, and play with things.

Alex decided to stay up and spend some time with Elise. They hadn’t spent much time together once he had gotten over his case of the creeps. He waited for Elise to go downstairs, and then he followed her down.

“Alex, what are you doing up?”

“I thought it would be nice to spend some time together.” Alex noticed she was thinner, paler, and yet more voluptuous. Lips redder, fuller, breasts fuller, her whole body was more curvaceous; but reed thin in the same glance. Perhaps, their lack of sexual relations had just stirred his blood; maybe he had forgotten how beautiful she really was.

“That would be nice,” Elise said slowly. Her words were carefully pronounced. She sort of sounded like old Vladimir himself. Elise was wearing a high-collared Victorian styled dress. Pink. She looked like a porcelain doll. Her skin was so white it was nearly opaque.

Alex walked closer and pulled her to him. She was cool. Her skin was cool beneath the thin fabric of the dress.

“This is a beautiful dress.”

“Thank you. Dr. Rudov gave it to me. It belonged to his sister.”

“His sister? She must have been quite a lot older than him.”

“Yes. I believe she was.”

Alex clasped her beautiful hair and buried his face in the long tresses. He kissed her earlobes and her cheeks. She did not move. She was cold and stiff. He pushed her collar down to kiss her throat and in one quick flash she jerked away. Alex gasped in horror.

“Those marks!”

Elise pulled her collar tight and held her hand over the spot.

“Those gashes on your throat, my god! What are they?” Alex tried to pursue Elise, but she almost ran from him.

“They’re nothing, Alex. Nothing at all. Just bites. A cat bit me.” Elise smiled.

“The cat? Our cat? I haven’t seen the cat for a month or more. What is on you neck? What made those marks?”

“The cat is around. She comes in at night.”

“I don’t want you to see Rudov anymore. None. No more. Nada. Never again. Weird things have been happening ever since you met that piece of shit doctor. No more. Do you hear me, Elise?”

“What makes you think Rudov did this? You’re paranoid.”

“I don’t know who or what is doing what, but I’m sick of it. No more Rudov.”

“Okay, Alex. Just calm down. It is only a little cat bite. I’ll go see a doctor tomorrow.”

“When? You don’t get up until evening. Do you know any doctors, besides the emergency room that stay open at those hours? No! You don’t because there aren’t any!” Alex was screaming and waving his arms wildly. He turned around and stormed upstairs cussing all the way to his room.

Elise sat silently on the sofa and wept. She peered down at her hands; bloody tears covered her palms. She pulled a shawl around her and went out.

Alex heard the door close. He knew where she was going. She went where she always went every night. Alex punched his pillow. She was going to Dr. Rudov’s.

Alex heard the pounding of his heart. His ears pulsed with the rushing of his blood. The thought kept turning over and over in his mind. She was going to Vladimir Rudov’s. Suddenly all of the events, the dreams, and the suspicions seemed real. Not

just the antics or thoughts of craziness or jealousy as Elise tried to convince him. Suddenly, it all made sense.

So what if Rudov ate meat. Elise had said that some vampires could eat meat...very raw and bloody meat. The sleepwalking, the trances, the raw meat, the old clothes, the locked doors—it all made sense now. Alex clutched at the sides of his head in frenzy. This was insane! But, what could he do? He couldn't very well run down to the local police station and cry, "Help! My wife is being turned into a vampire by the old doctor who lives in the big house on the hill!" He'd be locked up in a rubber room with a nice white jacket for his attire.

Alex jumped off the bed and paced the floor. The book! The book that Rudov had given Elise when they first arrived. When she had been having vampire dreams, and he had had them too! The sick reality that the dreams were not dreams at all caused his stomach to nearly wretch.

Alex tore through Elise's drawers, the dresser, and the vanity. He found the small volume in her make-up bag. He had a plan now. He would memorize the book. Learn the rules, the myths, and then beat old Vladimir at his own game.

When he woke up the next morning, he discovered that he had fallen asleep in his clothes clutching the half read book; and that Elise was sleeping soundly in the bed beside him. She had placed blankets over the windows again to make the room darker. The whole room had a blue tint to it due to the blue blankets that could not fully keep the sunlight out.

He read the book over breakfast, and finished it by lunch.

"Rule 36: Avoid wooden stakes. A stake through the heart and/or complete decapitation will kill a vampire."

Alex paused for a moment. The movies were correct. The old myths had stayed as old and unchanging as Rudov's house. Old and frozen in time. Unfortunately, Elise had that same oldness to her and that inability to change. Her flowing gowns and excessive adornment of pearls gave glimpses into the era before modern styles or conveniences. Alex made a supply list, got in the car and headed to town. Once in town he purchased a large mallet, and six or seven thick wooden stakes intended for gardening, but with a little alteration the stakes would serve his purpose.

Once home, he cut and carved the gardening stakes into the size of a tent stake and sharpened the ends. He put everything into a large knapsack. He also put in a vial of holy water that he had "borrowed" from the local church on his way home. He read the rules again. He hid the gear and was re-reading the book again, when Elise walked into the room.

"You're mad, aren't you?" Elise asked.

"Mad? About what?" Alex looked up from the book.

"About me going out last night." Elise fiddled with the lace on her cuff.

"Did HE give you THAT dress too?" Alex asked.

“You are mad.” Elise twitched her mouth, exposing two longer teeth, but quickly pulling her lips back over them, as if she still wasn’t use to them being there.

“No. Not really. I don’t own you,” Alex said indifferently and returned to the book.

“What are you reading?” Elise moved closer, rather like she floated closer.

“Your book on vampires.” Alex put extra emphasis on the V in vampires.

“Oh?” Elise raised an eyebrow.

“It’s interesting.” Alex shrugged. “Oh, by the way, the maid found the cat. Bloodless. Drained dry. Freaked the poor woman out. Had to give her the rest of the day off she was so upset. I told her it was probably some freak accident, cut or something and that the cat bled to death.” Alex watched Elise’s face for some sort of emotion or expression. There was none.

“Are you going out tonight?” He turned a page.

“Yes,” a short answer with no feeling attached to it.

“Why don’t you just stay there tomorrow?” Alex looked up.

“You mean sleep over?” Elise raised both her eyebrows this time.

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Why not? There are plenty of rooms. I have to mow tomorrow and I don’t want to wake you.”

“Mow. Can’t you pay someone to do that?” Elise smiled.

“It’s good therapy,” Alex said sarcastically, but she didn’t get it. “Sleep over, have fun. We’ll be leaving soon.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Elise smiled.

“I trust you. Go on. Have a good time.” Alex smiled back.

He knew that Rudov slept whenever he wanted to usually, but since Elise couldn’t go out in the day, young as she was, he had to be sleeping in the day in order to entertain her at night. He had to get them while they were asleep with the stake through the heart, just like the old movies, the old stories in the old books. It was the way. It always had been.

Alex went to bed and fell off thinking of the gruesome task that lay before him.

In the morning, he got his gear and tramped over to Rudov’s house. Elise had said before that the maid went to the grocery store until 11 am. He had two hours. He knew the first thing was to find where Vladimir was sleeping. And he knew it was going to be behind one of those locked doors.

He searched through drawers of aging belongings to find the keys. He dug around in old cupboards, curios, chests, and finally found a skeleton key in a small onyx box on a shelf; but it failed to fit any of the rooms. Alex poked around in the house, the old, house that had collected centuries of junk and treasures. He turned a corner into another hallway and noticed a dark stairway leading down into the belly of the house.

He turned on his flashlight and followed the winding progression of stairs. It was dank and dark and slippery. The strong scent of mildew and mold tingled sourly in his nostrils. At the bottom of the stairs stood a wooden door so old, he knew it must be part of the original house built before the colonial times as Rudov had mentioned.

Alex pushed on the door. It swung open easily. It did not creak or groan. It slid on its hinges as if it were freshly oiled. Alex touched the hinge. It smelled like oil.

He shined the light around to reveal a small cave-like cellar. Roots hung from the dirt and brick walls and up through the floor. It smelled like wet earth. On a large slab near the farthest wall slept Rudov...and clinging to him was the very naked body of Elise. Rudov was fully dressed, decked out fashionably as usual. He was sleeping soundly in his little hide away.

Alex groped in his knapsack until he found the mallet and a stake. He had to do it. Do it the way it had always been done. The way it had never changed. Years and centuries had proven it to be effective. Rudov was a fool. Unchanging, never wavering, stuck in some other century. Now he would be killed by the same old, unchanging ways that one kills a vampire. He only hoped he wouldn't have to kill Elise. Maybe when he killed Rudov, the curse would break for Elise, the book was unclear. Alex thought of the rooms full of antiques and artifacts above him, things reminiscent of the lives of Vladimir Rudov...and in an instant placed the stake gently on Vladimir's chest, over the heart. He drew back the mallet, struck the stake, which only made a dull clinking sound on Vladimir's chest. Suddenly a hand shot up and grabbed Alex by the throat. A firm, unyielding grasp, slowly crushing the air from him, closing off all entries for more air to come in. Rudov's eyes sprang open and a smile, that thin-lipped, bloodless smile curled over his face. Elise, too, had awakened and had slinked back against the wet, dripping wall like a cat ready to spring if necessary to defend herself. Her fangs were barred, her lips parted and snarling.

Rudov sat up slowly, never letting go of Alex.

Alex kicked frantically at the air as Rudov stood up and dangled him high in the air. Alex felt dizzy. He gasped for air that would not enter. His face felt hot. His eyes like they were soon to explode. Rudov laughed quietly at first, then loudly.

"Would you kill me while I was sleeping?" Vladimir Rudov laughed again.

"Did you think that a simple wooden stake would kill me? Ah, yes. The book." He read Alex's mind, "Well, you memorized a lot of that book, didn't you, Alex?"

"You forgot rule number one, didn't you, Alex?"

Alex tried to answer. The room was spinning around furiously now.

"You're wondering why the stake didn't go in, didn't stab me in the heart as I slept, aren't you, Alex?" He laughed again. "And, you can't remember Rule number one...the most important rule of all!"

Vladimir Rudov held Alex higher still and with his other hand ripped open his immaculately starched white shirt to reveal a heavy, stab-proof vest, impenetrable. “Rule Number One: Adapt to the times. My dear, dear Alex. Adapt to the times.” Alex felt the grip on his throat tighten, and then there was darkness.

THE END



To find more work from the author you can visit her at:
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COLD WAR

REBECCA M. SENESE

Rebecca M. Senese is a Toronto based writer who writes crime fiction, horror and science fiction, often all at once in the same story. Garnering an Honorable Mention in THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION and nominated for numerous Aurora Awards, her work has appeared in TRANSVERSIONS, DEADBOLT MAGAZINE, ON SPEC, THE VAMPIRE'S CRYPT, STORYTELLER and INTO THE DARKNESS, amongst others.

After the cops left, taking Wilson's wasted corpse, Pete was still shaky from panic. So close, goddammit, too close.

When they'd rung the buzzer at five that morning, snarling into the vid-cam, he was sure they'd come for him.

Spike ratted, he'd thought wildly as his trembling fingers fumbled on the door lock keypad. The cops waved piercer guns, powerful enough to blast through a three inch steel door, never mind the thin slice of plexiwood that was the apartment door.

Some damn high security building, Pete thought.

Finally his fingers cooperated, punching in the code. The door inched open then swung wide as one of the cops kicked it. The shiny, ominous end of a split-fire, twenty-five round, piercer gun jammed under Pete's nose. The smell of oil and death nearly choked him.

"Wilson?" snarled the cop. "Bunter Wilson?"

Pete blinked in surprise. He pointed across the narrow six foot apartment. Wilson cowered against the wall, emaciated shoulders scrapping peeling paint. Bony fingers clutched the sheet. Glazed eyes stared out in fear beneath thinning blond hair.

The cop pushed Pete away and three of them strolled into the room. A lieutenant wearing a shapeless black overcoat and armoured gloves opened a leather case. He glanced at the contents and back at Wilson.

"Bunter Wilson, you are charged with skipping your six month test," the lieutenant said. His voice grated from too many herbal cigarettes. "As such a blood test is to be administered immediately. Having skipped the test, you have no right to legal counsel and any conclusion drawn from the following blood test is deemed valid and admissible in court."

He drew out a thin pencil-like object. The tester. A nod to the other cops sent them gliding forward. Wilson didn't bother to struggle as they held out his arm.

Pete had heard of cases where the blood tests were wrong. Fat lot of good that did the poor jerks who had to take them.

Wilson flinched as the tester beeped once and lit up. Red. The lieutenant's face was glacial.

"Bunter Wilson, you have tested positive. Your twenty-four hour amnesty period has been waived due to your noncompliance with the law."

Pocketing the tester, the lieutenant pulled out a twister wand and jabbed it at Wilson's chest. As the wand touched him, the cops let go and Wilson's body quivered, jerking to the rhythm of the lethal dose of electricity. The smell of cooked flesh filled the air. Pete gagged.

Wilson's body flopped to the floor when the lieutenant switched the wand off. One hand lay, palm up, dirty fingernails pointing at the ceiling as if beseeching mercy from an uncaring god.

Without glancing at him, the lieutenant left, mumbling about paperwork, leaving the heavily armoured cops to carry Wilson. They picked him up unceremoniously and dragged the body out of the apartment.

Pete scurried into his biker leathers, the stench of Wilson's passing still strong and rank in the air. He had to get the hell out before the cleanup crew arrived. They were supposed to come with the cops and look for any contraband on the premises, but things rarely went the way they were supposed to. Witness Wilson.

If they found Pete here he'd be screwed. Totally. No telling what they had on him already.

Three blocks away the familiar white van streaked past, heading for the apartment building. Pete ducked his head so they wouldn't get a good look at his face. Too damn close. Just his luck to find a roomie who wasn't a health freak or an organ hunter only to have the cops waste him. A skipper, who woulda thought that about Wilson?

He aimed down Yonge Street, the early morning air stinking of sewage and pollution wafting north from the poisoned lake. Although he knew it was too early to make contact he was going to do it anyway. Things around here were getting too hot too fast. No telling what the cleanup crew would uncover. The apartment had been in Wilson's name and Pete had been very careful about not letting anything slip but it would be noticed that he hadn't stayed for the debriefing. Noticed and reported.

Time to collect his stash and blow this town.

Angling down York Street, he hit Queens Quay. Around him, the buildings of a bygone era reached up for the sky, as pathetic as Wilson's hand. After the lake poisoning, the rich had fled from their luxury condominiums and gangs of squatters had taken over. Not even the police came this far south.

The stench was bad so he pulled out a face-filter. It was an old one, but he hadn't been paid for the last shipment yet. With the apartment gone, he didn't know how Spike would contact him.

The heaviness of the sewage crept through his worn filter. At least it was bearable. He adjusted the strap over his crooked nose. Seals never closed properly around it.

A dull, yellow sun glared down as Pete circled the buildings. He couldn't see anybody but he knew better. The gangs were watching; he could feel their eyes the way he could feel a custom inspector's suspicions. They wouldn't touch him yet though. Not with the red handkerchief of the Hapslam gang tied around his right arm.

It was dangerous to be this early but there wasn't anywhere else to go. His hands still trembled, remembering Wilson's death dance. He had to get his stash now.

Finally a figure appeared against one of the ruined doorways. Swathed in rags, it glided towards him across the barren parking lot. Only when it got within six feet could Pete tell it was a woman.

"Where's Matrix?" Pete said. He didn't need this right now.

"He got caught yesterday, up around Rosedale. Tested positive."

Pete closed his eyes. Oh great. Now what? If Spike found out he lost a shipment, running from the cops would be the least of his worries. Spike was increasingly nervous about the crackdown on her smugglers. Too many of them had turned or just plain disappeared.

"I'm your contact now." The woman's voice broke into his thoughts.

He opened his eyes to study her, or what he could see of her. Deep brown eyes stared out at him over a filter mask that looked even older than his. Tufts of black hair peeked out from the rags wrapped like a turban around her head. Impossible to see the shape of her body under the various pieces of fabric covering her.

"Who the hell are you?" Pete demanded. He patted his left thigh where the thin plasti-wire knife rested. She was small, but he knew how vicious these homeless could be. He wanted her to know he wasn't intimidated by her.

"I'm Vriana," she said. "Matrix's daughter."

Pete pursed his lips. Matrix had never mentioned a daughter, but they'd never swapped life stories. Mostly business, which was how Pete liked it. No attachments, no losses.

"Where's my stuff?"

"It's safe," she said. Pete waited, but she merely stared at him.

"Look, I can't pay you now. You get paid when I get paid. I have to make delivery."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "This isn't about money. I want to meet your lead. We want an adjustment to the arrangement."

Shit, he didn't need this now. "What kind of adjustment?"

"I'm not discussing it with you, just your lead."

"Give me my stuff first." His fingers itched to unfasten the plasti-wire knife cover but violence was the wrong way to respond. He didn't underestimate her.

Apparently she didn't underestimate him either. Her gaze barely flickered from his face but she took a shuffling step back.

"Are we going to stalemate?" she said. "Matrix said you were smarter than that."

He was smarter and at the moment, hungry. Hell, so they wanted to meet Spike, what did he care? He was a middleman, he didn't care about agreements.

"Food first," he said.

* * * *

He was grateful she didn't tell him what was in the stew. As they squatted by the fire in the lobby of an old condominium complex, he snuck glances at her over the edge of his cracked bowl. Without the filter mask, he could see the resemblance to Matrix in her face; the long nose, the high cheekbones. Her dark eyes contrasted her father's blue ones, but they held the same expression, hard and intense.

"You got my stuff on you?" Pete asked casually.

Vriana shot him an amused look. "Hurry up."

Before they left, she exchanged her homeless robes for the chic patched leathers and mock furs of a fake slummer. The vertical stripes accentuated her slim waist, curving her hips even more. With an effort, Pete looked at her face. Her brown eyes were steely. He didn't want to know how she'd acquired such an expensive outfit.

"Move," she said.

He led her up York Street to Queen where they headed west. He removed the red band from his arm and stuffed it in a pocket. The kid gangs here didn't appreciate homeless affiliations. Vriana studied the street and the barricaded store fronts. She's probably never been this far north, Pete realized.

He zagged up Spadina and spent time wandering around the decrepit shops.

Vriana glared at him. "How much longer?" she asked.

"As long as it takes," he said. He ignored her scowl. He had to make sure they weren't being followed.

Finally they ducked in the back way to Massey College. He steered her past the tables, loaded with black market merchandise and upstairs.

"You smuggle all that?" she asked.

He glanced down the stairs, at the row of fresh fruit, the meagre stacks of blank paper, and the folded clothes guaranteed to contain no tracer threads.

"Not all, but some."

At a thick oak door, he stopped and knocked once. A few moments passed. Vriana shifted impatiently from foot to foot. She blinked rapidly. Pete suppressed a smile; she probably didn't even realize she was being scanned.

The door opened, granting them admittance. Spike, sitting behind a dark mahogany desk, waved them in. Her scuffed leather boots rested on the desk's elegant top.

"I don't give a shit what he says," Spike shouted into the phone. "Make sure." She slammed down the receiver and ran one wrinkled hand through her grey streaked hair.

"Hello Pete," she said amiably. "Tell me why you've brought me some homeless tramp and not my shipment."

She was in a bad mood. The more Spike smiled, the angrier she was, and right now she was positively beaming. Great day, Pete thought, and it wasn't even noon yet.

"My holder was lost in a Rosedale sweep," he said. "She says she's got the shipment and wants to talk to you."

Thankfully, Spike's scathing gaze turned to Vriana. "And what do you want?"

Vriana didn't even flinch. "We want to review the terms of our agreement."

"Your terms are more than generous and not open for negotiation."

Vriana smiled coldly. "We know you deal with other homeless gangs. You won't just lose one shipment if you refuse to talk."

Spike leisurely cupped her hands behind her head. Pete winced; was Matrix's daughter stupid or just plain blind?

"You homeless aren't the only game in town," Spike purred. "We have options."

"You won't even listen to our terms?" Vriana said. Interesting change of tactics, Pete thought.

Spike shrugged as if she didn't care either way.

"It's a better deal than you have now," Vriana continued. "We hold your shipments for you and instead of paying in cash, we'll take equipment. At a generous turnaround for you."

Spike dropped her arms and leaned forward. "What kind of equipment?"

Vriana said nothing, but it started to fall together for Pete. Everything he'd ever seen out at Harbourfront pointed to it. Matrix and his books, the desperate methods they used to erase ident markers and discourage police from patrolling the area.

"Laboratory," Pete said.

Vriana cursed and glared at him. Spike's look was quizzical.

"The homeless can get any kind of weapon," he said. "Anybody can with the right amount of money, but laboratory equipment is something else."

"What the hell do you want with that?" Spike asked.

"What do you think?" Vriana snapped. "Hasn't it occurred to you what they're doing? They're infecting us all and we have to find a way to stop it."

Spike rubbed one leathery cheek. "Why would I want to stop it?"

Vriana sputtered. "Why? What? How can you...?"

"Why," Spike continued, "would I want to stop something that makes me so much money? That pays for a market like the one downstairs? Things could be a lot worse."

"Worse!" Vriana shouted. "What could be worse?"

"Dead for one," Spike said. "If even it were suspected that I gave you the equipment you want..." She shrugged at the inevitable.

"You won't deal, you don't get your shipment. Not this one or any other."

"Fine," Spike said, rubbing her nose.

Shit, Pete thought. The kill signal. Bad idea. The homeless pursued their grudges with a vengeance and killing Matrix's daughter could lead to a war. From the look on Spike's face he knew if he didn't do it, he'd be dead. So he did what he always did when faced with an impossible situation.

Fake incompetence.

He reached for the plasti-wire knife, deliberately shifting his right foot to draw Vriana's attention. He allowed her another second as he drew the blade, then there was no turning back. If she didn't realize what was happening he'd have to kill her.

The blade came free, humming in his hand. He struck with his left hand. Immediately, she pivoted, hand flashing down. Pain spazmed in Pete's forearm and he allowed the knife to drop. Vriana didn't follow through as he expected but whirled on Spike.

"Is this how you deal with your contractors?"

"No," Spike said. "This is."

She pulled out a pistol and fired.

Pete rolled, knocking Vriana's legs out from under her. She collapsed on top of him, the shot zinging over her head. Pete mumbled curses under his breath; could this possibly get any worse?

Vriana twisted, pulling something from her pant's pocket. With a snap, she flung it up in the air as Spike stood to get a better angle. Vriana's hand clamped over Pete's eyes, but didn't entirely protect them from the blast.

He heard Spike's strangled cry and a thump. When Vriana released him, he climbed to his feet. Spike lay crumpled behind her desk.

"A light shock wave," Vriana said. "She'll be out for a while." She studied him curiously. "Why did you warn me?"

"Call me stupid," Pete said.

"Looks like you're out of a job," she said. "Want a new one?"

He turned to look at her. Her dark hair was tousled in a mess around her thin face, the fake furs around her shoulders askew. She looked normal, just like anybody else.

"You're infected, right?"

She bobbed her head. "Most of us are. It's burning us out, the older ones are really bad off. But you'll know that soon enough."

He blinked at her stupidly. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry, Pete. You're infected now too."

* * * *

"What the hell do you mean it's a cold?"

Vriana shook her head. Dark hair swayed. The neon lights in the mall made it glint.

But Pete wasn't interested. Here he'd risked his job for her only to find out he was infected. Just great.

"That's how it's spread," she whispered. She threw a glance at the shops. It was an upper-class mall, she'd probably never been in one before, Pete realized. He tried to remember what he thought when he'd seen the regulated shops, the healthy upper classes walking around in their designer style-of-life suits with matching air filters and oxygen tanks. Never saw their faces, only the masks.

"You don't have a cold," he said.

She reached into a pocket and pulled out several white capsules. "Decongestants."

Pete turned away to watch a couple walk by, their masks decorated with garish strips of colour and bits of metal welded on. The latest fashion.

"We're inside," Vriana said. "Don't they ever take those masks off?"

"No," Pete said. He took hold of her elbow and steered her away from the gang of upper classes she was staring at. "The virus?"

"Oh right. We think the purpose is to clean the organs out of waste products."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is it burns people out. And some have been disappearing."

"Yeah, the testing," Pete said.

Vriana shook her head. "No, not killed. Disappeared. We think they're harvesting the organs for transplants."

Pete stared at her. She looked serious. So that's what this was about, the request for equipment. Weapons they could get aplenty, but lab equipment was something else. Probably wanted to develop some kind of vaccine or something.

"We need that equipment," Vriana said. "You could..."

"No, I can't do anything," Pete said. "I'm finished here. I got friends in South Am, they aren't so strict down there. Maybe I'll pick coffee beans or something. You can do whatever you want."

She looked about to protest but Pete motioned toward the exit.

"I think we've shaken any tails. I'll take you home."

* * * *

The sun was bleeding across the horizon in a sunset that reminded Pete of vomit when they hit Queen's Quay. The familiar homeless buildings stretched in front of them. Pete frowned and slowed down. Some kind of transport was parked in front of one of the buildings. A thin vein of smoke drifted out of the buildings' front door.

"Cops," Vriana hissed just as a concussion grenade came whizzing toward them.

Pete grabbed her arm and threw her back. The grenade exploded, sending shockwaves through his system. Pete's brain felt scrambled. His skin tingled. Angry shouts filled his ears.

Time to get out. Pete forced his aching body to move. Nerves screamed as he climbed to his feet. The shouting got louder and now he could hear the pounding of armoured boots. He grabbed Vriana's arm, trying to drag her to her feet. Through drifting smoke he caught a flash of a swiftly moving figure.

Getting closer.

"Come on," he shouted, stumbling a couple of steps, still pulling Vriana's arm. She was moving now, slowly rising to her feet. One hand fumbled with the buckle on her belt. It dropped to the ground. Then with a surge of sudden strength, she raced past Pete, this time dragging him in her wake.

He didn't look back as he ran. The flash lightened Vriana's hair, sending a long shadow racing out in front of her. The wind came a moment later, its force propelling Pete even faster. A personal nuke, he realized. Shit, the homeless were well equipped.

Hadn't done them much good.

They kept running until Pete's lungs felt like they were going to burst. Gasping, he grabbed Vriana's arm and dragged her to a halt. She tried to pull away and Pete noticed the panic on her face, the way her eyes darted wildly. Poor kid, he thought, first her father, now her whole community. But he couldn't let her freak out, they had to keep their wits.

"Where you going?" he snapped. "Get your mind in gear. I don't have time for bullshit hysterics."

She stared at him a moment, eyes still wild, then anger crossed her face like a cloud. It brought her back to herself, just like he intended.

"You bastard," she snarled but he stopped her with a raised hand.

"You're right, I'm not going to argue the point," he said. "But unless you've got an idea, running like that will only attract attention."

The way her head drooped told him she was listening. Good, maybe their asses weren't cooked. Yet.

So now what would he do with her? Leave her behind? Even as he thought the words, he knew he couldn't do it. Matrix had always been a fair contact. Not a friend; Pete didn't have friends, couldn't afford them. But if he had, he would have liked one like Matrix, maybe even one like this intense woman standing before him.

Pete sniffed, rubbing his nose. His sinuses were clogging up and he could feel the beginnings of a headache pound out a rhythm in his temples. Just great. But it did give him a thought.

"I have an idea," he said. "Some place the cops would never think of looking."

* * * *

Granny hadn't stopped wiping his hands with a handkerchief since they walked in, Pete noticed. He'd ushered them immediately into a small room off the foyer entrance as if their mere presence would pollute the apartment's atmosphere. The bay window in the room faced east, showing the glow from the Pickering Nuclear Plant. Granny stood there now, his tall, skeletal form awash in fabric. Beady eyes stared out from behind thick glasses. He glanced at Vriana and wiped his hands.

"What do you want, Peter?" His voice held all the tension of a man being force to do something distasteful.

Too damned bad, Pete thought.

"I need information and passage," he said and then sneezed.

Granny frowned, thin lips etching an ugly line across his face. "I don't know..."

Pete pulled out a rumpled rag and rubbed his nose. "I do," he said softly. "I know lots."

Granny stiffened, posture ramrod straight and so tight Pete thought Granny's spine would snap.

"You know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important," Pete said.

The man sagged, nodding, looking even more glum. He wiped his hands one last time and stuffed the handkerchief in the pocket of his flowing jacket.

"Talk," he grunted at Pete.

Pete talked. Wilson, the stash, Vriana, Spike, the cops. Vriana scowled when he spoke about the homeless's virus theory but Pete knew he had to tell everything. Granny would sense a left out piece.

By the end, Granny's thin face was crinkled with amusement. "Transplants, eh?" he challenged Vriana. She stared back at him, fists clenched.

"I can see how you thought that." He nodded absently to himself. He turned toward the window, eyes defocusing. Pete tensed in anticipation. Info dump.

"Virus adaptus they called it in the lab, a joke name for a not so humorous disease. It does clean out the organs, but more than that. Adaption, regulation, genetic manipulation from the inside out. The testing confirms the effectiveness of the virus, green for uninfected, red for mutation, yellow for appropriate adaption."

"If not transplantation," Vriana said, "then what?"

She'd spoken before Pete could stop her. He glared at her, silencing her next question. Her answering glare told him she didn't know what was going on but he couldn't explain now. Pete held up his hand to entreat her not to say another word.

But Granny didn't seem to have heard.

"Harvesting is completed at an early stage and the yellows are brought in for further conditioning," he continued. "Reds are destroyed because of possible transmittal of the mutant strain. Greens are left alone and may never be infected. In this way, they can ensure a specific type for transportation off-world."

Pete bit his tongue to stop from speaking. His headache pounded across his skull like a drumbeat. This was always the hardest part, waiting for the info dump to finish. Usually he could be patient, but this cold was a constant reminder that his life as he'd known it was over and he was desperate for answers. But interrupting could be fatal to the reader and there were no better readers than Granny.

"Labour camps," the thin man announced. "Off-world camps unsuitable for non-adapted humans. That's why the genetic reconfiguration as well as neural shut down of all upper mind functions. The virus begins the process internally but external physical mutation and erasure of neural processes must be done in the lab. Everything not related to obedience and work is erased."

Vriana's face, pale to begin with, blanched white beneath her dark hair. Pete imagined he had the same haunted look. What was he now, a red, a yellow? What was she?

He waited another moment but Granny was finished. Slowly the man came back, blinking, hands fluttering amongst the folds of fabric. After a deep breath, he shook his head. "Nothing else."

"What the hell was that?" Vriana exploded.

"He's a reader," Pete said. He rubbed absently at his temples.

"But all readers are regulated, the government..." she paused as the skin on Granny's face tightened.

"We don't discuss that," Pete said mildly. She gulped and nodded.

"Are you sure that's a true reading, Granny?" Pete turned back to the thin man.

"As true as it can be."

That told Pete little. It could be true but it could also be a block. Many times he'd used readers in his work, but he's always been careful to verify everything. Too many corporations and governments employed senders to muddy the information the readers would dig up. A kernel of truth could be hidden in what Granny had said but there was no way to be sure.

Unless Pete metamorphasized into some inhuman monster.

A sneeze itched at his nose. He rubbed it. Already the lymph nodes on his neck were swelling. The cold, the virus, sure had a hold on him now. Monster. He suppressed a shudder.

Well, if he was going to do that, the least he could do was keep his mind from being sucked away by government scientists. He imagined Vriana felt the same.

"Okay Granny," he said. "That was the information. Now the passage."

"Hold on, Peter," Granny protested. "That took a lot. It's more than I give my paying clients."

"Consider it your payment," Pete said.

Granny's hands twitched as if he wanted to pull out the handkerchief and wipe them. When he settled for rubbing them on his pants legs, Pete knew he'd won.

* * * *

Against the light from the wall screen, Vriana's face took on a greenish glow. Pete wondered briefly if the virus caused changes in skin colour, then shook his head. There was no sense in being morbid.

Granny hunched over the keyboard, staring at the display. His skin colour looked positively putrid, but that was an improvement as far as Pete was concerned.

"Not that way," Granny murmured. He plucked at the keys. "Lord, Peter, what the hell did you do? You've got warrants all over the place."

Vriana's face tightened and Pete felt himself frown. Dammit, they had to get out fast before the net closed in. Maybe, just maybe, pissing Spike off had not been one of his smarter moves. He'd never thought her revenge would reach so wide.

"Okay, I think I have something," Granny said. "It's going to cost."

"Whatever," Pete said. He dug out a forged bank chip and handed it to Granny.

"It's a father-daughter, heading for Chile. I can reroute the tickets and give them your id."

"Daughter?" Vriana asked.

"Not gonna get anything better," Granny said.

"Good enough," Pete said. He had friends down in South Am. He and Vriana could disappear. He allowed a smile to touch his face.

"That'll do."

* * * *

Vriana tugged at the collar of her style-of-life suit.

"Stop that," Pete hissed. His voice came out like a whine through the mask.

"This is so damned uncomfortable," she said.

"Not as uncomfortable as being shot in the head."

She released the collar. "Pete, could he be right about the virus?"

Even through the distortion of the filter, he could hear the fear in her voice. It touched a similar chord in him but he couldn't afford to let it resonate. He couldn't be distracted.

It was a job, that's what this was. He took a deep breath and his professional mask helped push the fear away. This was his last smuggle, the most important. No way would he blow it.

It was the only way to think about it, the only way to keep the memory of Wilson's death dance at bay. The only way to keep from wondering about Matrix. Had he been a red when they found him in Rosedale? Or a green? Pete's head ached dully and a cough tickled his throat. The damned virus, damned cold. Anger rose up to blot out the fear but neither emotion was useful. Being emotional meant he was concentrating on something other than the job, and this job, more than any other, was too important.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We'll worry about the virus when we get out of here."

She stared at him for a moment and then nodded.

Just then the boarding call for their shuttle came over the loud speaker, almost unintelligible. Pete took Vriana's elbow and began steering her through the crowd, toward the gate.

He didn't know what made him look back, maybe nothing, maybe instinct, the same way he knew which officials to bribe and which not. He caught a flash of grey silver out of the corner of his eye. Amidst all these colours it was probably nothing, or it was cops.

In a split second, he knew and oddly, the knowledge took the fear away, leaving a sense of calm. He was a smuggler and the cargo was all important. The cargo, the woman whose arm he clasped. Warm and wild, strong enough not to need him. Not after this. Somehow that made it easier.

"Hold on to your ticket," Pete whispered to her. "Don't say anything. Keep looking straight. Go through the gate and get your seat. Remember to dump the id when you land. Vriana, whatever you do, whatever you hear, don't look back."

And he released her arm.

She kept walking, the hard learned homeless discipline gave her that. Even when Pete broke and ran, trailing armoured-clad cops like bouncing marbles, she

kept walking. As the hulking gorillas closed in, stunner sticks raised, he saw she'd taken his instructions to heart.

She did not look back.

Damn good smuggle.

The world turned black.

* * * *

They must be approaching planetfall, the creature that had once been called Pete thought fuzzily. The hibernation units had started to hum an hour ago, slowly waking their cargo. In his, Pete stretched, arm pairs unclenching. The unit was too small for him to stretch his many legs, so he kept them retracted. He realized he'd awakened first. He was always first to do something. When he'd begun to realize this, he pretended he didn't know or couldn't do it until later. That way his conditioning was less, that way they'd missed a few things.

A few things like he remembered what he'd been before, a smuggler, a human. The others didn't remember but after being in contact with him for a while, he noticed a slight spark of awareness alight in their many eyes. And this started him wondering.

He wondered exactly what the nature of this virus was, exactly how much mutation arose in the virus before it registered as a red. Was there a margin for error?

And slowly, since most thoughts came very slowly right now, he realized that maybe his greatest smuggle wasn't Vriana (whoever that was), but himself. Himself and this virus. This mutated virus.

And not a customs inspector for a billion miles.

Pete snuggled in his hibernation tank and waited for his fellows to awaken.

THE END

THE PERFECT HOMBURG

ROB HUNTER

With the onset of late middle age Rob Hunter is the sole support of a 1993 Geo Metro and the despair of his young wife. He does dishes, mows the lawn and keeps their coastal Maine cottage spotless by moving as little as possible. In a former life he was a newspaper copy boy, railroad telegraph operator, recording engineer and film editor. He spent the 60s and 70s as a Top-40 disc jockey. Rob's wife, Bonnie, is the secretary at a nearby rural elementary school. She is a gifted quilter who beguiled her new husband with the kaleidoscope of patchwork geometry. The nearest town to the Hunters that anybody is likely to have ever heard of—because of Stephen King's *The Langoliers*—is Bangor, Maine where there are real parking meters and a traffic light. They drive down every six months or so to watch the light change and see the trains come in.

Be careful what you wish for. And when you make that wish, speak up and enunciate clearly. Want rapture? You could go home with a rupture. Think about it.

So, I sold my soul to the Devil for a writing job. Not an unusual kind of wish for a writer. Except it worked. And it wasn't the Devil, it was Apollo, the god of poetry and envelope flap literature. Except it wasn't Apollo, but one of his representatives: Prosper Epilegomenes, a mouse demon. Anyway, I got the job.

An easterly ocean gale was cannonading the shores of Willipaq, Maine. It slammed down the chimney and blew my wood stove from bright coals to a full flame. *Woo-woo-woo*, the chimney whistled like a kid blowing a tune across the lip of a giant soda bottle. *Not to worry*, I reassured myself. There was a blacktopped town road between me and the fury of the North Atlantic.

Woo-woo-woo. "Mother Carey's chickens," said a familiar voice. "Watch the north wind rise." A diminutive green figure stood before my airtight, thrusting his rear end into the heat like a life-long Mainer.

I grumped, rolled over, and plomped another pillow over my head. "It's an east wind. Nor'easter—" I came up short. It was the demon. "Oh. Prosper." If he was here, he had a problem. And if the mouse had a problem, I had a problem.

"Oh, Prosper. That is shiningly unenthusiastic," said the demon. "Flat. A minimal infusion of joy would be nice: 'Oooh...Prosper!' Like that. Yep, I'm back. Hi

there." The demon sniffled and wiggled his backside closer to the stove. "Jim, Jim, I am saddened. You greet me more with apprehension than with joy. Ahh, wood heat. Can't beat it." He wrung out a pair of tiny green mittens.

"What?" I said. After all these years it was unlikely my personal representative from Sminthian Apollo had dropped in out of the storm to blow his nose and keep me company.

"*What* what? Just servicing your account, my old and rare. It is truly a dark and stormy afternoon," said Prosper. "Do you bowl?"

"That's why I'm the writer," I said. "And, no, I don't bowl."

My name is Jim Everhardy, and the mouse demon had granted my wish: to be read by millions. I now write the advertising blurbs on the envelope flaps of credit card bills. Not the Great American Novel, but it beats writing inventory codes for Wal-Mart. I had done last night's supper dishes, done laundry and hung it out by the stove on our accordion-fold wood racks. I had run the dust mop over the floors and shook it out into the wind, then flopped for a nap on the window seat. I am a house husband—no shabby occupation here in Downeast Maine where opportunities for employment are few and far between. My wife has the real job.

Prosper opened the glass fire door and stuck his head inside.

Woo-woo-woo.

A shower of sparks smoldered on the braided rug, Bonnie's pride and joy.

"Oops. Sorry about that." He closed the door and ran around stamping out tiny fires. The smoldering continued. "Nice fire, but we have some escapers. Got water?" asked the demon.

"In the kitchen," I replied. "There's a bucket under the sink."

Prosper hustled off.

The mouse demon returned with a bucket of water and doused the rug. I had not moved.

I had learned to keep my expectations under control when dealing with the lesser deities. Minor deities reward at minor levels: cheap T-shirts, herds of cattle, the usual stuff. But when they punish, it's major. Believe me, I know. From Prosper's last visit I had gotten the literary equivalent of cheap T-shirts, but the money was good. We thus far had the driveway paved plus a brand new washing machine. I liked things the way they were.

"Ah, but I'm here to change all that," said the demon. "You're too good a man to fritter away on envelopes. I've got something really big lined up. You are going to be a *contender*."

Prosper was taller than a mouse, but not by much. Five years back, during the first visitation, he had strutted on my desktop, pointy gray ears topped off with an upside-down colander which he called the Helmet of Cleptath, a magic hat. According to the mouse, he had wrestled the colander away from Apollo's sister in a fight over

cheese, the cheese of the gods. From the helmet dangled strings of those triangular flags you see at gas station giveaways and pizza joints. Then as now, Prosper wore green tights. Flags fluttered as he spoke.

"And here we are, you and I, nattering away like old school chums at a class reunion."

I didn't recall nattering. Typically, he was doing all the talking. He had popped back into my life like those unwanted barrages of advertising that regularly clogged my e-mail.

"Spam! Jim Everhardy, really! That makes me sound like one of those pesky spammers who plague your dinner hour."

Prosper was reading my mind. He was here to make me a proposition I couldn't refuse.

"Of course I am, Jim old turnip, reading your mind, that is. And to characterize me as junk mail cuts me to the quick. *Account Executive*. I like that much better. Consider me your account executive. 'A title on the door rates a carpet on the floor.' That's a gem of literature from one of your advertising greats." He did a quick two-step on a residual smoldering coal and ground his heel into my wife's prized rug. It was ruined.

"I only wanted to be an author," I whined.

"You wished for success in writing. That is different." He flicked lint from a lapel and studied his manicure.

"Consider the pickle," said Prosper, "in its progression from a humble garden vegetable to picklehood. Spiced, diced, plucked, peeled, steeped and cooked in a jar, yes? For now, you are a cucumber—not much going on, just waiting."

I considered the cucumber.

"Let's cut to the cheese," said Prosper. "I am decidedly subfusc and awash in a sea of despair. Clothes may make the man but hats make the demon. Artemis wants the hat back. The Helmet of Cleptath."

"Your funky colander?" I asked with sugary innocence.

The demon threw his arms into the air and then clutched at his heart. I had hit a nerve. Prosper's little shoulders heaved as he wept. He was overdoing it. *What the hell*, I figured. Mice emote.

"Pliny the Elder says I am a fool to seek mortal assistance. But I have faith in you, Jim. Are you acquainted with the exemplary acting skills of Walter Pidgeon?"

I recalled him as an old-time leading man, a movie star when I was a kid.

"It was classic movie night in the demons' pantry. Artemis slipped in to catch the second feature. And there he was, Walter Pidgeon, wearing a homburg. On the screen, I mean. Her Worshipfulness lost it, plop, right there on the linoleum. And Sean Connery—when he wears a homburg, it really twists her knickers. She became

a regular at our movie nights. Having management hanging around puts a crimp in our otherwise freewheeling high spirits, if you get my drift."

"She was baiting you to get your colander, the Helmet of Cleptath, back?"

"Yes. She's got a new attitude and she's wearing a homburg hat. A sort of homage to Connery and Pidgeon."

"Well, good. Of all the Olympians I figured Artemis to be strong on sexual identity."

"You betcha, buddy. Struts buck naked through the firmament, with the Homburg on her head and her head in the clouds. You'd think a homburg hat would be sufficient for any goddess. But now she wants her old hat back, too. From me."

Prosper indicated the beribboned colander on his head. "The Helmet of Cleptath." The sobbing began anew. Prosper pulled a tiny kerchief out of his sleeve.

"We have been challenged," said the demon, getting his blubbing under control. "Now, a challenge in Paradise is, by definition, unusual, perfection and all. But, be that as it may, the Divine Artemis has got a feather up her royal ass over losing her hat to a mouse. She challenged me to miniature golf. In Paradise, personal differences have been traditionally settled by miniature golf. I hate golf of any size. My weapon of choice was duckpins. As the challenged, I got first call.

"Pliny the Elder is her second. I would you were mine. There's a Volvo wagon in it for you. The celestial playoffs will be at Dinwiddie's Chuck-A-Bowl Lanes in Taunton, Massachusetts. It has been bruited about that the Kennedy lads trooped their dates to Taunton for a rousing frame or two. Of course, this is hearsay. You will also show me how to wire the Helmet for two-way communication. Police and fire calls, you know, keeping in touch..."

"If we win."

"Of course we'll win. Trust me."

"And if we lose?"

"You die. I volunteered you. I have your signature on file. Remember?"

I remembered. Don't sign anything you haven't read. And if you do, keep all the copies. I was at the mercy of a mouse.

"Death is neutral," said Prosper reassuringly. "Either you are or you aren't. The means thereto are usually nasty and frequently spectacular. You should feel special. Most lives are lived like tire fires at the town dump. Years of smoldering, then a plume of gas ignites for a flashy finish when there is nobody around to notice."

I tried feeling special.

"The guys and I got our heads together and we thought we'd call on you. You owe us one," said the demon.

"Pliny wouldn't help? As your adversary's second, isn't he supposed to negotiate any difficulties, iron out the paperwork, so to speak?"

"Conflict of interests. Gaius Plinius Secundus, naturalist, bon vivant, general, senator, etc., etc., was pledged to Artemis. We needed a fallback strategy. That's you. If you should lose, and of course, you *won't*—" Prosper slipped in unconvincingly—"a hubcap from a '38 Dodge sedan should do the trick. We'll just negotiate a swap." Over my dead body. *My body*, probably smoldering like the rug. Prosper babbled on as he expanded my vocabulary of affliction.

"Artemis is wild for chrome. See, Valentine, Feng Shui and I were watching Antiques Road Show and—"

"Hold on. A chrome hubcap? This is what my life, my hopes and aspirations, all I have worked and struggled for, are worth? You will trade her a hubcap for the hat after I am toast?"

"That's about right," said the demon cheerily. "Meet the gang."

Four new mouse demons popped up like unwanted advertising. "I am in uncertain waters, careerwise, so I got the fellows here together for some brainstorming. Jim Everhardy, meet Valentine, Tantrum, Elapse, Feng Shui."

"Hello, Flopsy. Hello, Mopsy. Cottontail, how do you do? And...Feng Shui?"

"The very same," said Prosper. A diffident demon in a red fez took a bow from the end of the line.

"You see, at my performance review, a Certain Personage was disappointed that you chose skills with ephemera over His Volvo wagon. Volvo wagons are a hot item, and I'm supposed to be pushing them. Gracewise for demons, a disappointed Personage is no fun to be around. We needed a human to take the heat. You. See, what I mean is Apollo's still fulminating over Feng Shui's realignment of the poles. Feng Shui's arrangements differ slightly in the Southern Hemisphere. All those koalas and kangaroos hopping out of a Certain Personage's jubilee cake... Apollo had hoped for a stripper. Well, you've got to run before you can strut. Trust me."

Trust the mouse demon, if I ever wanted to write the Great American Novel. And stay alive.

"I cased the location for you, Everhardy. I hung out at Dinwiddie's watching big, burly bowlers contend. They slammed the crap out of the place, splinters everywhere. The pinsetters were a-hopping, on the run and sweating buckets all night. Candlepin bowling runs very fast. You're going to have to hustle to keep up."

"Let's review just where we are up till now. You need me to bowl for the home team. And Artemis, Sister of Apollo, your patron, is more powerful than you, a mere mouse demon?"

"And sexier, pal." The demon blew his nose with a honk. "You mock me when I am down. Watch that mere stuff. *The Unknown Man*—that's the film where Walter Pidgeon wore a Homburg."

"It was."

"Indeed, it was. We have videos in Paradise, thanks to Pliny the Elder. Pliny begged an indulgence from the Higher Power. Ol' Pliny hovers at the mailroom for the latest Baywatch. For myself, I favor the classic films. And The Sopranos, of course."

"Oh, of course."

* * * *

Time passed.

I just love it when I read that. It usually means the author is running out of toner. Anyway, time didn't pass. Not for me. We were out of doors and the wind was whipping up the trapdoor of the comfy red flannel union suit I wear when I am at home and being creative. A neon sign flashed "Chuck-A-Bowl." We were at the far end of a strip mall somewhere in exurbia. Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Feng Shui were nowhere to be seen.

Prosper pulled at the cuff of my union suit. "Now, let's get our story straight. What we want from her is..."

"We? What's this 'we want'? Hey, *you* want."

"Don't get snippy with me. I want the homburg. Next to it the Helmet of Cleptath is old hat, no pun intended. Barring that, I have a fallback strategy. I have one for you, too. If you survive." His eyes got a dreamy, far away look that suggested trouble. "I have an opening writing inventory control codes for Wal-Mart..."

I shuddered. "No, the envelope flaps are fine."

Prosper studied cloud formations as a stratocumulus was ripped to shreds by the passage of a commercial jetliner. "A '38 Dodge."

"Huh?" I squinted up at the plane. No resemblance.

"A little faster on the uptake, Everhardy my doughty scrivener. Our fallback strategy, the chrome hubcap, remember? Dodge, nineteen-thirty-eight. An automobile. Prewar. On Antiques Road Show. They had the goddess kvelling for it. Honestly, Everhardy, do I have to draw you a map with every little utterance?"

There was the clearing of a heavenly throat. A radiant woman strode toward Dinwiddie's Chuck-A-Bowl. She was naked under an unfastened mink coat that flew open at each step.

"Shrewd, nude and lewd. Here comes the divine presence Herself, all greased and ready to kick some mortal ass," said Prosper.

Mortal ass. I noticed the demon's equation left Prosper, Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Feng Shui safe above the high water mark, *après nous le déluge*-wise.

"I am here."

Her eyes blazed up at us from the lowest point of a curtain call curtsey. Artemis eyed the guttering neon. "This is truly the Land of Milk and Caviar," she said of Taunton, Massachusetts, and blessed their efforts. Marring her beauty, Artemis' lip

had a curl to it, a slight inflection that made her look haughty and supercilious, like a banker about to break wind. She narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose, making an arch of the freckles across its bridge.

"Mink becomes my legend most," said Herself.

The coat wriggled.

"Strikes and spares it is, then? Well, me boyos, bring on your balls. I'm fair itching to have a go," said the goddess.

If she had an itch it wasn't psoriasis. My eyes rolled over her body, memorizing. No rashes present. Her itchy balls analogy did chime a familiar chord, though. I reached to scratch.

Prosper waved me a caution sign—crotch scratching might be misinterpreted.

"She has that effect on most men. Jim Everhardy, meet the Divine Artemis, Sister of Apollo."

The goddess extended a perfectly formed arm to offer a handshake. "Divine Artemis, how do you do. Yes, I am beautiful, am I not?"

My hand was left hanging in mid air as hers was withdrawn to groom an eyebrow. "And you are rolling your eyes. Don't do that."

Artemis again held out her hand. "Artemis, candlepin ace of the Olympian pantheon, sister of Apollo. Likewise the Fata Morgana, Lady of the Wild Things, Diana of Ephesus, et cetera, et cetera."

"Jim Everhardy. How do you do?" was the best I could come up with. We shook hands.

"So much for bonding, let's bowl," said the Lady of the Wild Things. She spun on a heavenly heel and the coat swirled to cover her. "Shall we go indoors?"

An invitation from a goddess, who could refuse?

With all that mink blocking my view, I checked the coat. Thirty pairs of beady little eyes stared back. The pelts were alive. Tails twitched. Artemis' coat was giving me the once-over.

Artemis had noted my interest. "Ranch mink have little to look forward to but a lot of sex, hormone-laced burger meat and then coathood. These guys are wild. Even so, I like to see they get out every now and again."

Once we were inside, Artemis made a gesture, the effortless articulation of a perfectly proportioned wrist that indicated noblesse oblige, and we all were grateful. The minks jumped ship and headed for the crispy snacks spread out in the Chuck-A-Bowl's refreshments area. The Divine Personage's coat melted and flowed to the floor as the boys scrambled for the Cheetos and pickled eggs.

I felt thankful to be alive and in her presence. And appreciative for the peek. Now that the coat had bailed out, I stared.

"Yes, I do look splendid in a hat," the Lady observed.

I agreed wholeheartedly.

Artemis got right down to the business at hand. She seemed to have brought along a basket full of bowling gear.

Prosper whispered hoarsely up at me. "Jim, watch the minks. Make sure they don't get nasty. They are feral creatures. To them I may be just another mouse."

"I get it. The Helmet of Cleptath is turned off or whatever. You are powerless."

"Only for the duration of the tournament, Jim my old and rare. Hold down the fort. I'm off to get Her Wonderfulness pissed with me and hopefully off her game with rage."

"Leaving me to win by brawn and native wit."

"That's why I chose you," said Prosper, "muscle power."

I was not cheered.

Putting on a greasy lounge lizard persona not at all becoming to a demon in the service of Sminthian Apollo, Prosper insinuated himself up to the goddess.

"Hey, Divine One, where are all your statues now?"

The Divine One was polishing a set of candlepins, popping them with her bowling towel. "My statues?"

The mouse demon struck a cocky pose atop a bowling ball.

"Ah, my statues." The Lady of the Wild Things, Ephesian Diana, et cetera, et cetera, sniffled and held the Number Five candlepin high above her, studying its curves against the Chuck-A-Bowl's fluorescent lighting.

"Where did I go wrong? To hide my tears I tell myself I yet smell the fumes of belladonna that once wafted forth on the polished cobbles of the night. Did you know I was once worshipped at Ephesus?" This was a rhetorical question. The goddess let fall a single, perfect tear.

Artemis patted at her eyes with the bowling towel. "From among the heart-wrenching utterances of rude devotion and abject submission I brought into my exile a favorite not so humble—a sixty-cubit image of ivory and hammered gold. I have always been fond of its fierce golden gaze and its boasted thousand breasts." She turned coyly to give Prosper a poke with her middle finger. "It bankrupted a satrapy in Asia Minor."

"All those tits," said Prosper cozily. I waited for the thunderclap of divine justice.

"I understood them as an allegory of nurture," said Artemis. Her hauteur was returning. "Besides, there were only five-hundred-fifty. Neat, but not gaudy."

The goddess tilted the homburg back on her beehive hairdo. "And yet I am remembered, if only in the shape of a bowling pin."

The Divine Artemis was, indeed, a whole lot of female.

"An invocation for our games," said Artemis, "one of my favorites and I hope it's yours, too." She took a deep bow revealing not much more than we had already enjoyed. She was now a piano bar hostess working the house. Her arms were extended and she held the pose. "You *will* join me, won't you?"

Thirty sets of fierce mink eyes glared at us from the bar, waiting. Of course we would.

Artemis sang.

"There was a man, Joe Bangles, and he did a dance.
He changed his pants
Once a year. Ooh, ooh, ooh...
Mister Joe Bangles, dance...

Kicked off his shoes, he couldn't lose,
He had no clues.
Ooh, ooh, ooh.
The pants were new, the shirt was, too.
Your mind is weak, so shuck those sneaks.
I bless this alley, please don't dally."

Artemis sat splat down on the floor as Pliny the Elder passed her the rosin bag. This might be a part of the ceremony. I sat, too, and removed my shoes and socks. She dusted the soles of her feet. Prosper offered me a rosin bag and I waved him off. He gave me a wink that suggested this was the correct option.

"Mister Joe Bangles?" I had to ask. The goddess paused her lounge singer routine to explain.

"The original," said the goddess. "Robert Graves—a poet, I believe, who wrote this little number just for me:

"I am the turning of the wheel.
I am a salmon in the pool.
A spotted snake from whom mice quake
And share Apollo's belly-ache.
Ooh, ooh, ooh, dance, Joe Bangles..."

"Okay, Pliny, let's kick some mouse ass," said Artemis as she closed out the prayer and bounced to her feet. "Let's get those pin spotters hopping."

She chucked a ball with an underhanded throw that would have done her proud in women's international league softball. The ball flew through the air, hit the lane 40 feet down and smashed the pins flat, scattering them to the left and right.

"Well, that one cleared out the deadwood." She glanced meaningfully at Prosper and me. "Lucky for you guys we're just warming up."

"She's supposed to bowl the ball, not throw it," Prosper whispered. "But she makes the rules."

"Shouldn't you object?" I whispered back.

"*You* object."

I shut up. Subject closed. My turn, I guessed. I lost the ball in my backswing. It went flying behind us where the minks cleared the bar, diving for safety.

"Whoops," I said.

"Sweaty palms? queried the goddess. "Here, use my towel." Pliny the Elder leaned close to Artemis. She nodded and spoke to me. "The worthy Pliny informs me you are inexperienced at candlepin bowling. Perhaps we should take a brew break. But first, let's get you a handicap."

I looked desperately to Prosper.

"She means she will give you a couple of pins advantage 'cause you're new at this."

Pliny again whispered to the goddess.

"I shall give you pins seven and ten," said Artemis. "Hit or miss, they won't count."

Sounded good to me, but Prosper was shaking his head. "Tell her you will go straight up. By the rules we need six strings to establish an average for a new bowler's handicap. She's parsing out a Las Vegas standoff. Pliny is trying to disqualify us."

After three frames the score stood at them 90, us zero. The goddess had been rolling consecutive strikes.

"Let's have that brewski break." Prosper beckoned me as he sauntered over to the refreshments area. "Hie thee here, tapster, some nut brown ale for me and my homunculus."

The tapster slid us a bowl of salted cashews. This was followed down the bar by two chilled, foaming mugs.

"Ahem." Prosper cleared his throat.

The bartender, who seemed not to notice that he was selling drinks to an eight-inch tall mouse in an Errol Flynn suit, looked mildly startled and vacant, like a senior citizen who had forgotten this was meatloaf day at Meals on Wheels.

"Sorry, sir." He brought us two coasters and placed them under the mugs.

"No offence taken," said Prosper. The bartender appeared relieved.

Minor Lovegrove and Lydia, his missus, were bowling in the next alley. They had joined us at the bar for some light refreshment. Their embroidered satin team shirts bore the family crest, a tree with a heart carved into the bark.

"How do?" said Prosper. The Lovegroves nodded and smiled with the same vacant, unconcerned look as the bartender. Nothing out of the ordinary here, just a mouse and a man wearing red flannel underwear bowling with a naked lady and an old coot wrapped in a bed sheet.

Prosper produced a small plastic squeeze bottle from beneath his cloak. He pressed it into my hand.

"Put some of this on your balls. You get three this frame."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The bowling balls, you ninny. Grease the track. A fast alley will give you the edge we need."

Unnoticed, Pliny the Elder had snuck up on us to eavesdrop. The bartender brought another mug of beer and a coaster.

"I know. You want to get back to Paradise and your soft porn," said Prosper.

Pliny sighed.

"We'll try to get you back as soon as possible."

"Her Effulgence really, *really* wants to win this one," said Pliny.

"When a building is about to fall down, all the mice desert it. Your own Natural History, Book VIII. Right, Pliny?"

Artemis' second turned to Prosper with an appreciative bow. "*Ruinis imminentibus musculi praemigrant, aranei cum telis primi cadunt*, Prosper. May I assume you're quoting my own work at me to signify you are in this fiasco to the bitter end?"

"*Oleo tranquillari*... You said that in Book II."

"Ah, yes. Oil as a sovereign balsam in troubled situations. You, Sir Mouse, are slick as a greased hooker in the Forum Boarum. I catch your drift." Pliny's eyes brightened. He would soon be back in Paradise with his beloved Baywatch tapes.

I nudged Prosper. "What the hell is going on?"

"Shut up and bowl," replied the mouse demon.

I approached the line and scuffled my bare, un-rosined feet on the alley, testing the purchase. Nothing but purchase. I could not slide. Rosin residue from the goddess' pitches gripped me tight to the floor. With each step I had to peel the soles of my feet up like a deep sea diver walking through a kelp bed.

Prosper saw my problem. "Bring your ball and let's get back up to the bar. We'll get you cleaned off."

I picked a house ball from the return trough and sauntered to the bar where the minks had gotten into the pearl onions and maraschino cherries. With the smearing as they rolled about, spraying their musk, the scene looked like a slaughter of eyeballs painted by a crack addict. The bartender was oblivious, happily polishing Manhattan glasses with a bar towel.

"Wipe your feet, Everhardy. Then run like hell, stop and let go of the ball when I tell you. You might stop short and go buns over teakettle, so hold onto your nose. For luck," he added. Prosper gave his colander a quarter turn and focused his eyes on the acoustical tiling of the Chuck-A-Bowl's hung ceiling as he mumbled an exhortation in what sounded like an ancient language.

A mink bit me on the ass and I hurtled forward.

"Foul line! Stop!" shouted the mouse demon. I stopped and slid right up to the line, remembering to let go of the ball. Leftover rosin grabbed at my feet. I ground to a precipitous halt and clutched my nose as I careened head first onto the polished maple floor. The 2½ pound candlepin ball shot forward in a fireball curve. I noticed it pick up speed as I slid right up to, but not over, the foul line.

When the ball connected, the number seven and ten pins dodged while the others fell. The ball rebounded from the bumpers and returned to take them down, too.

We won.

And then we had to face the wrath of the goddess. And me with a bloody nose.

Artemis, the Lady of the Wild Things, Ephesian Diana, etc., etc., was whistling up her minks and packing to leave. She seemed in a good mood, for a disappointed Personage.

She handed me a large basket. "If you are here to cut a deal, you are too late. Here, hold my snakes and thrysis. Initiates may see my mysteries elsewhere. You really should get that nose looked after. Behold! Ecce Bocce: a bowling alley. What a shabby field of honor! The fields of my epistemology are awash with mice, beer and salted nuts."

She wriggled her shoulders. "I am a figure of religious fervor. Heat and reflection don't mix. You think you have a role to play in eternity. Well, you don't. As you go through life, Jim Everhardy, remember the parting words of the Lady of the Wild Things: Shut up and bowl. And be careful what you wish for."

I hadn't wished for anything. This time at least. I spoke up. "Uhn..."

"Speak up, you ninny," thundered Artemis. No more Ms. Nice Guy.

"I was just minding my own business—"

"No excuse. Not valid. Shut up. You were sucked into Prosper's machinations by a vortex of avarice."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I find you guilty of betting on a doctored sporting event. I told Pliny to tip you off about the greased ball stunt."

"Then you suckered us."

"You fell for it. You are therefore guilty as charged."

"But we won."

There was a smattering of applause from the Lovegroves in the neighboring alley. Artemis stared them to silence.

"Madam..." Pliny was edging in for a word. "If I might get a word in, edgewise as it were?"

"Not even sideways, you doddering old leech. Keep your noble Roman mouth zippered if you ever want to see another Baywatch."

Pliny persisted. "They did win. You cheated; they cheated. So it would appear you are even-up. And screw Baywatch. It's only silicone."

"You, Gaius Plinius Secundus, are sentenced to spend what remains of your eternity viewing Little House on the Prairie!"

At this, the senior statesman and preeminent natural scholar went ballistic. Screaming, "An indulgence, Madam!" Pliny reached beneath his purple-bordered toga and, in a fit of pique, drew forth a hubcap and skimmed it at Artemis' head.

Ahh, Prosper's fallback strategy. I closed my eyes and sent a silent prayer winging heavenward.

"The coveted '38 Dodge, chrome and all!" shouted Artemis. "And intact, too. Museum quality. The old hidden hubcap trick, not unheard of in dirty bowling. Leave it to a scientist. Ball greaser!"

One superbly formed arm shot forth and caught the hurtling hubcap in mid flight. "Aha! How's that for a Frisbee goal?" The other arm made a rather theatrical gesture of triumph.

"You don't get it, do you?" said the goddess. "It doesn't matter if you won or lost. I want all the hats. And whatever Lola wants..."

She snatched the beribboned colander off Prosper's head and tossed it aloft along with her homburg and the '38 Dodge hubcap. Dots of light reflected from polished chrome sparkled and bobbed on the ceiling.

"You can't knock perfection," said Artemis, sister of Apollo, as she juggled the three hats, "and the homburg is perfect."

As a finale, she took the hats gracefully out of aerobatic rotation, bouncing them one by one off the back of a heel.

"I shall keep the homburg." The supercilious curl returned to Artemis' celestial lip, this time with an evil tic she didn't even attempt to get under control. "But I am willing to share," said the goddess with a self-congratulatory chuckle.

"Prosper, here's your new hat." Artemis tossed the chrome hubcap at the mouse demon. "I'll be keeping my colander, too. Everhardy, begone, you belie your name. Pliny, get likewise lost. I banish you to the 21st Century. Prosper, I want words with you. Stay."

* * * *

Well, that's about the story. I sometimes wonder how Prosper fared at the hands of the Divine Artemis. I have adjusted to writing inventory control codes for Wal-Mart. Bonnie and I also have a semi-permanent houseguest.

Ask me about the shelf life of a live mink. Go ahead. Ask me how Pliny and I got home.

DARK TALES

Thanks, we had to hoof it. We passed the hat and washed dishes to get up enough cash and made the last leg by bus. The minks tracked us, Pliny and me, all the way. I tried to visualize polecats, ferrets, weasels, the wild cousins of the goddess' coat, lining the road and cheering the lads on, north and eastward, up the New England coastline. The Divine Artemis' coat must have raided one hell of a lot of garbage cans on the road to Willipaq, Maine. On the bright side, they have since cleared our neighborhood of mice and rats. Like I might have said, negotiating with the gods is playing house rules against house odds.

Pliny, my wife and I make macaroni and cheese and watch Baywatch reruns nightly as our penance. Pliny *did* wangle us a plenary indulgence from Little House on the Prairie. Somewhere in this exchange, I ended up with the '38 Dodge chrome hubcap cum disco mirror ball. Don't ask. I have tried to get the hubcap off, but every time I try, the computer crashes.

And so it is I am writing again, in the time I free up by being good at writing inventory control codes. Be careful what you wish for, even if it's only for a better mousetrap. I love my wife, we put up with Pliny, and I wear my hubcap all the time. Even to bed.

THE END

LEGENDS REBORN

CAROL HIGHTSHOE

Carol Hightshoe Born in 1964, Carol grew up in San Antonio, Texas and eventually found her way to Colorado Springs, Colorado. An avid reader at a young age, her desire to write came from her love of (her husband calls it her obsession with) Star Trek. It was this that led her to the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres. Carol's current "day job" is as a Deputy Sheriff with the El Paso County, Colorado, Sheriff's Office. Working the midnight shift she can dedicate a large amount of her time on her days off to writing while the rest of her family is asleep—keeping normal human hours. Carol's family includes her husband Tim; their son John; and two dogs—Kans and Schadue. All of whom, somehow, manage to tolerate her imaginary friends and worlds. Visit Carol's homepage, Realms of Imagination, at www.carolhightshoe.com. Email her at petaQ@msn.com.

Gwendolyn Robbins clutched the stack of papers, the wind tearing at them trying to steal them from her grasp, as she walked through the Wildlife Foundation's maze of buildings. She paused in the relative shelter of the main administrative building and brushed her tangled black hair out of her eyes; thankful the strong winds were keeping the flying insects away for now. *Almost two hundred years and it still hasn't returned to the brilliant blue of legend*, she thought, glancing up at the brightening amethyst sky.

When she reached her office, there were at least ten notes attached to her door. *Just what I need after sitting in the analysis center all night*, she thought.

Gwendolyn shifted the stack of papers to free her right hand then began taking the yellow slips off the door. A quick glance showed several were from Tomas Whelan. She frowned slightly at his multiple invitations to dinner. She had considered going out with him a couple of times before her promotion to Director of the Genetics Department. Now, she wasn't sure she wanted to deal with the headaches that could arise from dating one of the regional coordinators. While she wasn't his supervisor, she was the one who made the decisions on which projects received priority. The risk of perceived favoritism was high. *No, it's probably not worth the headache*.

The other messages were regarding the status of various projects her department was working on. One got her attention quickly; "We Quit!" was all it said. The small bird drawn on the note showed it was from the team working on the avian

project. She knew they weren't really quitting; this was just their way of making sure she read their report first thing. *As if I don't have enough to do this morning*, she thought.

"Good morning, Gwen. Did you get my note?" a voice asked behind her. Gwendolyn turned to see Tomas smiling at her.

"Good morning. I did. All six of them. The answer is still no." She shook her head and fought the smile that threatened to turn into a giggle at the crestfallen look on her friend's face.

Tomas laid a hand on his chest and took a step back. "She mocks me. I lay my heart out for her, and the lady mocks me." He dropped to one knee, clasped his hands together and held them up in a gesture of supplication. "What must I do prove myself to you, my lady?"

Gwendolyn sighed softly and decided the best way to deal with Tomas' theatrics this morning was to change the subject. "How are the wolves working out?" she asked.

"Pretty good—so far." The sandy haired coordinator stood up, dusting his dark pants off. "Looks like it may be a while before I get the proper balance of predator to prey, but I think it's a good start."

"Glad to hear it. It's nice to know something may be working right for a change." Gwendolyn shifted the stack of papers again as she reached for her door.

"Allow me." Tomas said, opening the door and giving her a bow.

"Thanks," Gwendolyn said, walking into the office and dropping the papers on the desk.

"What's all that?" Tomas asked, gesturing at the papers.

"The animal census reports. I only have a few days before my presentation to the Council. They're trying to shut the Foundation down. They claim we're interfering and upsetting the Balance! Like there was a Balance for us to upset!" Gwendolyn clenched her fists for a moment then relaxed.

"So the rumors are true," Tomas said.

"I'm afraid so," she whispered.

Tomas reached up and gently squeezed her shoulder. "Have you considered that they may be right? We do interfere with the Balance and the natural recovery," he said.

"The natural recovery?" Gwendolyn pulled away from the coordinator. "We've tried that. It's really working isn't it?" She jerked the curtains in her office open to reveal the pale purple of the morning sky. "The damage done to the ecology of this planet in the last war is too severe for us to just sit here and do nothing!"

"By the Balance! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Yes, I do. Do you really know what *The Balance* is? True Balance can only come when everything becomes a part of the ecology of this planet." She crossed her

arms across her chest and stared at her friend. “The Council still clings to those draconian capitol punishment laws for interference in the Balance, but man is a part of nature and a part of the ecology. We should never presume to dominate this planet and its resources the way the Ancestors did, but neither should we completely withdraw either.” She turned and walked over to the window. “That’s what we’re doing, and it’s destroying us. Mankind is disappearing from this planet,” she whispered.

“If that’s what the Balance decrees, do we have a right to say otherwise?” Tomas asked.

“We may not be able to say otherwise, but are you willing to just give up without at least trying?” she asked turning back to face him.

Tomas glanced up at her, and Gwendolyn was pleased to see a look of determination in his gray-blue eyes. “No, I suppose I’m not,” he said. “If you need any help getting your presentation ready, let me know.”

“I appreciate that.” She smiled softly.

“Do yourself a favor, Gwen. Stop pushing so hard. Take some time for yourself.” He reached up and caressed her cheek, then turned to leave.

Tomas stopped at the door and turned to face her, a crooked grin on his face. “By the way, don’t think I’m going to stop trying to get you to go out with me.”

“You keep trying. Maybe I’ll give in out of pity one of these days,” she said, smiling.

“Pity? Okay, I’ll take pity. At least it’s a place to start. How about tonight? I know this great cook, and his place has wonderful atmosphere,” he said.

“Nice try, but I’m not quite to the pity stage yet.” She gestured to the papers scattered across her desk.

“Maybe next time. Oh, before I forget, how’s your pegasus project going?”

“I’ll be releasing my first pair into the Foundation’s habitat tonight,” she said. Something that constantly surprised her about Tomas was his ability to change the subject of a conversation and his mood quickly. In many ways, he reminded her of the wolves they had recently reintroduced into his region. He had a very playful but mercurial nature and could be deadly serious when he chose.

“But, how? You just got initial approval. How can you have a pair ready for release that quickly?”

Gwendolyn looked at the door, still standing partially open, and Tomas reached back and shut it completely.

Gwendolyn grinned. “After I prepared the proposal, I went ahead and tested the material and data by developing the first pair. Meet me after work and I’ll show you the pegasi.”

“See you then,” he said, turning and leaving the room.

Gwendolyn stared at the closed door for a few minutes surprised and a little disappointed he hadn't seized the opportunity to ask her out to dinner again. After all, she had given him a perfect opening by asking him to meet her after work. While she knew all the logical reasons to not get involved in a relationship with Tomas, she still enjoyed the attention.

She glanced down at the papers now scattered across her desk then out the window at the lavender sky. *What's the point of being involved in a relationship anyway?* She grabbed the curtains and yanked them shut. *Fewer couples are succeeding in childbearing, and only a few of those actually born survive infancy.* Gwendolyn picked up Tomas' notes. "Besides, a lover is just one more person to lose in the next famine or plague." She placed the notes in a wooden box on her windowsill. As she closed the lid, her fingers carefully traced the rearing unicorn inlaid on it in silver. *A hope chest, she thought, that's what Tomas called this once. Pandora's box is more like it.*

Gwendolyn sat at her desk and read the remaining notes. There was nothing that required her immediate attention, so she set them aside and picked up the report folder. As she had expected, the news was bad. For the past five years, the Foundation had been working to reintroduce various bird species. Despite the availability of genetic material in facilities like this one, all of their cloning efforts had failed.

The continuing damage to vital food crops from insects, coupled with the ban on the use of pesticides made this project a priority. At least in her opinion, it was a priority. The rising mortality rates across the planet should have made it one for the Council as well, but they seemed to be taking a wait and see attitude with the situation. Then again, they had given initial approval to her pegasus project, which was a little more proactive than she would have expected. True, the Council had withheld final approval pending the reports from the test stage, but this was more than she had actually hoped for considering the Council's decisions in the past.

The report contained no significant information from the group's recent search of the archives, except for a brief note from one of the junior members.

"Director Robbins, I believe the problem may be with the atmosphere. The birds we are able to clone all appear to be demonstrating respiratory problems. I found a reference in one of the records, which indicated birds were once used to detect the presence of dangerous gasses. Based on this, and I realize it isn't much, I would surmise birds have very sensitive respiratory systems.

"With the changes in the atmosphere after the war, it's possible all the birds died before they could adapt, as other species have. Just a thought—Jayson."

Gwendolyn pulled the curtains open and looked out the window again, shook her head and silently cursed the Ancestors and this mix and match world they had

created with their last war. All over the planet, equipment sat in lifeless testament to knowledge lost or incomplete.

During the past century, mankind had begun trying to claim a small niche on the planet. Technology was being salvaged and brought together in various locations. One of these was the Wildlife Foundation. This had been some kind of genetic facility prior to the war and there were samples of genetic material from thousands of creatures stored here. Unfortunately, all they were able to use properly was the cloning equipment. Perhaps, if the knowledge hadn't been lost they might have found a way to adapt birds to the current atmosphere. However, even if they could, that would only help with one symptom of a larger problem. She picked up her papers and moved to the adjoining conference room.

A large map covered one wall of the room, and papers were scattered across the floor and table. She glanced up from the papers she was carrying and scanned the map with its multicolored pins and ribbons. The different colors of the pins indicated different species groups, while the ribbons showed their growth patterns. Black ribbons attached to the blue pins showed clearly the status of the avian species. There were no recorded populations anywhere in the world. Green ribbons attached to green pins showed the population increases for insects. Most of the remaining pins held red ribbons, showing population decreases. Here and there were pins with no ribbons; an indication there had been no significant changes in that species' numbers.

She shifted through the papers, found the reports for each of the various regions, and began comparing the numbers from the previous and the current census. Every few seconds she found herself adding another red ribbon to a pin, which previously had held no ribbon. Only occasionally did she find herself reaching for a green ribbon or removing a red ribbon.

She finally stepped back and surveyed the map, shaking her head at the amount of red. Her eyes searched out the gold pins she used to designate humans then closed them against the tears she felt coming. Her map confirmed what she had told Tomas—humanity was dying. Based on her projections, Gwendolyn doubted mankind had many more years left to it.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Tomas burst into the office. "Gwen!"

"Calm down. What's wrong?" she asked, reaching for the papers she had dropped.

"Director Banks is on his way here with members of the Council." He started gathering up the papers scattered on the floor and table.

Gwendolyn stood frozen, staring at her friend. "What? Why?"

"Don't know. But they didn't look happy." He finished picking up the last of the papers and looked up. "Where do you want these?"

“Huh?” She shook her head slightly. “Thanks. Just put them on my desk.” She nodded toward the door to her office.

“Ms. Robbins,” a voice said from the doorway.

Gwendolyn looked up to see Brian Banks, the Director for the Wildlife Foundation standing in the room next to a petite woman with dark red hair and brilliant blue eyes. “Director Banks, President Kerchner. What can I do for you?”

Helen Kerchner, the President of the World Council, stepped forward and smiled softly. “Ms. Robbins, we need to talk. The Council and I have some concerns.

“Of course.” Gwendolyn gestured to the chairs around the table.

“Ms. Robbins, I have reviewed your proposal regarding your pegasus projects as well as the other *interesting* projects you have suggested. I must admit that while your ideas are intriguing, I have some reservations.”

“Madam President, over the past two years, teams from the Foundation have managed to catalog every species known to still exist on Earth. My proposal deals with those ecological niches that are severely under populated or not populated at all. I believe it’s possible, through cloning of unique species to fill those niches and thereby restore Balance.”

“So we were correct,” President Kerchner said leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest. “You are talking about creating new species. Ms. Robbins, I am sure you know the policy of the World Council is to allow for natural recovery, with minimal interference from man.”

“Your proposals are a serious violation of that policy, as I have already told you,” Director Banks said.

Gwendolyn met the intense gaze of his dark eyes and wasn’t surprised to see nothing reflected in them. No light, no emotion—just two deep pools of black space. “I understand that,” she said. “However, you need to understand it has been two centuries since the war that nearly destroyed this planet?” She turned her attention back to the Council President. “Everyday we are still reminded of that event. Records say the sky was once as blue as your eyes. In the time since the war, it still has not returned to that color. The Balance has not been restored. Moreover, it will never be restored if man is not considered as part of the equation. Two hundred years and mankind is afraid to do anything that might risk the ecological balance of the Earth. We live in constant fear of making a mistake and destroying what life is left.”

“With good reason, I’d say. Look around you at what is left.” President Kerchner leaned forward, her blue eyes piercing in their intensity.

“You look around!” Gwendolyn slapped her hands against the table. “Man has hung on by the skin of his teeth since the war. We are afraid to live. We are unwilling to be a part of the Balance anymore, and it’s killing us.” She gestured to the map covering the walls. For the next several minutes, she carefully explained about the colored pins and ribbons.

“While, I have not completed all the comparisons yet, you can still see from the amount of red on the map, populations have declined since last year. The Council has got to realize what’s happening. This planet is dying! New methods must be explored.”

“Perhaps, but that is not your decision to make.” The President’s eyes narrowed slightly and she stood slowly. “I must warn you Ms. Robbins to tread carefully, the Council will be watching you closely.” With a final glance at the map, she turned and left the room, Director Banks following her.

* * * *

Gwendolyn sat on the floor of the conference room, staring at the map and occasionally glancing down at the papers in her hand. *There has to be a way to get through to them*, she thought.

Her eyes kept darting across the maps, the various colored pins with the attached red, green and black ribbons. The pin groupings within each of the regions showed the various population centers. Something didn’t look right as she continued to study the map. The ratio of green and red pins in the western region of the North American continent was different from the rest of the map. She set the charts for the western region aside so she could reconstruct that area of the map later.

Let’s start with these, she thought, removing the blue pins with the black ribbons. *We’re all aware of the status of the avian population*. She stepped back and studied the groupings. *Okay, now for the insects*.

All of the appropriate pins and ribbons removed, Gwendolyn stepped back and looked at the map again. There were still a few green pins left in the scattered clusters. She reached for one to remove it then stopped; her hand frozen as she stared at the green dot surrounded by a rainbow of colors. There was no ribbon attached to it. Could she have forgotten? It didn’t seem likely. Gwendolyn picked up her charts and flipped through them looking for the census numbers for this particular area. There it was—No significant increase or decrease in insect population.

“No significant increase or decrease in insect population,” she said. “No significant increase or decrease in insect population!” She repeated the phrase like a mantra.

Gwendolyn returned her attention to the section of the map with the green pin. All of the remaining pins in that grouping were either empty or had a green ribbon attached to them. She circled the area with a green marker.

For several hours, Gwendolyn carefully checked every cluster of pins, circling those that showed characteristics similar to the first group. “Is there a pattern?” she asked herself, when she was finally done.

Gwendolyn removed every pin cluster that wasn't circled, then stepped back and smiled. All of the remaining clusters were grouped together around a central area. *It's almost like a mushroom ring surrounding an oak tree*, she thought.

Gwendolyn's thoughts were interrupted as the door to her office opened. She turned to see Tomas entering the room.

"Gwen," Tomas said. He paused as he looked around the room, his eyes wide at the papers scattered across the floor. "Work was over hours ago. And, you promised to let me meet the pegasi tonight."

"Give me a minute, then we'll go." Gwendolyn jotted down some notes on her charts then motioned to the door.

* * * *

Gwendolyn led the way through the bare corridors to a large room set up as a habitat, similar to the woods surrounding the center. As they entered the area, two large gray wolves bounded out of the trees. "Hello, you two," Gwendolyn said as the two creatures sniffed at her and Tomas.

The two wolves followed closely as she led Tomas over to large enclosure.

"Back off you two. Sit and stay," Gwendolyn told the two wolves.

The two large canines cocked their heads at her, but both backed up several steps and sat watching her closely as she opened the enclosure. Gwendolyn smiled at the gasp she heard from Tomas when the two small black horses pranced out into the habitat. The pegasi were about three quarters the size of the wolves.

Gwendolyn brought one of them over for Tomas to see. "This is Artemis. The male is Apollo," she said. "As you can see, they look like horses in every detail; other than the obvious difference in size, that is. Other differences: They have hollow bones like a bird. And, most importantly, they like insects in addition to grass."

The two wolves looked at the pegasus still standing by the cage. One of them glanced up at Gwendolyn, and then pounced at the winged horse in front of it. Gwendolyn laughed as Apollo jumped into the air and whinnied at the wolf. "And, they can fly. I'm sorry Remus, but it won't be easy to catch one of these guys." She reached down and scratched the wolf's ears.

"An interesting idea, Gwen. You may have come up with a solution to the avian problem. Do you think it'll work?" Tomas gave Artemis a pat.

"I hope so. The data from the Ancestors says it will." Gwendolyn let her voice trail off.

"But?" Tomas asked.

"But, it doesn't make sense. The digestive systems between a bird and a horse are so different and technically these guys shouldn't even be able to fly."

“Neither should a bumblebee. Guess nobody ever told them they couldn’t,” Tomas said.

“Perhaps.” Gwendolyn gently tossed Artemis up and watched as she spread her wings catching the air and gracefully glided away from them.

Gwendolyn and Tomas stood and watched the pegasi dart around the habitat, playing with each other and the two wolves.

“Gwen, what do you know about unicorns?” Tomas asked after several minutes.

She hesitated for several moments before answering. “I’ve studied a few of the legends. Other than that, not much.”

“Did you find any evidence here that the Ancestors may have developed or tried to develop unicorns?”

There was a note of suspicion in Tomas’ voice. “Why do you ask?”

“Director Banks asked me to research several unicorn sightings and I discovered that they center around a central location. The area of the Foundation.” Tomas reached out and took her hands in his. “Gwen, I need to know. Are you the one responsible for the unicorns?”

Gwendolyn stared at her friend for a few minutes, searching his face for an indication of his true motives in asking that question. Tomas had staunchly supported the Council decisions regarding non-interference in the natural recovery processes in the past. Would he be open minded enough to understand something she wasn’t sure she understood herself?

Gwendolyn turned back to watch the pegasi as they glided to the ground. The two wolves trotted over and the four animals touched noses. “No,” she whispered. “However, I do have a theory as to where they might have come from. Follow me.” She led the way out of the habitat building to the genetics labs.

“The Ancestors experimented with the idea of creating animals from mythology. They left behind research and genetic material from numerous species, including the pegasi and unicorns. The Council has tightly controlled most of this information. Only Brian and I have had access.”

“I guess that’s why no one could figure out where you got the materials for the pegasi.”

Gwendolyn only smiled as she looked at Tomas, then turned toward the computer. “It took a while, but I was finally able to get into the system and begin cataloguing the work the Ancestors were doing.” She pushed several buttons and the image of a rearing unicorn appeared on the screen. “These are the files and records I was able to recover. Unfortunately, they are not complete. From what I have been able to find, the Ancestors created test subjects for all of the creatures listed in this database.”

“Any indications they took their experiments further than the test phase?” Tomas stood behind her and placed a strong hand on her shoulder.

“Not that I could find. However, these may only be the preliminary records. Although, it seems the primary focus here was on unicorns. I personally believe the Ancestors did create and release unicorns.”

Tomas sighed deeply then stepped back. Gwendolyn turned to face him. He stood with his arms crossed across his chest and a faraway look in his eyes. “Just what information do you have on the unicorns?”

“They were solitary creatures, very elusive, almost impossible to find. The pool a unicorn drank from would be pure and clean. The areas where they lived were green and fertile with abundant plant and animal life. And lastly, they were the guardians and bringers of hope.” She paused and glanced from the unicorn on the screen to Tomas and back.

“Guardians and bringers of hope,” Gwendolyn said suddenly. “Come on! I want to check something.” She jumped up and hurried back to main building.

* * * *

“Gwen, what’s going on?” Tomas demanded when they got back inside, out of the howling wind.

Gwendolyn brushed her hair back from her face and took several deep breaths before answering. “I can’t really explain it. I’ll have to show you. Do me a favor. Get your notes on the unicorn sightings and meet me in my office.”

Tomas raised his eyebrows and frowned slightly, then nodded. “Sure.”

After entering her office, Gwendolyn got a box of silver pins from her desk then went into the conference room.

“Here’s the unicorn information. Now, will you please tell me what’s going on?” Tomas said, handing her a folder.

“In a few minutes. Let me check something first.” Gwendolyn handed the folder back to Tomas. “Read me the locations on each of those sightings.”

Tomas sighed, shook his head slightly, and then opened the folder.

As he read off each location, Gwendolyn marked each one on the map with a silver pin. When they were done with all of the reports, there was at least one silver pin in all of the circled clusters.

“I knew it!” Gwendolyn said.

“Knew what?” Tomas asked, staring at her.

“All of these areas are showing stabilization or growth. I first noticed they had no significant increase or decrease in their insect populations. Further checking showed the other groups demonstrated either the same or population increases. There was no significant decrease in any species group—including man. Now, we find *all* of the reported unicorn sightings are in these areas. There has to be a connection!”

Tomas studied the map for a moment. "I agree it appears that way. But, what exactly is the connection?" he asked.

"Legends call unicorns the guardians and bringers of hope. Could it be that simple? Is what's needed be something as simple as hope?" Gwendolyn asked, staring at the silver pins. "Or were the Ancestors able to actually breed for magic?"

"There are a lot of the old technologies, we don't understand. Perhaps they weren't breeding for magic, precisely. However, they could have given the unicorns some sort of ability that allows them to influence the plants and animals in an area to promote healing and balance. To us it might look like magic." He reached forward and placed his hand next to one of the silver pins. "Besides, does it really matter? What matters is something is happening and the unicorns may be the catalyst."

"So, what should we do about it? Do we report this to the Council or ignore it for now?"

"We definitely don't ignore it, but we don't report it; at least not yet. Once we have enough information on the changes that are occurring, combined with the current and previous census reports, we will be able to show the Council what's going on. And, they *will* have to listen to you. But, before we do that there must be no doubt regarding the unicorns and their influence."

"Tomas, you've have always supported the Council, why would you suggest this?" She backed away a few steps.

"Because, I believe you're right. The unicorns could be just a coincidence, but I doubt it. I've seen the previous census reports. I know what's been happening to the various species groups on this planet. Something has to be done. The fact the Council gave you preliminary approval for your pegasi, shows they are more aware of what's happening than we give them credit for."

Tomas placed his hands on Gwendolyn's shoulders and squeezed gently. "Come on," he said. "It's getting late and we both need to get some rest. I'll walk you home."

"Thank you," she said softly as they left the room.

* * * *

Outside the administrative building a flash of silver and gold caught Gwendolyn's eye. "Did you see that?" she whispered.

"I did. Do you think . . .?" Tomas let his voice trail off.

"I want to. We could use some hope around here."

There was another flash of silver and a soft whinny echoed in the trees, followed by a rhythmic drumming.

Gwendolyn smiled at Tomas as the sounds faded into the night. "Perhaps magic is nothing more than hope and a belief in things hoped for," she said.

“If that’s true, there may already be magic in the world,” Tomas said.
Gwendolyn only nodded as they walked down the path.

THE END



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HALLOWEEN EVERLASTING

MARK JUSTICE

Mark Justice lives with his wife and cats in Kentucky, where he hosts a morning radio program. In his rare free time he writes stories, which have appeared (or will soon appear) in BARE BONE, DAMNED NATION, HORROR FICTION REVIEW, MYTHOS COLLECTOR, IN LAYMON'S TERMS, GOTHIC.NET, HORROR CAROUSEL and DARK KRYPT, among others. He also reviews fiction for Hellnotes and Page Horrific, co-hosts the podcast Pod of Horror and edits the Story Station children's fiction site at: www.viatouch.com/.

Tommy climbed the ladder to the tree house, just like he did every morning. When he squeezed through the opening in the floor, he found Bill, sitting against the wall, reading an old issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, with Gill-Man on the cover. It was one of Tommy's favorites.

"Hey," he said.

Bill looked up from the magazine. "Hey."

Tommy finished clambering through the opening. He brushed sawdust from his shirt and plopped down next to his friend. He searched through the pile of old comics and magazines, settling on a *Famous Monsters* with Wolf Man on the front.

"Hey," Tommy said. "You think Wolf Man could beat up Gill-Man?"

Bill sat the magazine in his lap and thought about the question. "Nope," he finally said.

"Me, neither," Tommy said. "You know what tonight is?"

Bill smiled. "Trick or Treat."

"Yeah. It hardly seems like a year, huh?"

"I know," Bill said. "Remember last year, when I went as Dracula and you went as The Mummy. That was the coolest!"

"That wasn't last year," Tommy said.

"Was, too."

"Uh-uh. That was before."

"Before?" Bill said, his face scrunched up in concentration.

"Yeah."

"Oh," he said. "Anyway, what would you be this year, if you could be anything you want?"

"I don't know," Tommy said. "Maybe a pirate."

"How 'bout a biker?"

Tommy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. If I could be a teenage werewolf biker."

Bill laughed. "That would be neat."

They returned to examining their magazines for a while, even though they had long ago memorized the articles and pictures. Later, Bill said, "So, are we going out tonight?"

"We always do," Tommy told him. "It's Trick or Treat. We have to go."

"I guess," Bill said.

They passed the rest of the day in the tree house in Bill's backyard.

* * * *

That night they walked through the neighborhood, watching the other kids begging for candy.

"Man, they look so little this year," Bill said through his plastic vampire fangs.

"No kidding," Tommy said. He had left his mouth uncovered by the gauze wrapping of his mummy costume. As a fairy princess passed by them, Tommy looked into her plastic candy bag. "Boy! They're handing out the good stuff this year. She had a Snickers and a Baby Ruth."

"Sure beats candy corn," Bill said.

"Or those marshmallow peanuts," Tommy said, which cracked them both up.

They followed the throngs of trick-or-treaters through the neighborhood, to the intersection of Main and Harrison. While all of the costumed kids turned left on Harrison, toward another street of lighted porches and smiling Jack O' Lanterns, Tommy and Bill hesitated. They gazed toward the darkened end of Main, as the whoop and din of excited children faded behind them, until all that seemed to remain of the world was the two of them.

Then, without speaking, they started down Main Street, away from the light. They passed by the empty barbershop, the drugstore (where many of the monster magazines had originally been purchased), the silent courthouse and the vacant lot, where they had both played baseball.

They walked until they came to the bridge. It spanned a small tributary of the Ohio, little more than a creek, not very deep at all.

Just deep enough.

They stepped carefully onto the bridge. Both boys peered over the rail, to the blackened water below.

"It was really cold, wasn't it?" Bill said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I slipped."

DARK TALES

“I know,” Tommy said. “It wasn’t your fault. It was slick that night.”

“We didn’t have to take the shortcut,” Bill said. “We could’ve gone the long way around to Washington Street.”

“We were trying to get done by eight, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, you didn’t have to jump in after me, you know.”

Tommy shrugged. “That’s what best friends do. You would’ve done the same thing for me.”

“Would not.”

Tommy playfully punched Bill in the arm. “Would too.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Thanks for trying to save me.”

They stared silently at the dark water for a few moments.

“Come on,” Tommy said. “Let’s go.”

They walked back to Bill’s house, where they would climb up to the tree house and wait for another Halloween, best friends forever.

Forever twelve years old.

THE END

PRAWN J.R.CAIN

James R.Cain has had stories and poems published in over 90 publications, including the anthologies **COLD FLESH**, **LURKING FEAR**, **COLD GLASS PAIN** and **CLOAKED IN SHADOW**. His novel **EK CHUAH** is due to be published in the USA in 2006. Visit him online at: www.darkanimus.com/cain.html.

Eva spun into a million nightmares and each of them the same: falling down an endless passage, a dervish spinning out of control, hitting walls, striking bottom to drown in a sea of mucus. Then she was free and falling again, repeating the journey, ever into darkness, and her one thought was this: Why did I eat that friggin' prawn?

Eva twisted in a fugue with her senses made dull from fear's inexorable blows. Her skin became a chitinous shell and adhered to her bones, and the organs became twisted, writhing *things*, bloated slugs that stirred awake within her being. Eva's eyes—God her eyes!—twitched animate, and slowly rotated in their sockets, bulged outward like inflated balloons.

Eva hit bottom, ploughed into a tar sea, and there she floundered. Her strength dissipated like windblown steam. She gyrated in spasm through the mire. Slowly, slowly waded to the shallows where shock dry-humped her limp.

There she slept.

In time, she dreamt again.

Eva dreamt of a land of acid-scarred forests, and a million axe-wielding manikins came towards the trees. They began copping in frenzied abandon, expressionless, stripping the trunks in a gale of sticks and leaves. The manikins continued their work until the landscape became a wasteland of mud and kindling pyres. They set fire to the stacks with laser vision – red threads that ignited the wood, and the land became a semblance of hell with fires belching smoke. This continued for an age, and the pyres crumbled to heaps of steaming embers. The ash blew away leaving a world that was as crisped and parched as the Martian desert. A world of contaminated earth where once a forest had been, a place where starving children choked on the air.

Eva wept to see that awful place, knowing how things should be, could be . . .

She lay there for God knows how long—a day, a year, a millennium?— and in her inertia, Eva's body crystallised into amber. She became a driftwood log with dead

flies petrified into her face—she could feel the lumps. A roach crowned her shoulder like a 3D tattoo.

Why?

Why?

Why?

Time festered.

Eva didn't understand how she'd come to be in this cave of wetness and damp. Her last, nay, her only memory was of dinner with a preacher man in an ash-black suit. The preacher had worn a wide-brimmed hat and clutched a tattered bible in his sun-baked fist. He'd thrown it onto the white cotton tablecloth and opened to a passage, stabbing at the text while ordering lentil soup.

"Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgement upon all, and to convict all the ungodly among them of all the deeds they've ungodly committed."

The preacher had a harelip. Pigeon eyes lay in a hollow beneath his brow, and his eyebrows were wire clouds. He berated Eva for sin while he sipped and dribbled soup from his spoon—sin Eva had never known nor committed.

"Sin's inherited you see," the preacher man said in a Southern accent, watching with a birdie gaze. "Each man or woman's condemned by God before they're ever born. Justice, ya see? You Missee, are in dire need of salvation this night."

"Salvation from what?" Eva asked. "God?"

The preacher snapped off a reply with a flick of his wrist. Eva couldn't quite remember what he'd said, only that she'd remembered thinking it was strange that God should design us for destruction.

"Perhaps the religions have misunderstood?" she'd said. "Perhaps man cast the Creator in his own hateful reflection?"

The preacher snatched up his bible, said Eva would burn and that hell had a particularly nasty spot for blaspheming women.

Then there was the prawn, a lonely red prawn with its spiky head watching Eva from off her fork. The prawn had sat there in an orange-beige seafood sauce, and looked up at Eva with its peppercorn eyes. "Tonight, he'll come for you," it whispered. "Tonight, you'll know your dreams and sweep up the world." The prawn wriggled on the utensil and winked a rounded eye.

"Do prawns have eyelids?" Eva asked aloud.

The prawn squirmed while the preacher searched his bible. "To do this, you'll most certainly have to die. Bite me and be done!"

Eva bit down in annoyance as the preacher man recited from Revelations—bit and wished all religion away.

Now, here she was. Floundering in a bog of filth.

"I'm altering," she said.

She was aware of her body metamorphosing beneath the part of her body she'd once called a neck. It was ironic to Eva, that God was commanding this farce, and enjoying her pain.

Time became a dull monologue. Eva found she could move, slightly at first, and then she gained some momentum. In a moment of shocked incredulity, Eva saw she'd adopted a squid-like form. She was an amorphous entity with a mouth slithering around a lake of mucus-tar. She came to experience pleasure in the simple act of movement and left ripples in her wake. A myriad of eyes awakened all around Eva's skull, blinking alive to take in her world.

The cave had two arched vaults. The ceiling and walls periodically contracted and billowed out, raining gel from the roof. As Eva swam, the world awakened into life.

Bone-white orbs emerged from the walls, peeling away as oysters with snapping maws. Their mouths were filled with pinprick teeth and they had dull impressions for eyes. They swept upon Eva as a swarm, slapping, biting, gnashing her shell and limbs. They gnawed Eva's suckers in a desperate frenzy . . .

Eva tried to beg God for mercy, but found her mouth had dissolved. Her tongue fumbled against a flat plate of skin where a mouth and lips *had* been. That worm of muscle probed against an inner surface of iron, tried to force release, but none came. Eva couldn't breathe, couldn't gasp, had no outlet for terror. A keening roar began in her brain . . . a vibration that threatened to explode.

Eva's body arched. She arose and separated from the sea—Venus rising—propelled by the torment of her chewed nerves. Bony orbs gnashed all over as Eva levitated upwards. Her survival instinct revived and pulsated as a jet heart within her chest.

Blobs adhered to every inch of Eva's skin, an ulcerous cloak of parasites . . . and as they chewed, they adopted Eva's image. Little faces formed on Eva's tentacles and slippery torso, mocking reflections that resembled a woman Eva had once known and recognised as herself: Eva in her younger years.

Eva pivoted. She began to spin quickly, quickly, rising towards the ceiling, gyrating. Her tentacles were pulled outwards by the centrifugal force of her motion, and the Eva faces were flung away. Light speared outwards and erupted from the centre of Eva's being—a magnesium flower destroying the cave's shadows—and Eva transmuted into a furious star.

She detonated from within.

An event horizon evaporated the orbs from Eva's body. Sparks and fire lanced her skin.

Eva split.

A shrunken twin separated from Eva's side, gaining form and substance as it split away and spun also. Eva knew glorious release as she watched her sister born,

and as the pair spun in harmony. Then twin split and the children spun and split, spun and split, and each generation was slightly different than the rest.

Eva was both amazed and satisfied as her progeny were born around her. The noise of birthing becoming a song, a high-pitched squeal of life that called to the universe, and Eva was the centre of it all. The chasm became crowded with the birthing sisterhood, and each child looked towards its mother, the goddess of their kind. Each called towards Eva with semi-translucent eyes radiating happiness.

Eva saw each bore a semblance to her—an eye here, a chin there, an ear perhaps? Each slightly different but yet she felt, the same. Parts of a greater whole perhaps? A jigsaw, the pieces of which were being thrown to the wind. Parts somehow more and yet less than the whole.

The sisterhood formed a whirlpool and began to howl around in a gale, each child alight, multiplying within the storm. Some collided into the walls and were thus absorbed—flashes of incandescent light marked their passing. The white-teeth orbs were slaughtered—images of Eva's face lay in charnel mounds in the bog.

Eva came to think of her progeny as angels, and the angels plunged into the walls of the chasm, assaulting it with flaying limbs and tentacles, detonating in bursts of light until the cave began to quake and shudder. The walls contracted in jerks, then quivered and the ceiling yawned upwards to form a sphincter that sucked and billowed fresh atmosphere into the cave. A great many of Eva's children were drawn away this way, born up and into the world beyond the stars, multiplying as they rose. They cramped the passage above in a rush—the way Eva had originally fallen. The angels destroyed the gates of their imprisonment and left them a gaping ruin through which freedom beckoned.

Eva was content.

Her children continued to pour away as she gave herself to the maelstrom—the birthing process was painless now. Eva knew fulfilment with each birth.

An understanding crept up from the innermost recesses of Eva's being: *This* is how it was always intended to be.

Titillation like treacle engorged each cell in Eva's body as the children commenced a harmonious symphony within her mind. Her children throbbed light—a universe of birthing stars—and each hesitated momentarily before rushing upwards to fill the world—that place of past essence.

"It's how things should be," Eva said and knew the truth of her statement.

A thread of knowledge came to mind, words from the preacher man: "Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgement upon all, and to convict all the ungodly among them of all the deeds they've ungodly committed."

"The Lord or me," said Eva and in wondering *knew*.

A cold speck formed in one limb. The speck travelled up Eva's extremities leaving stone in its path, and a dire chill caused Eva to tremble. Uncontrollably she

shuddered, and grew numb, then slowly, slowly . . . she returned to the tar in which she'd formed.

Eva rested in that corpulent bed. Faces—her own—leered around her with filmed-grey eyes. The slime was warm as it embraced her. Eva submitted to its touch . . . breathed in the pall that clung on the dead.

Threads of night scrawled across her sight.

The last of her children were spawned and flying away.

Continents of ash formed in Eva's body and clogged her heart. Regions of life quaked and began to blink away.

Into nothing.

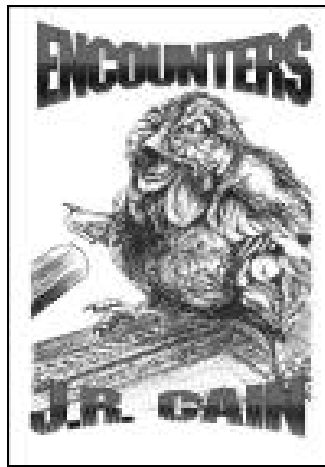
"The prawn was right," Eva said with a gasp.

She'd realise her dreams just never in her life understood them.

Tomorrow *would* be a better day.

Her children would not leave the world unchanged.

THE END



To find more work from the author you can visit him at:
www.darkanimus.com/cain.html

AFTERLIFE

KAREN SANDLER

Novelist Karen Sandler's romance fiction has been published internationally in countries as diverse as the UK, Denmark, The Netherlands, Australia and Estonia. Her books have appeared on bestseller lists and always garner favorable reviews from critics and fans. Her short fiction has appeared most recently in the horror anthology **THE BLACK SPIRAL** and the Canadian science fiction and fantasy magazine, **NEO-OPSIS**.

Syd “the Kid” Denton smirked as he prodded the inert form of Joey Fratantonio lying at his feet. The tang of gunpowder hung in the air, and smoke drifted from Syd’s still warm gun barrel.

Syd hitched worn black denims up on his skinny hips and scanned Joey’s cruddy little apartment. Everything was jake; no witnesses, no evidence whatsoever that Syd had done the deed.

A clean hit. Surely this time, Mr. Russo would see that Syd was ready for bigger and better things.

Then Joey’s ghost slithered out of his body.

“Holy shit!” Syd squeaked, nearly dropping the gun.

The ghost bumbled around the shabby living room, jumping back each time its insubstantial form passed through a piece of tacky furniture. It took Joey’s spirit a full minute to realize the croaked body on the floor was his.

Joey’s incorporeal hands flew to his ethereal face, his mouth a quivering “O.” Then he looked up from his useless carcass to Syd standing there with the gun.

Joey aimed a misty finger at Syd. “You!”

Syd stared at the spirit, then at the corpse on the floor. He shrieked in frustration, swiping at Joey’s ghostly form.

Joey stumbled away and passed through a table lamp with a sizzle. He shook off the electricity, then staggered toward Syd again. Four steps away, Joey flickered, scattered, and disappeared.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” Syd whined as he tucked away his gun and ran from the apartment. He paused in the basement just long enough to unload the gun and dump it in the incinerator. Back behind Joey’s building, he tossed the gun’s magazine into the dumpster.

“Why me,” Syd moaned as he raced across the street, dodging taxis. “Why now?”

Seven years ago, it had started a near-riot when the ghost of a murdered preacher appeared at his killer’s trial. The brouhaha went clear to the Supreme Court before the judge agreed to accept the returner’s ghostly testimony. Since then, hundreds of returners had popped up to accuse the guilty, but randomly enough to make even the coldest killer’s finger waver on the trigger.

But Syd had been so damn sure it would never happen to him. He’d aced hit after hit without a single ghost. Until now. Until Joey Fratantonio.

And if Joey followed the returner pattern, he’d be on Syd like a leech until Syd gasped his last.

Syd shook away the image of electric chairs and gas chambers and sprinted after the uptown bus. He beat an old lady to the last seat and ignored her beady-eyed glare as he tried to figure out how the hell he was going to tell his boss.

* * * *

Anthony Russo took his time to speak. Leaning his bulk back in his chair, he pulled a match from the pocket of his tailored suit and lit a fat Cuban cigar. He drew deeply on the Julieta, then gazed lovingly at its lit tip. On the other side of Russo’s massive desk, Syd squirmed.

Russo puffed aromatic smoke rings across his desk. “This presents quite a problem, Mr. Denton.”

Syd smeared back his greasy hair, then wiped his trembling hand on his back pocket. “I dumped the gun.”

Russo shrugged. He hefted the fat envelope on his desk. “You understand why I’m withholding payment for now.”

Syd gazed longingly at the white envelope. “Sure, Mr. Russo.”

Russo tucked the money into a drawer. “If you can... tidy things up, I’ll reconsider. In the meantime, Mr. Denton...”

Syd’s stomach squiggled into knots. “Yeah, Mr. Russo?”

He eyed Syd through the blue haze of the cigar smoke. “My associates and I would be very dismayed to have our names brought into this.”

Syd ran his hand over and over the oily stain on his back pocket. “Never, Mr. Russo, never would I mention your name.”

“Of course you won’t,” the big man said with quiet menace.

“C-c-course not, Mr. Russo,” Syd stuttered as he backed away from Russo’s desk. Syd banged his backside into the door, his hand sliding off the door knob three times before he could turn it. Too antsy to wait for the elevator, he took the eighteen flights of stairs down.

As he stumbled out of Anthony Russo's building and onto the street, Syd gasped deep breaths of dirty city air. He was one well-done turkey, that was for sure. If only Joey Fratantonio would just quietly fade away, like dead people were supposed to. Fat chance of that.

Syd didn't even have the pocket change for the bus, so he hiked up the sidewalk, counting the blocks as he went. At the nineteenth corner, as he stared into the gutters for lost money, a heavy hand clamped on his shoulder. Syd screeched and stumbled off the curb.

"Syd!"

Syd relaxed at the sight of his foster brother Brett's friendly grin. Brett tucked a cardboard box under his arm, then pumped Syd's hand.

Syd held on a second longer than he should have, soaking up his foster brother's warm affection. After an endless cycle of foster homes, meeting five-year-old Brett had been the only scrap of joy in Syd's miserable life.

Now Brett was twenty, tall and strong and clean in a pressed dress shirt and tie. Brett's freshness always made Syd feel soiled and old at twenty-eight, but damned if he wasn't glad Brett kept his life straight.

"Good thing I came across you, Syd," Brett said. "One of the paralegals quit and Mr. Taylor needs a new messenger. I talked you up to him."

Anyone but Brett offering him a legit job, Syd would've split a gut. For Brett he kept a straight face. "Thanks for thinkin' of me, but I'm still doin' that contractin' work."

"I wish you'd at least talk to Mr. Taylor. He's loaded down with all his returner work."

Returns. Joey Fratantonio. The bubble of pleasure at seeing Brett burst. "I gotta go, kid." Syd pushed off down the street.

"When you gonna have me over to your place?" Brett asked, shadowing Syd. "I deliver to the South Side all the time."

"Soon, kid, soon. Just gotta do a little more fixing up first."

Brett kept pace a few more steps, then leaned down as if to pull Syd into a hug. Syd did a little dance to sidestep him, then leaped off the curb out of reach.

"See ya, kid!" he called out, dodging cars as he crossed the street.

From the safety of the opposite side, Syd watched Brett walk away. He'd die before he'd admit how much he loved his foster brother.

But for three more blocks, he cherished the tiny clean spot in his heart where Brett had touched it. Then the meanness of his soul squelched it out.

* * * *

Joey's ghost was waiting in Syd's armpit of an apartment when Syd got home. Joey drifted from one light socket to the next, poking his misty fingers in. He giggled each time the electricity sparkled up his wavering arm.

Syd ignored him. He pulled a beer from the refrigerator and plopped down at the chipped Formica dinette table. Joey drifted into Syd's kitchen and shoved his head into the fridge.

He pulled his head back out. "The light's not on."

Syd guzzled half his beer. "What you want, Joey?"

"I got myself one of those lawyers. That guy from TV. Mr. Horace Taylor, 1-800-55G-HOST."

"Yeah, yeah, so what?"

"You shouldn't of done me, Syd. Now I gotta get you back."

Syd swallowed the last of his beer. "You ain't got me yet."

"You're gonna fry, Syd. You're gonna cook 'til your eyeballs pop."

The bubbles in the beer burned his throat and his voice quivered. "To hell with you, Joey."

"They're gonna pop!" Joey oozed toward him, passing through the scarred kitchen counter. "Pop, pop, pop!" Suddenly he flickered, fading in and out. "Damn," he said, then was gone.

Syd wished it was for good but he knew better. He set down the beer can with a shaky hand, then wandered into the living room and slapped on the TV. Leaning back on his sagging sofa, he watched as a *Bonanza* rerun gave way to an onslaught of commercials.

The smug face of one of those TV attorneys flashed on the screen. "Returner justice is a complex issue. Mattson Associates have handled dozens of returner cases, many involving only simple fines and no incarceration. Just listen to this."

The lawyer's face cut to that of a fidgety-eyed client. Syd recognized the hollow-cheeked loser as one of Anthony Russo's bottom-of-the-food-chain flunkies.

"When one of them returners fingered me, I thought I was done for. Mr. Matt Mattson took care of things and I didn't have to do no jail time, either."

Matt Mattson's toothy grin reappeared. "Do yourself a favor. Call today."

Syd scrambled off the sofa and grabbed a pen as the number scrolled across the screen. Damn, no paper. He wrote the number on the palm of his hand.

"I got a feeling about this," he said to the empty apartment. "Things is gonna be okay."

* * * *

Matt Mattson's secretary wrinkled her nose as she led Syd to Mattson's office door. Syd took a sniff of his underarms just to be sure. He didn't smell that bad.

Mattson shook Syd's hand like a pansy, then pulled a hanky from his trouser pocket and wiped his palm. Syd swiped his hand on the back of his jeans, then across the front of his shirt for good measure.

"No calls, Miss Smith," Mattson said into his intercom. Then he turned to Syd. "Tell me everything."

Syd laid it all out, from the moment he'd done the deed until now. Mattson kept nodding and scribbling notes on a yellow pad. "Your ghost has a lawyer?"

"Yeah, that 1-800-55G-HOST guy."

Mattson's hand stilled and his blue-eyed gaze narrowed on Syd. "He's hired Taylor?"

"Yeah, the guy from TV," Syd told him. "So, have I got a chance?"

Mattson tapped his pen in rapid staccato. "You're not to reveal to anyone what I tell you here. Not your mother, not your best friend, particularly not your returner. Understood?"

Syd bobbed his head. Tossing his pen aside, Mattson reached behind him and shut the blinds, closing out his sky high view of the city. Then he unlocked his bottom desk drawer and carefully pulled something from it.

He flicked a glance at Syd, then placed what looked like a four-slice toaster on his desk.

Syd nearly laughed. "I got a returner on my back and you wanna make toast?"

Mattson glared at him, then flicked a switch on the bottom of the device. The side panel of the toaster dropped and Syd could see a jumble of circuitry inside.

"The man who developed this is dead," Mattson said. "It's his prototype— no others exist."

Syd bent down to peer into the electronic innards. "But what is it?"

"Call it a... dissolver. A dematerializer."

"A dema-what?"

Mattson snapped the case shut again. "A ghost killer." The lawyer whisked the toaster from his desk and back into the drawer. "This device will make your returner... go away. For good."

"This thing works? You tried it?"

"Several times. It's fail-safe." Mattson leaned back in his chair and locked his fingers across his middle. "My fee is substantial, of course."

The amount he named sucked the air from Syd's lungs. "N-no problem, Mr. Mattson." Maybe he could get Russo to cough it up.

"We'll also need a live body."

Syd gaped. Mattson pulled a gold watch from a vest pocket and swung it from its chain. "The device is not electrically powered. Through a process I do not totally understand, it draws energy from a living spirit. Energy sufficient to blast a returner into oblivion."

“So who we gonna get?”

Mattson’s lips stretched into a smile. “Mr. Taylor will do nicely as our live body.”

Syd’s eyes gogged. “You gonna off one of your own?”

Mattson tucked away his pocket watch. “Let’s just say I’m eliminating the competition.”

“Gotta hand it to you, Mr. Mattson.”

“I’ll call Taylor, tell him I want to set up a deal. We all meet at your apartment. We get your returner, Taylor and the device in the same place at the same time. Poof! Problem solved.”

Syd rocked from toes to heels in anticipation. “Sounds great, Mr. Mattson.”

“I’ll need your fee first. All of it, up front.” Mattson pinned Syd with his sharp blue eyes. “We have to do this fast, Mr. Denton. If Taylor were to find out you’ve come to me... well, let’s just say things might not go your way.”

“I’ll get you the dough, Mr. Mattson. Right away.” Syd thrust his hand out to shake, but Mattson shoved his into his pockets.

The wrinkle-nosed secretary saw him out. As Syd pounded the pavement to Russo’s office, he wondered for the second time that day what he would tell his boss.

* * * *

It was a close thing, but Syd managed to pry the bucks out of Russo. He felt pretty good jogging home with that fat envelope tucked inside his shirt. Even when he found Joey waiting for him.

The ghost melted through him as Syd reached for his ringing phone. Syd shivered from the chill as he cradled the receiver to his ear.

“Yo,” Syd said.

It was Mattson. “All set on this end. You have my fee?”

The light on his answering machine was blinking. Syd reached over to rewind the message. “Yeah, yeah, I got it. What time?”

“Tonight. Six o’clock.”

Syd hung up, then pressed the button to play the message. Joey drifted around the room, passing through walls. Brett’s voice burst from the answering machine, full of enthusiasm.

“Syd, Mr. Taylor says he’ll talk to you. I’m coming out your way, if you’ll just give me your address —”

The message cut off with a fizz of static as Joey sliced a hand through the answering machine. The machine sparked and sizzled, then a curl of acrid smoke rose from its black plastic case.

Syd jerked the cord from the wall and scowled at Joey. “Pop!” Joey said, “pop, pop, pop!” His voice ended on a squeak as he glided off. The ghost was really getting on Syd’s nerves.

Syd patted his shirt to check the envelope. Joey found a new game — dangling from the ceiling. Pretending not to notice, Syd flipped on the TV. Scrunching back in the lumpy sofa cushions, he watched a talk show host interview “Women Who Kill their Husbands — and the Ghosts Who Love Them.” The droning conversation lulled him to sleep.

A sharp rap on the door jarred Syd awake. Scrambling from the sofa, he opened the door a crack to make sure it was Mattson. He let the lawyer in, then scanned the room. Where the hell was Joey?

“Pop!” the ghost squeaked from the living room ceiling and Syd cringed. “Your eyeballs are gonna pop!”

Mattson set a cardboard box onto the sofa and flicked a glance at Joey. “Taylor should be here any minute. Where’s my fee?”

Syd handed Mattson the envelope. The lawyer tucked it away, then slid the toaster from the box. When he placed it on a rickety end table, Joey glided down to take a look. Syd jerked back, sick of having the ghost ooze through his body. Joey passed his wavery hand through the toaster, but when no electricity tickled him, he lost interest and slithered into the kitchen.

Mattson opened the panel and fiddled with the insides. Shutting the case again, he positioned the toaster to face the door.

“The danger zone is from here to here,” he said softly, his arm moving in a semicircle around the device. “We’ll be fine back here. When our live one arrives, we’ll call in your returner. Anywhere in this room, the device will get him.”

Syd stood with Mattson behind the sofa, picking at stuffing that bulged from a hole. Every time he heard footsteps on the stairs, his heart thudded. After three false alarms, he finally heard footsteps reach his landing.

A fist pounded on the door.

“Come in!” Syd called out, then yelled for Joey. The ghost floated into the room.

Mattson slapped a button on the device and they crouched behind the sofa. A sickly green glow shimmered from the toaster. Syd peeked over the sofa back as the door opened.

Brett stood in the doorway with a cardboard box in his hands. As he scanned the room, he reached inside the box and pulled out a steam iron.

“Where is he, Joey?” Brett asked the ghost. “Where’s the guy that did you?”

Stunned, Syd bounded up from behind the sofa. Brett stepped into the room. “Syd?”

Joey swung around to point his wispy finger at Syd. Then they all watched as a rank yellow vapor began to ooze from the iron's steam vents toward Syd.

Syd yelled as the vapor caught him, burning across his flesh. He scrambled for breath as the stinking smoke tweaked his soul, pulling out searing bits like cotton candy. Beside him the toaster flared white-hot, and Joey Fratantonio danced and wiggled, trying to free himself from the green glow.

Then Joey bullied his way inside Syd as the yellow vapor weakened Syd's hold on his body. Joey battled Syd for possession, his spirit pushing Syd's aside. But before Joey could fill the empty space, the green glow loosened his grip and he had to let go. Caught in the green maelstrom, Joey disappeared into oblivion in a gust of wind.

Syd crumpled as the green light faded and the yellow vapor dispersed. He dimly heard the sound of stumbling feet as Mattson scrambled out the door, then another set of footsteps.

"Syd!"

Brett vaulted over the sofa, crying out as he found Syd, nearly gone. Brett cradled his foster brother in his arms.

"Oh, my God, Syd." He squeezed Syd tighter. "Oh, my God."

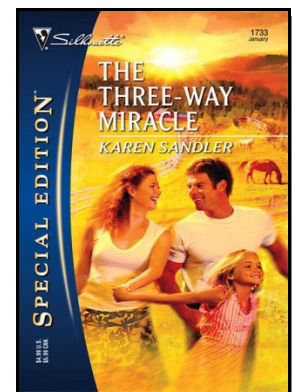
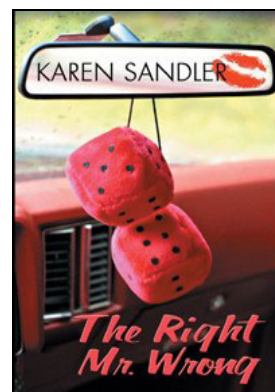
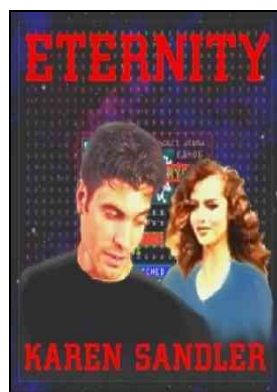
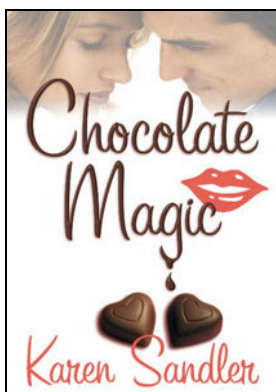
"What did you... how..." Syd managed.

"Mr. Taylor," Brett said, swiping away tears. "He said it was only fair to give the returner back his life. But if I'd known it was you..."

Syd focused on Brett, yearning toward redemption. He scrunched his forehead, searching for words to save his soul.

But the words wouldn't come. In another breath, the last of his life sifted from him. Beyond salvation, Syd "the Kid" Denton followed Joey Fratantonio into oblivion.

THE END



To find more work from the author you can visit her at:
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THE FLIBBERTIGIBBET

SHAUN JEFFREY

Shaun Jeffrey was born in 1965 and lives in Cheshire, England. He grew up in a house in a cemetery, his playground the graveyard where his early reading experience would have come from headstones—perfect grounding for writing dark fiction. A member of the HWA and The British Fantasy Society, his first published novel, *EVILUTION* has received favourable reviews in many publications. He has also had around thirty short stories published in magazines and anthologies, most recently in: *MONSTERS INK*, *SURREAL MAGAZINE* and *SHADOWED REALMS*. For more information, visit: www.shajunjeffrey.com.

“What’s that noise?” Ethan Silverman asked, cocking his head in an attempt to trace the sound.

“That be the Flibbertigibbet, laddie,” the old man said, puffing on his pipe, his deep blue eyes narrowed in consternation as he wrestled to land the small fishing boat at the quayside.

“The what?” Ethan frowned and surveyed the rugged mountains surrounding the remote Scottish village of Nocktully on the island of Inchcullen. The next moment he leaned his head back over the side of the boat, fighting the urge to be sick.

“The Flibbertigibbet.” The old man shook his head. “Ave ye ne’er heard the sayin’, ‘Come ben the hoose and lock yer door, when ye hear the Flibbertigibbet on the moor.’” He winked and laughed.

Ethan shook his head. He was sure the old man was only trying to scare him.

“It sounds a bit like bagpipes,” Ethan said.

“Aye, it’s pipes, but not bagpipes yer can hear.”

Realising that he wasn’t going to get a straight answer out of the old man, Ethan closed his eyes. He was feeling queasy and he was sure his face must look as green as the sea. The captain on the other hand relished the choppy seas. With white hair and beard, he resembled Captain Birdseye, his craggy face testament to the harsh climate.

The water frothed and foamed around the bow like a rabid beast. Seagulls hovered overhead, a choir of noisy angels. Along the coast of the island, the waves battered the rocks into submission and Ethan was grateful when a figure hidden underneath a sou’wester and a thick, black oilskin jacket appeared on the small dock

and helped moor the boat, dragging the ropes over the mooring posts with a vicious looking hooked pole.

Shouldering his bag, Ethan staggered off the boat. It took him a while to get his land legs back and he took a couple of deep breaths. He could smell the sea and the purple heather that clung precariously to the mountainsides. But there was another smell, something unwholesome that the other aromas failed to mask.

He noticed the figure that had helped moor the boat disappearing into one of the small crofters cottages that sat huddled beneath the grey sky, their roofs slick with rain. The sound of the mournful pipes he had heard from the boat suddenly stopped, and Ethan thought he saw a figure on one of the mountains. Narrowing his eyes, he realised that it was just a stag, its antlers like bolts of black lightning against the dramatic backdrop.

“It were nice meeting yer, laddie,” the old man said, laughing as he scurried toward the nearest house and disappeared inside; the sound of a bolt locking the door was ominously loud. When Ethan turned back to look at the mountain, the stag had disappeared, too.

“Silly old bugger,” Ethan whispered. Secretly he was beginning to wonder whether he should have taken this new job. He had only been with the company for two weeks, but it felt a lot longer. If it weren’t for the promise of rapid promotion, he never would have signed the contract. He was supposed to be trying to obtain permission for a local leisure facility—a getaway from the strain of modern life, a place where you could do as much or as little as you wanted.

The management stressed that all new employees had to do their bit for the good of the business, and having been divorced for nearly two years, Ethan had nothing else in his life, so he didn’t mind coming out to this Godforsaken island if it meant a gold star against his name. He was determined to put his heart and soul into his job. The men at the top were all ancient; people like Ethan were the new blood.

If the facility was built, it would boast a whole host of activities to keep the punters happy: tennis courts, swimming pool, sauna, Jacuzzi, gymnasium, shooting, fishing, archery, beauty salon, quad bikes, orienteering, rock climbing, paint ball. The main selling point would be its idyllic location; away from the hustle and bustle—‘paradise is closer than you think’ was going to be the slogan in all the brochures.

Walking along what pretended to be a road, but which was really a rut in the earth that had been compacted by thousands of feet over the millennium, Ethan headed toward what passed as the village pub and guest house. Despite the islands isolated location, the houses all looked neat and tidy with double glazed windows and neatly planted gardens. Ethan knew the neighbouring islands had not fared so well, the islanders having departed for the mainland, but for some reason, the island of Inchcullen seemed to be flourishing.

A sign swung outside the pub, *The Hanging Man*, and it depicted a figure with its entrails hanging out suspended by one leg from the branch of a dead tree. Ethan ducked his head to avoid the low doorframe, and entered the building.

Inside, he was surprised to find the bar richly furnished. Plush purple carpet belied the fact that drink and cigarette ash would soon adorn it, and the tables and chairs all appeared shiny and new. Harsh light above the optics seemed to illuminate the bottles contents with an unnatural hue—the rum looked more like blood.

A middle aged man sat smoking a cigarette in the corner of the room. He was staring out of the small window at the mountains. As Ethan approached, the man turned and exhaled a grey cloud of smoke that swirled and eddied as if it was alive. He smiled, his thin lips almost as narrow as his eyes, the colour of which were indiscernible below the overhanging buttresses of his eyebrows.

“Ye made it then,” he said, grinning salaciously.

Ethan nodded and dropped his bag to the floor, rubbing his shoulder to relieve the strain. “Yes. You must be Duncan Stewart.”

Duncan nodded, the movement almost imperceptible. “Yer friends told me ye were comin’.” He puffed on his cigarette.

“You mean Janet and Trevor. Are they here?”

Duncan shook his head and gestured out of the window. “They’re up yonder mountain. I were beginning to worry that yer wanna goin’ to make it.” He grinned, all teeth and wild red hair.

Ethan frowned. He felt the man’s concern was overly zealous.

Before he could question Duncan further, the mournful sound of the pipes started up again. The sound sent a chill down Ethan’s back and he peered out of the dirty window.

Duncan shook his head. “Well, Jimmy, yer here now.”

“My name’s Ethan, and—”

“Whatever ye say, Jimmy, whatever ye say.”

Irritated by the proprietor’s manner, Ethan said, “Can I have the key to my room.” Normally he would have said please, but in this instance, he didn’t think his host was genial enough to warrant it. Despite knowing he had to win the locals over, he was damned if he was going to kowtow to everyone.

Duncan stubbed his cigarette out. “There aren’t any keys tae the rooms here. Yer at the top of the stairs, first door on the left.” He pointed toward the back of the bar and then struck a match down the wall; the phosphorous glare made his face look skeletal and he lit another cigarette and turned to look back out of the window.

Picking up his bag, Ethan walked through the door indicated and climbed the steep stairs to his room. Although he wasn’t especially tall, he found that he had to duck slightly as the ceiling was low and it made him feel claustrophobic; being in Nocktully felt like being in Toytown. Richly furnished, the room comprised a large

four-poster bed, a dressing table and an en-suite bathroom. The island was not at all what Ethan expected.

The sound of the pipes drifted into the room, haunting and eerie. As he listened, he thought it sounded like someone screaming in pain and he shivered and drew the curtains in an attempt to drown out the noise.

The mountains around Nocktully were steep and precarious. Purple heather stretched to the foot of the mountains, there replaced by scree and towering buttresses. Janet Clark and Trevor Smyth sat on a large, flat rock and admired the sweeping vista. Far below, the sea frothed and foamed around the island.

“I’ll say one thing,” Trevor said, “it’s certainly beautiful up here.”

“A bit too remote though, don’t you think?” Janet said, running a hand through her damp, long black hair.

Trevor shrugged. “After the hustle and bustle of the city, I think our prospective vacationers will love it.” He picked something out of his white teeth and flicked it away.

Fastening her yellow Gortex coat against the elements, Janet hugged herself to keep warm. Personally, she wouldn’t pay good money to come to a place like this, not when for the same amount she could relax on a tropical beach.

But it was her job to sell the place; to make sure that the people intending to come to Nocktully were going to have a good time, so she was going to do her best to find things to write a good report about. Her new job depended on it. Although she didn’t know Trevor very well, she knew he had a position of authority within the company, so she had to prove herself to him and show willing.

Cupping his hands, Trevor blew into them. “Damn, it’s cold though,” he said.

“In the brochure the cold will translate into ‘a brisk air guaranteed to rid the lungs of the smell of the city’.”

“You’d make a good estate agent.”

“No one’s perfect.” They both laughed, but the mirth was cut short as a haunting wail drifted down from the summit of the mountain.

Janet felt as if the sound penetrated her bones and she shivered, her brown eyes wide and alert as she surveyed the rocks.

Trevor stood up and peered toward the summit. “There it is again. Do you think someone’s in trouble?”

She shook her head. They had heard the haunting cry twice already today, once from the boat on the journey to the island, and then about half an hour ago, and although she didn’t voice it, she felt afraid. There was something unnatural about the sound.

“Do you want to see what’s making it then?” Trevor asked, looking toward the summit of the mountain.

Janet almost choked. She coughed to clear her throat. “I don’t think so.”

“Where’s your spirit of adventure?”

“Have you seen how steep that mountainside is? And if you think I’m going to give you a piggyback when you fall and sprain your ankle—”

“You’re not scared, are you?”

Before Janet could reply, a spattering of stones tumbled from the summit. Janet watched them skitter over the rocks and come to rest near her feet and her heart did a quick summersault. Looking down at them, she suddenly realised they weren’t stones at all—they were bones, tiny skulls that might have been mice or voles.

“Jesus,” she squealed, tucking her legs up and wrapping her arms around them protectively.

Trevor crouched down and picked up one of the skulls. It was about the size of his thumb, and as white as snow. “It’s only a bone,” he said, holding it out for Janet to see.

Janet shook her head. “Thank you, but I don’t want it near me.” She looked up at the summit, about a hundred feet away. “Where the hell did they come from?”

“Perhaps there’s an eyrie up there.”

“A what?”

“You know, an eagles nest. Perhaps the mother was doing a bit of house clearing.”

Although it was a good explanation, Janet wasn’t convinced. She thought it was more eerie than eyrie. “Let’s get out of here,” she said, jumping down from the rock.

“Not yet,” Trevor said, shaking his head. “This is perfect. Just think. If there is an eagle’s nest up there, the tourists would love it. Let’s climb up and have a look.”

“*Climb up!* I’m not Spiderman. Have you seen how steep that rock is?”

“Piece of cake.”

“Well, I’m not going up there.”

Trevor grinned. “Just wait here then, I won’t be long.”

As Trevor walked away, Janet exhaled a nervous sigh. She watched him clamber over the scree, his red coat making him easy to spot and then he disappeared into a gap between two large boulders. She hoped he didn’t hold her lack of enthusiasm against her. She needed to keep this job. With unemployment at an all time high, she knew there were hundreds of people willing to take her place. As she nervously waited for him to reappear, rain started to fall, splattering the rocks like drops of blood and she had to shield her eyes with the flat of her hand to stop the rain stinging her.

Where the hell was he?

As the rain fell, the wind picked up. It tugged at her coat, whipping the lapels across her cheeks.

Ominous clouds were gathering overhead, and although it was only midday, darkness descended. Left on her own, Janet's heart beat faster. She could feel the blood pumping through her veins. Something moved near the summit and she saw something dark scamper between the rocks. Her breath hitched in her throat. A nervous twitch made her left eyelid flutter. That tropical beach was looking more enticing by the minute. Small rocks skittered down the mountain, but she was too afraid to look at them in case it was more bones cast by a fanciful shaman.

She kept her eyes trained on the mountain, looking for the telltale red coat that Trevor was wearing.

Her palms were sweating and she was having palpitations that wasn't helped by the high altitude.

She considered shouting for him, but fear had glued her mouth—the consequences of not receiving a reply were too terrifying to contemplate. What if something had happened to him? She was being stupid, but she couldn't help it. Fear conjured fervent thoughts.

Calm down, she thought. Breathe. Nice deep breaths.

Where was he?

As if in response to her thought, she saw a flash of red coming toward her through the darkness and she relaxed slightly. But then she realised that the red glimmer she had seen wasn't scrambling down the rocks—it was flying through the air. She let out a little squeal and stumbled back as the object landed with a splat on the rock where she had been sitting. At first she thought it was Trevor's coat. But it wasn't. Purple steaming entrails slopped over the rocks.

Janet screamed, but the mournful wail of the pipes drowned out her cries.

Ethan cocked his head and listened. He was sure he had heard a scream that was more intense than the pipes that drowned it out.

He looked at his watch. It was three thirty. Where were Janet and Trevor? They knew he would be here by now. He had sent word that he had missed the train and that they would have to travel to the island without him, and that he would be with them a couple of hours later, so he expected them to be here by now; they had a lot of work to do.

As he walked down to the bar, the mournful tune died away. Duncan still sat by the window, the scene it framed now blurred by rain.

"Have my associates come back yet?" Ethan asked.

Duncan puffed on his cigarette and then turned to face Ethan. "Did ye hear that, Jimmy? That wus the sound of the Flibbertigibbet celebratin'."

"Look, I asked a reasonable question, and I expect a reasonable reply."

Duncan snorted loudly. "Ye damn fool Sassenach."

Ethan could feel himself growing angry and he took a deep breath. He had begun to hate the generic Jimmy title ascribed to him; being called a Sassenach seemed even worse. He found it a bit demeaning. "If you've got something to say, then—"

The door crashed open with a resounding crack and a playful wind entered the bar and tussled Ethan's hair. Then Janet stumbled through the door, her face ashen.

Ethan reached her in two strides and caught her before she collapsed. "Good God. Janet, what's happened? Janet, can you hear me?" She looked as if she had aged twenty years in the couple of days since he had last seen her, and he noticed grey streaks in her hair that he was sure weren't there before. How old was she, thirty-three? He remembered thinking how attractive she was when they were introduced a couple of days ago, but now she looked haggard. Sitting her on a chair, he looked across at Duncan who hadn't moved.

"Get her a drink," he ordered. "Brandy."

Duncan shook his head and laughed as he walked toward the bar where he poured a small glass of brandy from a bottle.

Ignoring him, Ethan turned back to Janet. He stroked her cheek. She was freezing and her lips were blue. "Where's Trevor? Janet, can you hear me?"

"Flibbertigibbet," she mumbled.

"What, say that again," Ethan said.

"It got him."

"What got him?" Ethan frowned.

"Flibbertigibbet."

She wasn't making any sense.

Duncan placed the tumbler of brandy on the table and returned to his seat in the corner, reminding Ethan of a sentry.

Janet downed the drink in one and then sat shivering.

Whirling on Duncan, Ethan said, "What the *hell's* going on here?"

"The Flibbertigibbet."

"Bullshit. This Flibber whatever doesn't exist. What have you people done with Trevor?"

Duncan laughed without humour. "The Flibbertigibbet must be hungry."

"Listen to him," Janet whispered, her eyes wide with terror. "We've got to get away from here."

"I'll not be chased away by superstitious nonsense and lies."

Janet grabbed his arm and squeezed with surprising strength, making Ethan wince. "We've got to go. *Now.*"

Duncan grinned, revealing a mouth of misshapen teeth "Partial tae a bit of Sassenach it is." He laughed, the sound falling as flat as the joke.

Ethan felt like punching Duncan, but he had never hit anyone in his life. Whatever was going on here, he was going to leave them to it. He knew the company would want their pound of flesh, but he would inform them that the island of Inchcullen was not appropriate for their plans. He would find somewhere else himself for their leisure facility if he had to, but he was damned if it was going to be here.

Without even bothering going upstairs to fetch his bag, he helped Janet to her feet and led the way down to the small dock. Despite the cry of the wind, he could hear the mournful tune. It sounded closer than when he had heard it before and he kept nervously glancing around. The atmosphere was depressing, and shackled by the gloomy clouds, the island was in darkness. Without a proper street, there weren't even any streetlights to illuminate the path, and on more than one occasion, he tripped. His heart was racing. He could feel his temples pounding with unease. It was all he could do to stop himself running. He imagined Duncan laughing to himself and he felt a twinge of anger.

"Where's Trevor?" he asked as they walked.

"He's dead," Janet wailed.

Ethan shook his head. "He can't be dead. They're just trying to scare us." He didn't want to leave an important member of the company on the island because that wouldn't go down well with the management at all. "Where did you last see him?"

Janet pointed at the mountains. "Up there ... somewhere."

"Great," Ethan said, realising that Trevor could be anywhere.

The small boat that had transported him to the island was still moored at the dock. It rose and fell in the swell and he could hear wood creaking. Tyres suspended over the sides of the boat cushioned it from the dock.

Hurrying to the house Captain Birdseye had entered, he banged on the door.

"Who is it?" a muffled voice inquired.

"It's Ethan Silverman—you brought me to the island earlier."

"What ye want?"

"I need taking back to the mainland."

Captain Birdseye laughed. "So ye aint deid yet then."

"Of course I'm not dead you stupid idiot." He couldn't help but get angry.

"It wanna be long now," the captain said, his voice growing fainter as he retreated from the door.

Ethan pounded against the wood until his fists were sore, but he realised it was useless. Captain Birdseye wasn't going to answer.

Well, sod him, sod them all. He looked at the boat bobbing in the waves. "Come on, Janet. If he won't take us, I will."

Janet hesitated. "Can you sail?"

"I can drive a car. It must be similar. Besides, would you rather we stay here with the madmen?"

Janet emphatically shook her head.

“Well, come on then.”

Large waves buffeted the quayside, salt spray stinging Ethan’s eyes and blurring his vision. The sound of the mournful pipes was closer still. He could hear the tone above the roar of the wind and waves and he looked around, frantic to trace the source when he saw a figure in red hurtling toward them.

Janet screamed, and Ethan almost followed suit.

“Hold on,” the approaching figure shouted. “Wait.”

“It’s Trevor,” Janet said, her voice revealing her shock.

As Trevor approached, he had the hood of his red jacket up against the elements.

“I thought ... I thought you were dead,” Janet said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Silly woman,” Trevor said, pulling his hood back. “That was just a sheep. The Flibbertigibbet doesn’t just feed on company employees you know, and as you wouldn’t accompany me it had to eat something.”

Ethan wasn’t sure he had heard right. He frowned and a sickly feeling gurgled in his stomach.

“Hold on a minute—“

“No, Ethan, it’s you that has to hold on.” He turned and looked back the way he had come. “Ah, here he comes. Frightful things these pagan Gods. Think they have all the time in the world.”

Ethan peered through the salt spray at an approaching figure and the sick feeling rose to his throat.

Dressed in a kilt of flesh adorned with a sporran of skulls, the Flibbertigibbet sauntered toward them. It had large horns sticking out of its head like a stag and its features were thin and drawn, its eyes glowing white—it looked like a perverse demon. A shawl of flesh and fur was draped across its shoulder and it carried what looked like a sack made from flesh and bone underneath its arm that it pumped, blowing into one of the bones to create the horrendous, mournful tune.

“Why?” he stammered, staring at Trevor. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing or seeing and his legs went weak.

“To get ahead in business, you have to have an edge, an advantage over your competitors. This is ours; we’ve revived a pagan God, and in return for the odd sacrifice, he makes sure our company succeeds.”

Janet screamed and backed away.

“Don’t worry my dear,” Trevor said. “I’m sure it won’t be too painful. Just think of it as helping the company.”

“Fuck the company,” Ethan snarled.

Without hesitating, he ducked his head and charged Trevor like a bull, hearing a satisfying grunt as he struck his foe's stomach.

Winded by the blow, Trevor staggered back and the sound of the hideous pipes suddenly stopped. The Flibbertigibbet took the bone mouthpiece out of its mouth and bared its sharp teeth. It snarled.

"Fuck you too," Ethan snarled back. Although terrified, he wasn't going to die on this shitty little island so that a corporation could make more money from their unholy pact with the devil.

Spying the long pole that the man had used to moor the boat with leaning against the wall, Ethan grabbed it. The wooden shaft felt slippery, and he tightened his grip and turned to face the Flibbertigibbet.

"If you want me, come and get me," he growled, levelling the point of the pole at the demonic form.

The Flibbertigibbet opened its mouth wide, tilted its head back and laughed. Ethan was shocked. The monster's reaction scared him more than if it had growled or charged.

"You pathetic piece of shit," Trevor spat, standing upright and rubbing his stomach. "You'll pay for that."

"*Fuck you,*" Ethan roared, pointing the end of the shaft at Trevor and hurtling toward him.

Trevor's expression metamorphosed into a look of fear. He attempted to move aside, but he was too slow. Ethan rammed the shaft into Trevor's stomach. There was a slight resistance as the point of the shaft smashed through Trevor's ribs, but after that, it was unimpeded and he forced Trevor back, putting all of his strength behind the thrust. Trevor gargled, blood spluttering from his mouth.

"If you're hungry, how about a human kebab," Ethan said, pushing Trevor toward the Flibbertigibbet and letting go of the pole.

Without waiting around to see what the Flibbertigibbet did next, he grabbed Janet's hand and forced her onto the boat. Quickly removing the ropes from the moorings, he jumped aboard, almost slipping on the deck as he ran to the cabin. Luckily, the key was still in the ignition and he turned it, the engine spluttering into life. Pushing the throttle, the boat lurched forward, colliding with the dock. High waves battered the side of the boat, and using all his strength, he turned the helm, steering the vessel out into the harsh sea.

Wave after wave battered the boat and Ethan struggled to hold the vessel on a straight course. Salt spray obscured the cabin window and he flicked a switch, hoping that it would operate the wiper, but instead it cast a beam of light like a net across the tempestuous waves.

Before he had time to try another switch, he heard a scream. Janet. His heartbeat went into overdrive and he tried to peer through the spray-soaked window.

Large waves crashed over the bow, trying to submerge the boat and he wrestled to keep the vessel heading away from Inchcullen.

“Janet, are you OK?” Ethan shouted. As another wave slapped the vessel, he almost lost his footing. He felt sick. His stomach was doing cartwheels.

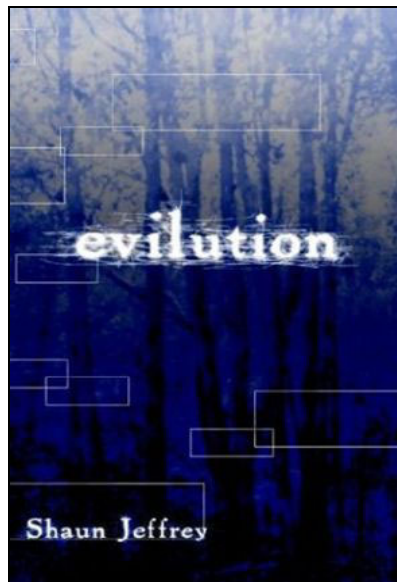
Something smacked the window, cracking the glass and Ethan jumped. Illuminated by the searchlight on the cabin, the sea looked red like bubbling lava, and it took him a moment to realise that the window was covered with blood. He opened his mouth, wanted to scream, but he couldn't because he knew that if he started, he would never stop.

Something smacked the glass at his side and he glanced across, horrified to see what was left of Janet's face, the skin ripped from her skull and now stuck to the glass like a macabre stamp. Empty sockets in the flesh showed where her eyes had been, now gory windows on the hostile sea.

Ethan couldn't understand what was happening. And then above the roar of the waves, he heard the pipes. The Flibbertigibbet was on board the boat, playing its mournful tune on the gruesome bagpipes.

The company was about to get its pound of flesh.

THE END



To find more work from the author you can visit him at:
www.shaunjeffrey.com

WITH MURDEROUS INTENT

K.G. MCABEE

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My companions were insistent. I would go to the desired location, willy-nilly. They would not leave my side until we stood with our destination before us. One, the largest, used the hilt of his sword to bang upon the door, creating an impressive cacophony against the thick wood. Still, it was necessary, to be heard over the noise from within.

“Major Andru, how delightful!”

In the doorway stood a charming lady, dressed in the height of fashion: tight breeches, tighter vest, a tunic with flowing sleeves thick with lace, high heeled shoes with jeweled buckles, all in varying shades of gold. It contrasted magnificently with her flaming copper hair.

I looked over the elegant throng swirling at her back, looked down at my own attire.

Brown riding breeches and an old vest. A shirt which had once been white and dusty boots.

“Your pardon, my lady,” I bowed. “I received his majesty’s summons just as I arrived home and did not stop to change.”

I reminded myself to reprimand King Benedict later, in a polite subject-to-monarch kind of way, for sending his henchmen after me without orders that they allow me to dress in the proper mode.

“I had no idea,” I continued, at my most engaging, “that I was being invited to such a gala, or I assure you, I would never have appeared thus.”

Not that I had had much choice. When three burly guardsmen, all heavily armed, arrive at one’s door, one would do well to accompany them.

The lady smiled and dismissed the matter of my attire from our conversation.

“I am merely having a few friends here to amuse his majesty,” she continued as we waded our way through the throng and my erstwhile companions disappeared behind the closed door.

I wondered what her name was, and if she were Benedict's latest passion. Looking at her from the corner of my eye, I didn't doubt it in the least. Tall and buxom, it seemed that the material of her vest would soon give up the unequal battle and allow the treasures within to escape.

"Might I ask my hostess' name?" I inquired in my politest tones.

"Oh, I am sorry, Major, I thought you knew. I am Syrilla, Lady Carstairs." She smiled; the same enchanting smile, no doubt, which had captured Benedict. I had often warned him of his susceptibility.

Useless, of course. King Benedict had only just acquired his throne, through great travail by himself and others, and he wished to catch up on lost time.

I couldn't blame him.

Although I often caught myself trying.

Lady Syrilla led me through the crowd in a purposeful manner, her eyes seeking for someone amongst the throng.

I wondered what Benedict wanted this time.

You wonder, no doubt, why I am so free with the name of my liege and monarch. To be sure, I never call him so in public. But since I was one of the ones responsible for gaining him his throne, I felt I deserved the right to call him what I will in the safety of my own mind.

Not that he would mind. Or I don't think he would. He remembers where he came from, and who helped him.

Sometimes

The Lady Syrilla procured me a large glass of wine from a passing servant with a tray. I gulped it down—nothing gives one a thirst like being forced to attend a gala at the point of three swords, I find—and gave the glass back to him as we continued our voyage.

"Er, my lady, what exactly did—" I began, just as we reached a knot of people near the terrace doors.

"There he is," she whispered, "see him there?"

I saw him. Who could miss him? Benedict had always had flashy tastes, but little coin to indulge them. Now he had the coin and the tastes seem to have burgeoned like a weed.

He looked like a peacock in a garden of tulips. Everyone around him wore single colors (it was the fashion just now, I had heard) but he, being the king, had broken this fashion rule in the gaudiest manner possible. Red and emerald, gold and turquoise, silver lace here and black lace there; it gave one quite a headache just to look at him.

He turned and saw me with Lady Syrilla, favored her with what he must have thought was a secret smile. In other words, he ogled her like a satyr.

"Andru!" roared my lord and king. "You took your own damn time getting here."

I bowed with respect. “Your pardon, majesty. I was out when the kind invitation from Lady Syrilla came,”—I thought it best not to mention precisely where I had been—, “and only returned when your servants reached my door.”

I finished off with a dirty look, and I meant it to sting, by the gods.

Benedict gave one of his predatory grins, his face splitting wide, teeth gleaming in its sunburned mask.

“No matter, no matter,” he said, with a bit less volume—but not much less. “You are here at last.” He motioned for another glass and the Lady Syrilla took one from a passing tray and handed it to him.

“Thank you indeed, my lady,” he murmured in what I suppose he thought were dulcet tones; they sounded more like a booming cannon. “Andru, I have summoned you here to meet someone, but I don’t see her,” and he looked about him in dismay. “Aye, she seems to have disappeared.”

I sighed. Benedict spent an inordinate amount of time flitting from affair to affair, and always seemed to wish his friends to accompany him on his journeys. He could never understand why I preferred to travel alone, as it were.

“Majesty,” I said, “doubtless I would—”

“Ah, there she is,” boomed Benedict, motioning behind my back towards the tall doors to the terrace. “Come, Madren, he’s here at last. Come and greet an old friend.”

It seemed to take forever for me to turn around. And in that endless time, a thousand thoughts and feelings ran through my mind. Regrets, memories, anticipations, fears.

My last thought was that, of course, it could not be her. She was dead.

But it was.

Apparently, the news of her death had failed to reach her.

She stood in the doorway to the terrace, dressed in black. I had asked her many times, in the old days, why she always wore black. Every time I asked, I got a different answer.

Slim black breeches tucked into sleek high boots. An inky shirt under a brocaded vest.

Her hair was a darker amber than I remembered, but her eyes were the same grey—a grey of stormy skies, a grey of old coins, a grey of weathered stone.

And she wore a sword. She always wore a sword—and various other blades, secreted about her person, although where she managed to secret them all I had never dared to inquire.

Madren Savage.

Madren the Savage, some called her.

Once commander of King Theobades’ guard. Then on his death, chief assassin for the usurper Damion. Finally, when Benedict appeared after all had thought him

dead, she switched her allegiance to the rightful heir and helped us to put him back on his throne.

She was without a doubt the most dangerous person I had ever met.

She had also been my lover, my best friend, my life.

And the woman I thought I had killed.

“Hallo, Andru,” Madren nodded. If there was joy at the sight of me, she hid it well.

“Well, Andru?” shouted Benedict behind me. “Lost your tongue? Or your mind, man?”

I walked toward her. It was the longest walk of my life.

I stopped a few feet away. She lifted her head slightly to look me in the eye, but only very slightly, as she came near to matching my own uncommon height.

I heard nothing else in that huge room full of people, no other sound, no other movement. But I could hear her breathing speed up as she looked at me.

It was not desire, I knew, unless perhaps the desire to murder me.

I wanted to watch her hand, see if it decided to draw her sword and run me through, but I was afraid to take my eyes from hers.

I smiled, held out my hand, trying to keep her right hand in the corner of my eye.

It wouldn't do much good, I knew. I had seen her kill, quickly, elegantly, and without remorse. I had no sword, no way of protecting myself.

And she had to be angry with me.

Would not you be?

“Madren,” I nodded, hoping she wouldn't kill me yet, not before I had a chance to explain.

“Hah,” shouted Benedict, “he remembers her name, at least!”

Madren looked down at my hand. At that instant, I knew exactly what was in her mind. I have no magic powers, I am not a trained adept, but I knew it without a doubt.

She was seeing my hand with the knife in it, just before it plunged into her belly.

She looked back up at my face. She made no move to hold out her own hand.

“Come, come, this won't do,” said Syrilla. She was behind me, but I had not heard her move. “Old friends must not meet again this way, not in my house.”

She moved beside us, took Madren's hand in one of hers, mine in the other.

“Please don't disappoint his majesty,” she whispered. “He has so few pleasures, you know.”

She placed Madren's hand in mine.

The shock of physical contact was unexpected. I hadn't thought to feel such a jolt at the mere touch of her hand.

Madren smiled. To anyone who didn't know her, it would have seemed almost natural.

“How good to see you again, Andru,” she said as she pulled me to her and put her arms about me. My mouth was near to her ear.

“Please don’t kill me,” I whispered, hugging her as tightly as I dared.

She murmured in my ear, so low that even I wasn’t sure I heard.

“Whyever not?”

I felt cold, but I was sweating like a hard-ridden steed.

I waited for the inevitable.

And waited.

Finally, Benedict shouted from behind me, “All right, all right, enough of that. Let the rest of us see you together at long last.”

I stood back from her, glad to be alive. I admit, I did sneak a look down at my belly, just to make sure, you understand. Sometimes, shock can make one feel nothing for a time.

But I was unharmed.

For now.

Suddenly the room was filled with people again. I know, they had been there all along, but to me they had just reappeared.

And not a one of them knew just how close to death I had been.

Benedict ambled up, put his meaty arms around us both.

“How glad I am to see the two of you here,” he rumbled. “Madren, back with us again, after all this time. Where have you been, what have you been up to? Andru, were you surprised? Of course you were, who would not be? We thought you might be dead, Madren, dead and lost to us, after all we owe you.”

“Indeed, majesty?”

Her voice was cool, cool and calm. Only I could know how dangerous she was when she sounded like that—I and some dozens of corpses. I chanced another look at her face, hoping for one of her crooked grins, one eyebrow cocked up.

She smiled at Benedict, nodded to the Lady Syrilla.

“I thank your ladyship for the invitation,” she murmured. “I confess, I did not expect such a welcome.”

“And you shouldn’t get it, either,” boomed Benedict. “Staying away for so long, just so I would not be able to show my gratitude, I’ll swear! Why did you do it, damn you?”

Madren looked at me.

“It was . . . unavoidable, sire. But now that I am here, I promise I shall stay. For a while, at least. I have some unfinished business to take care of.”

I saw her hand brush against the hilt of her sword. I had seen her do that same motion a thousand times.

Benedict grinned his feral grin.

So had he.

“So, we can expect an untimely death, can we?” He turned us loose and grabbed the Lady Syrilla instead. “My dearest, Madren can kill without warning, without sound, without mercy. If not for her and Andru here, and some few others, I would still be wandering in the hills, trying to escape from Damion’s troops. I owe them more than I can say.”

I had never expected to hear him admit it.

“Then I owe them twice that, majesty,” said Syrilla gracefully. “My house is yours,” she continued to us, “and doubtless such old friends would like to spend some time alone. I will have a servant show you to a private room and bring you wine and food.”

“I would take that as most kind, my lady,” Madren nodded. “Andru and I do have a great deal to discuss.”

Her silver eyes were as cold as the distant moon, and the tone of her voice matched them.

Benedict and Syrilla accompanied us to the private room, along with a parade of servants bearing every conceivable delicacy on golden trays—and a great deal of wine.

It looked as though my last meal would be a hearty one.

If I got to eat it.

The room was paneled in dark wood, the windows hung with heavy draperies of deep blue. Rich rugs covered the floor. There was a fresh fire crackling in the hearth and two comfortable chairs were drawn up before it.

All in all, I decided, it was as good a place to die in as any.

“You will not be disturbed tonight,” said Syrilla as she glanced around to see if anything had been forgotten. “This room is very quiet, and the noise from the party can’t even be heard.”

“Aye, neither can any noise from here be heard in the rest of the house,” roared Benedict with a great laugh. “I can assure you of that. There is, I believe, a bedroom through that door, isn’t there, my lady?” He closed an eye in a broad wink at Lady Syrilla, who smiled back.

“Who told you that, sire?” she asked as they walked from the room, followed by the servants.

The click of the latch on the door echoed like a cannon in the still room.

I thought my best course of action would be to act as bravely as possible. Madren always had a weak spot for bravery in others.

I dropped to one knee before her, clasped my hands together and begged for my life.

“Please don’t kill me.”

But I said it with as much bravery as I could manage.

“Andru, don’t be absurd. It would make a terrible mess and upset our hostess. Of course I won’t kill you here. Get up and pour us some wine.”

I felt better, but not much. I struggled to my feet and did as she asked.

Perhaps if I could get her drunk, I could—? No, now I was getting desperate. As if I already weren’t.

I handed her a glass of Syrilla’s excellent wine. I hoped I’d get to drink all of it that I wanted.

She drank it off as if it were water, then looked at me for the first time since we had entered the room. She turned the glass thoughtfully in her long clever fingers as she examined my face.

“You look frightened, Andru. As frightened as I was, the night you stabbed me.”

The glass shattered in her hand. The sound cut through my head as sharply as the shards cut into her skin.

She didn’t even notice the blood. She never took her eyes from me, waited for me to speak.

I opened my mouth, curious as to what might come out.

“You’re bleeding,” I said. Not too clever, I admit, but do better in a similar situation, if you can.

She looked down, opened her hand. She shook it once and all the slivers of glass flew into the fire, sizzling as drops of blood and wine hit the leaping flames.

She held her hand out, close to my face. I stared at the cuts, heard her muttering some nonsense gibberish.

The cuts healed as I watched them, closed over and turned the pink-white of new scars.

“You’re an adept,” I sighed, wondering why I had never suspected it, realizing how much it explained.

She nodded once, dropped her hand. I saw her old crooked grin; one side of her mouth in on the joke, the other left out.

“Yes, I am. Or was, rather. I was . . . asked to leave the Assembly of Orders. It seems that my attitudes and theirs did not match. My training *has* come in useful from time to time, however.”

I drained my own glass, feeling sick, then set it down on a small table and sank into a chair.

Madren, in that fluid motion which I had always admired and could never match, drew her sword. The tip hovered between my eyes, scant inches away.

I gripped the arms of the chair, swallowed around the lump in my throat.

I’m good with a sword. I’ve had to be. But she’s better. It had been the sheerest luck that had allowed me to take her life.

Luck, and the fact that she had trusted me.

I watched the tip of the sword, eyes crossed painfully. I could feel a bead of sweat run down my chin, hang there for a second, then drop off as though it were trying to escape from the inevitable.

Then she tossed the sword onto the hearth rug and sat down in one easy motion, tossing one long leg up over the arm of the chair. The sleek black boot gleamed in the flickering light.

“Perhaps that will make you more comfortable?” she asked, right leg swinging like a pendulum.

I let my breath out. I hadn’t even realized that I had been holding it. I wiped my hand over my forehead. It came away wet.

“If your plan is to frighten me to death, you’ve nearly accomplished it.” I could hear my voice shaking.

“My plan, my dear Andru, is to find out exactly why you wished to kill me.”

“And then?”

“And then kill *you*, of course. How else can I keep you from trying again?”

Madren’s logic is always impeccable.

I relaxed, just a bit. I felt that I had a few more moments of life, at least. And if I could convince her of my true reasons for my murderous attack, maybe more than a few.

“You may not believe it,” I began, “but when I saw you just now, back from the dead, it was the happiest moment of my life.” “You’re right. I don’t believe you,” she said, the motion of her leg stopping for a second, then resuming. “In fact, it’s going to be near impossible for me to believe anything you say.”

“But it’s true, nonetheless. I never wanted to harm you. I haven’t been able to forget you, you and what we had together,” I said, hoping she’d remember what those times were like as well as I did.

“Andru. Don’t make me angrier by recalling those times. Don’t rely on my tender feelings to save your life. As you know better than most, I don’t have any. Just tell me why you did it.” She remembered, all right.

I felt like Sheherhezade, who told tales to keep her head intact. If my story was good enough, Madren would let me live. But I didn’t think I had a thousand nights to perfect my story. Maybe not even one.

So I might as well satisfy my own curiosity.

“How long did it take you to recover from the—” I hesitated.

“Knife in my belly? Why, planning another?” she laughed, if something so sharp and bitter can be called such.

“Push my luck again? I don’t think so,” I replied, shaking my head. “I just wondered if it had been—how painful it had been.”

“Very,” she snapped. “It took all the powers I had, simply to stay alive until some friends I had left from the Assembly could help me recover. The ride to their tower was—” she paused, her face blank, her eyes stormy, “—difficult.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I didn’t like to think of that ride, of her holding herself together while she desperately sought help. I didn’t like to think of what she must have thought of me. “Sorry,” I repeated, my mind full of that vision.

“Are you really?”

Madren jerked to her feet, walked to the table and poured us more wine. She handed me a glass, sat back down.

“The reason, Andru, if you please,” she sipped her wine. “I grow tired of this. I want to get it settled and get away from here.”

I sighed, looked into the depths of the wine. It was the pale yellow wine of Shirrene, one of my favorites.

It seemed apt, somehow.

We had shared a bottle on the night I had killed her.

I began softly, “I received a message from one of my most trusted —”

“Spies?” she interrupted, her tone harsh.

I laughed.

“It’s what I do, you know. I’m not ashamed of it, any more than you are of being an assassin.”

Madren smiled in return.

“Hard to be anything else, working for Damion. Let us accept our occupations and go on, shall we? What message did you receive?”

I wondered if she would believe me. Probably not. It must be difficult to trust a man who has stabbed you in the belly after making love to you.

Disconcerting. Not conducive to a healthy relationship.

“I received a message that you were still working for Damion, in secret.”

“You believed that?” she asked in amazement. “After everything else, you believed that?”

“No,” I admitted, careful not to let her see my eyes as I sipped my wine. “I did not believe it. But to hear it from him, I realized that someone believed it, and enough to harm our plans.”

“So you killed me, to protect our plans?” she asked with a rueful smile.

“I realized,” I went on, ignoring her statement, “that someone was trying to ruin what was perhaps our last opportunity to put and keep Benedict on his rightful throne. We had all fought for it so hard, so long, that I did not feel I could take a chance. I did not feel you would wish for me to take a chance, either. So I investigated.”

“And found?”

She didn’t believe anything I had said so far. I could tell.

“Nothing,” I admitted. “No one knew anything about it, no one had heard anything. From what I could see, you were precisely what you said you were. Benedict’s champion. My friend.”

She laughed, sharp and biting. “So you tried to kill me anyway? Merely for the pleasure of it, I assume.”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. A memory rose before my mind’s eye, so suddenly, so intensely, that I could feel the knife yet again as it plunged into her, see the shock in her eyes as she looked down, realized what I had done.

And my own shock at what I had accomplished, at who I had done it to.

I had murdered my best friend, my lover.

“I have never been able to trust anyone,” I began, “least of all the adepts of Malmillard —”

“Malmillard!” she interrupted in disgust, sitting up in the chair where she had flung herself.

I nodded. “But when one of them arrived at my quarters late one night, I found that I had no choice. No, no choice at all”

* * * *

“Captain.”

The adept was dressed in flowing silken robes, of a red so dark that it seemed black in the light cast by the sliver of setting sun. A shaved head rose from the silks like the naked stalk of some poisonous fungus, growing out of the dried blood of a murdered man.

Andru shook himself, wondering where such melodramatic thoughts had come from. He could not tell if the adept was a man or a woman—those of the Order of Malmillard rejected all gender identification when they took their vows. It was even whispered that the women sliced off their breasts and the men—

Andru shuddered in the chill wind that blew through the open door and tickled his neck with icy fingers.

The adept smiled, showing long white teeth with the tip of a red tongue captive between them.

“Well, captain? Are you going to allow me inside? Or shall we conduct our business here, at your door, for all to see and hear?”

Andru did not want to admit the adept, but he knew that he must. He had received a message from one of his most trusted spies, to expect a visitor with important information concerning the lies that were circulating about Madren Savage.

He knew they were lies. But he had to be sure.

“Come,” he said, his tone noncommittal and anything but welcoming.

The adept entered with a sweep of silk that brushed against Andru's arm. Suppressing another shudder, Andru closed the door and shot the bolt, then turned to his uninvited guest.

"What do you have for me?" he asked, straining to keep the unease from his tone.

An odd sinuous twisting motion warped through the silken form, followed by a faint laugh.

"Are we to stand here in the hallway, then, as though I were a servant you were reprimanding? Your study is this way, I believe."

Andru stood amazed when the adept turned as if familiar with the way—and proceeded up the curving stairs that mounted to the tower study, Andru's private retreat.

Shaking his head, Andru followed, staying well clear of the sweep of blood-hued silk as though it could contaminate him in some way.

The adept paused at the top of the stairway, outside the only door on the tiny landing, and turned with a deep and overblown bow.

"How kind of you to bring me to your private study instead of having our little chat in the rooms where you meet your . . . associates," murmured the adept. "I fear that my words will not please you. At least you will have the comfort of your books around you."

For one brief instant Andru paused, his hand on the latch, wondering if he truly wished to know what the adept had come to tell him. But it was his responsibility, his duty to find out what threatened his liege lord and if this man—woman?—could tell him more of the rumored plot against Benedict, then he was determined to hear of it.

Andru opened the door to his private study and entered, rude in his anxiety, before his unbidden guest. He caught himself just inside the door and turned, waved his companion in with as much grace as he could muster. The adept swept in with a flicker of smile and floated toward the two chairs before the small fireplace. Sinking into one, he nodded at Andru.

"Your retreat is delightful," the adept murmured, flicking a red tongue over a redder upper lip.

Andru found himself still at the open door, wide-eyed at the effrontery of this—person. He decided to regain what control he could and slammed the door, suppressing a secret pleasure at his guest's startled jump. He shot the bolt and strode towards the fire.

Captain Andru towered over the seated adept. Dressed in the heavy leather breeches and boots, the mail-entwined vest and coarse shirt of a soldier, he felt absurdly overdressed in the stuffy room, and wished that the adept had arrived later in the evening, after he had changed into more comfortable clothing for his studies.

"What do you know?" Andru barked.

“My name is Verelion,” said the adept as though Andru had not spoken. “I am an adept of the order of—”

“I know your order,” snapped Andru, leaning his right arm against the mantle and cocking the opposite hip, heavy with sword, in an unmistakable manner. “I have heard of what your kind do, and I ask again, what information do you bring me?”

Verelion tented skeletal hands, fingers tip-to-tip, then gazed into the resulting configuration as though to read the answer to Andru’s question there.

“I have knowledge that you have been seeking,” the adept admitted at last.

“Indeed?” said Andru.

“Yes. Knowledge concerning the Savage.” A pale eye met Andru’s own, searching for confirmation of his understanding.

“I know of any number of savages,” Andru replied, deliberately obtuse. “There are whole tribes of them to the west, it is said. And the—”

“You know of whom I speak!” spat Verelion, in the first display of emotion Andru had seen.

Satisfied, Andru said, “If you speak of Madren Savage, then call her by her name. I will not deal with those who speak in riddles.”

A broad grin turned the shaven head into a skull.

“Forgive me, captain, if I offend. I had forgotten the connection between you and the—and Madren Savage.”

“We are members of the band who placed the rightful king upon the throne,” Andru said as he eyed the adept. “A king who is grateful, might I remind you.”

Verelion nodded. “Of course. I meant no more than that. But you trust her, do you not?”

“I trust no one. I am master of spies to the king.”

Andru raised his hand as the adept opened his mouth to speak. “But I have no reason to *distrust* her more than I do, oh, *you* for example.”

Verelion gave another skull-like grin.

“She is devious. I know her of old. One may smile and be a villain, as the ancient adage has it. But I am here, not to sway your belief in your friend. That is something I would never seek to do. No, I am here only to ask whether or no you have seen this?”

The adept reached a hand through a slit in the crimson robe and brought out something clasped tight inside a fist. Andru leaned forward as Verelion’s arm snaked towards him. Long white fingers spread to display, balanced on a wrinkled pasty palm, a gleaming jewel.

The gem was as large as a hen’s egg, glittering emerald green in the firelight as each separate facet seized a beam and redirected it, split into a myriad of fragments. Andru could see that the jewel held untapped depths and he leaned closer to it, fascinated by the depth and intensity of the color.

“It is lovely, is it not?” came a soft murmur from somewhere far away from Andru, sunk as he was in contemplation of the great emerald.

Andru waved away the pesky sound, anxious for no distractions as he stared into the thing. Were those runes etched on its many surfaces? Did they spell out some esoteric message, some great truth, meant not for any ordinary person but only for himself? What was that he saw in the center, that looked so like a beating heart? Yes, it was a heart. He could see it with perfect clarity now as he leaned closer still, a deep pulsing vermilion shape in the very centermost point of the greenness.

A heart.

With a sword plunged through it.

The jewel grew, grew until it filled the entire room with its sea tint, and always at the center the great heart beating in time with Andru’s own. Andru slipped into the immense icy bauble and pulled its planes close around him.

How happy he was to be as one with the stone, the heart, the sword.

How happy.

The wind was icier now than earlier in the evening. Andru bade his guest a last fond farewell, clasping slender fingers in his own strong hand as if reluctant to release them.

“Thank you,” Andru muttered for the fifth time. “I will not forget this.”

Verelion smiled. It reminded Andru of a—the thought was snatched from his mind even as it occurred. He shook his head and tightened his grip as though to keep his friend still longer.

Verelion drew long thin fingers slowly, lingeringly, from Andru’s tight grasp.

“You will remember what must be done?” whispered the adept, glancing over a silken shoulder down the empty street.

Andru nodded, his enthusiasm and excitement palpable.

“I will remember. I will not fail you.”

“Good. Savages are dangerous,” came the soft sibilant whisper. The words were snatched up by the errant wind and whirled away into the night air. “Now go. And forget I was here.”

Andru looked up and down the empty street outside his door. The town bell was clanging the twelve strokes for midnight. What was he doing here, standing with the door open on such a cold night? He looked down, saw that he was dressed for bed.

Of course.

He had fallen asleep in the chair in his study and had gone to dreaming, had been awakened by an odd sound, had come down to investigate.

Of course.

Andru slammed the door and bolted it.

One could not be too careful, after all. Who knew what evil creatures could assault a man, so late at night, in such a part of town?

After all, that was why he lived here.

* * * *

“A dreamstone. And a Malmillard.”

Madren’s tone was bitter as gall as she spat out the name of the most treacherous of the multitude of Orders.

I spread my hands, begging for her understanding. I knew that what I had done was too much for forgiveness, but surely I could hope for understanding?

From the look of her face, I was asking a bit much.

But she surprised me once again.

She jerked up from her chair and stood before the fire, gazing into its sunken embers, hands braced on the mantel. Her back was to me—which I took as a good sign, that she trusted me even that little.

For a long time there was silence. I did not think it expedient to interrupt her reverie, especially since her sword was within easy reach and doubtless other blades as well.

“So now I have another mystery, it seems,” she said at last. “Not why did you try to kill me, but who else wanted me dead?”

“And may still do so,” I pointed out with eager logic from the depths of my chair. “Er, a dreamstone can only force a single image into one’s mind, I believe?”

Madren turned and looked down at me, one side of her mouth quirked upward.

“Yes. ‘One mind, one stone, one harm for thee. When next the stone be near, nothing there but fear.’ As clear as most ancient couplets meant to be mysterious, I suppose. Anyone once possessed by a dreamstone, who carries out its command, can never be possessed again. So the Malmillards are careful as to whom they use them on. So now it seems that you, amongst all who might wish me dead, are the only one I can trust. What a jest, is it not, Andru? You are the one person I can trust not to try to kill me. *If I can trust you.*”

I let out my breath in one long sigh. It felt as if I had been holding it for hours, for days. I rose slowly to my feet, took one step forward and leaned against the mantel facing Madren.

“I remember that night,” I began with hesitation. “I remember how necessary it was that I kill you, how right that I do so. Then, when the knife went in, the stone’s power released me.”

“It is the stone’s insidious danger. It forces you to do evil—then allows you to see what you have done and leaves you to stew forever in your guilt.”

The knowledge in her voice hit me then—she knew what I was feeling in a way that one never possessed could not.

“You?”

DARK TALES

A crooked smile. “Did you never wonder why I became an assassin? Or why the House of Savage, once a great and noble family, consists now only of my humble self? We all have our burdens and regrets, Andru.”

I reached out my hand, traced with a finger the path of a single tear resting at the edge of a silvery eye, outlined lips that I had last kissed too long ago. I smoothed back a tendril of tawny hair, then slid my hand into its thick mass, pulling her head towards me. I brushed my lips softly over hers, listened to see if I could hear her breath speed and grow short.

“I came here to kill you, Andru,” Madren reminded me.

Long fingers encircled my wrist in a band of iron, pulled it away. Madren looked deep into my eyes, saw the pleading there. And the pain—so like her own.

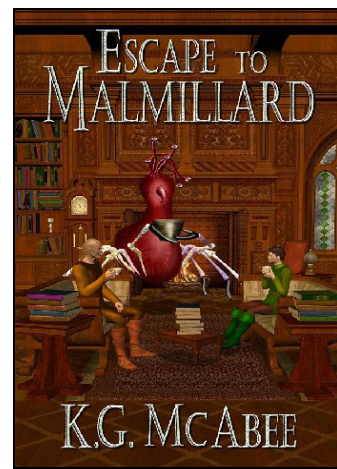
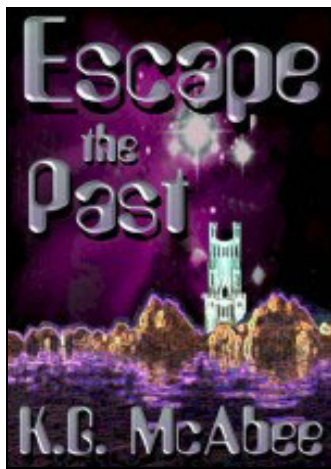
But she did not draw away from me.

“Still, I’ve waited this long. What can a few more hours matter?” she concluded after an endless time. “You won’t be able to try to kill me again, not in the same way, at least. And it will doubtless add a certain charm to our—”

I pulled her to me with my uncaptured arm, closed my mouth over hers.

Madren, for all her other sterling qualities, can be somewhat lacking when it comes to romance.

THE END



To find more work from the author you can visit him at:
www.kgmcabee.net/

MARA'S ROOM

JAMES S. DORR

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

When love is gone, what is there to replace it?

“There was a time, even before the time of the Emperor, he whose pyramid rises above the green fungal-lit Tombs, west, across the great river, a beacon to corpse-carts that traverse its causeway, even before the sun reddened and sickened and started upon its inexorable swelling until at last it will surely explode—and what shall we do then? -- there was, as I say, once a time of beginnings. . . .”

The speaker's full name was Maracanda, she whose rasping voice the children now listened to. But, as small children of all ranks and places will, shortening what their tongues cannot wrap themselves around, they called her “Mara.” She was an odd one, who wore a *chador* and broad-brimmed sunhat and even a day-mask even when it was no longer daytime, but rather the safer darktime of night that shaded all who might walk outdoors from the sun's poisoned rays, and even though where she spoke from was not outside, but rather within the New City's library. It was a comfortable, not-too-large room, with a platform and settee across from its entrance—a soft-cushioned, plush couch upon which Mara rested while those who

would hear her tales sat, cross-legged on the floor, on a thick, brightly-patterned rug showing a sunburst in yellows and purple-reds. It was a dimly-lit, *intimate* kind of room, located away from the library's central floors, more in a basement-like, off-the-main-path corner.

It was in here that the children were gathered, as part of their schooling, snug among tapestries that lined the room's walls, depicting scenes of the outside world's troubles.

"But I thought you were supposed to tell us about the ghouls?" one of the children interrupted. It was a thin girl named Glenorann, a part-rivergirl by the sound of her name, one descended, perhaps, from a boat gypsy mother—such liaisons, after all, were not unknown. One white-skinned and dark-haired.

John, who sat and listened next to her, did not like this girl.

But Mara did not mind. She nodded, her day-mask glinting a dull, unemotional silver in the room's subdued glow. "I will," she said, "speak in time of the death-eaters. It is, I know, what you have come to hear me say." She gestured then toward one of the tapestries showing the bridge from the neon-lit New City shore to the Tombs, choked with the first of an evening's corpse-traffic, with horn-hided raiders attacking the coffin-carts, blue ghoulish lights twinkling, pulling their cargoes loose, half-masked themselves by steam rising above the still day-heated, black water.

Glenorann giggled and nodded back. "Yes!" she answered.

"It is," Mara went on, "what your teachers have sent you here for, to learn these things from me. Each new year, more children. Just as last year it was your class-elders who, as you have now, agreed not to tell what they learned to those below them, lest those who are littler be frightened too easily.

"But now you are old enough—"

Glenorann clapped her hands. "Yes," she said again.

"Yet," Mara went on, "how can you learn what ghouls *are* if you do not know how they came to be? What the origins of the ghouls are, that is?"

Another child spoke up: "Is it not true that their hideous features and hard, twisted bodies come from their living so much out of doors? That is, in the ruins of what's left of the Old City, sheltering as best they can in shacks and cellars, in tunnels and under slabs—even in daytime when heat drives *us* indoors despite the awnings and breezeways and canopies that shade our own streets for those who *must* walk abroad?"

"Yes," Mara answered. "That is at least part of it—that the day-sun's mutating heat has so changed them outwardly. At least in theory. Thus here in the New City there are broad awnings above the more prominent, better streets, in the wealthier sectors, and strong, stout-roofed buildings that shelter all from the sun. Just as, within the Tombs west of the river, the mausoleums and crypts and grave-vaults

protect the living as well as their charges, keeping them safe from the dangers outdoors, at least until nightfall. And then, when the ghouls next come. . . .”

Mara once more gestured toward the tapestries, this time to one that pictured such an attack’s aftermath: Ghouls eating other ghouls—those killed by Tombsguards, gore dribbling from their mouths. Others silently shrieking as who knew what dragged them, flailing within its dark waters, beneath the river’s decay-slicked surface. But others, too, triumphing, blue corpse-lights flickering as singly and in groups they carried their prey off, an arm here, a leg joint there, here perhaps a whole, still-rotting torso, winding their ways home across the broad river in makeshift, skin-stretched canoes—watchful for boat gypsies who were their enemies! -- or south along the shore, back to the Old City’s tumble-down passages. Feasting now, huddled beneath collapsed arches and half-toppled house-roofs. Dancing then, rutting, partying in the ruins, while, half-hidden within the shadows’ blackness, three of their Necromancers conversed, perhaps plotting the next night’s raid.

Even Glenorann shuddered at this, slightly. While the boy who had asked the previous question—his name was Wolrar, John thought he recalled, and he didn’t have much to do with people like John, the more common people of the New City—raised his hand again. “What of the Necromancers?” he asked. “Will you tell us about them too?”

Mara rose, stretching, her motion accompanied by the muted jangling that jewelry might make beneath a woman’s *chador*—a common enough sound heard in the New City by those that dared venture out during the day-hours, perhaps having found no other time suited for some assignation, thus pairing where they might be seen as it were, yet privately also, for all *else* were indoors—then settled herself once more, comfortably on her couch. “They are the leaders of ghoulish-kind,” she said, “or at least their advisors. So the ghouls honor them. They are the ghouls’ protectors and law-givers. Some say they even predate the ghouls themselves, being the leaders of those who *became* the ghouls—helping to make the death-eaters what they are now. Others deny this, saying the ghouls freely chose what they wished to be, and only then sought those they deemed best fitted to lead them thus ghoulish-ward.

“Possibly both are right.

“But it does not matter—they are what they are *now*. While what I have to say concerns the distant past, even before the great space armada took some away from the Earth entirely, escaping the sun’s disease, even before the war that came after, that settled the question of what those left truly were. That is, in their own hearts. That defined that ghouls *were* ghouls and would be so forever, free to develop themselves in their ghoulish-hood. That said riverpeople should stick to the river, adapting as well in the ways that were best for them. Fisherfolk to the sea. Tombspeople to the Tombs, guards and embalmers, diggers and stone-carvers,

caring for those deceased placed in their charge. New-Cityers to New City—just as you who are its next generation sit here in New City now.”

John scowled at Glenorann—not all these, he thought, remained entirely separate. There were some of half-blood, a father perhaps *this*, a mother of *that* descent. Riverwomen, especially, bred laxly—those of the boat gypsies. That was what John’s father said. Even within the New City itself, foreigners teemed its streets.

Mara continued: “What I speak of, though, is the time of seed *planting*—its reaping you see now. I speak of the war before the war that defined the conflicts, creating the differences that, despite the striving of many, the later war just confirmed.

“That which ‘made’ ghouls ghouls—they were *already* ghouls. Do you see what I mean?”

Glenorann looked puzzled, as others of the children did too, but then she smiled at Wolrar. A fetching, girl-smile. And then John understood. She, Glenorann, was a part of the river—and she always would be. As her family—part of it anyway—always was. It was within her, the way she acted, the way she *would* act even to one like Wolrar who was *not* of her kind.

While Wolrar, in his turn. . . .

Mara continued: “And so what I speak of is an ancient time when there were many peoples, but only one race of man. These were divided by chance into nations, by beliefs and temperaments, each choosing where to live, most of them staying with others like them of course, but moving freely.

“They sometimes spoke different tongues, just as we have our own ‘high’ and ‘low’ speeches, and various *patois*, but *these* were based chiefly on people’s locations.”

Now John was lost too—it didn’t make sense to him. That people spoke differently simply because they lived in different *places*? But then how would they understand each other?

Or did they even try?

Mara continued: “Finally—and this is the crux—there was a war. There had been wars before, between these ‘nations’ of like-living peoples, but generally ones with beginnings and endings, and pacts and agreements. If one later on abrogated a treaty, then they made a new one, or fought again until one or the other side agreed to the changes. It was tragic, yes, but at least there were endings—and peace between such wars.

“But then something different came: There was to be a war of a new nature, a new kind of conflict to stamp out all enemies, spearheaded by the greatest of these peoples, aimed against *evil*. Evil itself, that is. Some at first questioned the wisdom of such strife, for how could a nation, however powerful, defeat an abstract? A

denotation? But it was then said, as well, that those who balked at joining this effort would thus, themselves, denote *themselves* as against the good.

“As a result, most nations allied themselves more or less to the cause, though as the war dragged on—for there are always new enemies to be fought if one looks hard enough—and as the first nation, full in its hubris, more and more compromised its own principles, that which in others’ eyes had been *its* goodness, to help root out those it saw as still against it, much of their zeal slackened. Yet, paradoxically, the more these, its allies, weakened, so the more powerful the first nation became.

“There was no shifting of sides in this, mind you. No *grasping* of evil—for all claimed to be for good. All so believed themselves. Rather, it was more of an isolation as the great nation itself shunned its allies’ suggestions. And this bred resentments, some of which still persist.

“But, at the end of it, even those who might once have truly hated the greatest of these nations grew too exhausted to do any more harm. And, as for the winners—the ones who had, first of them all, proclaimed the war—for so they were in that way victorious, though having consumed all they had, and more, on it, they were themselves the most exhausted of all.”

“And as for their allies?” It was John who asked this.

“They had no allies,” Mara replied. “None that were left to them. They were the pariahs now—haven’t you listened?”

“That was the point, you see. That what they had done, they did to *themselves*. For virtue in principle, yes, of course. That was why they had fought. But it was fighting itself that took over, that for its own sake became larger than what they at first had hoped to gain, not just for their own good but for the entire world—“

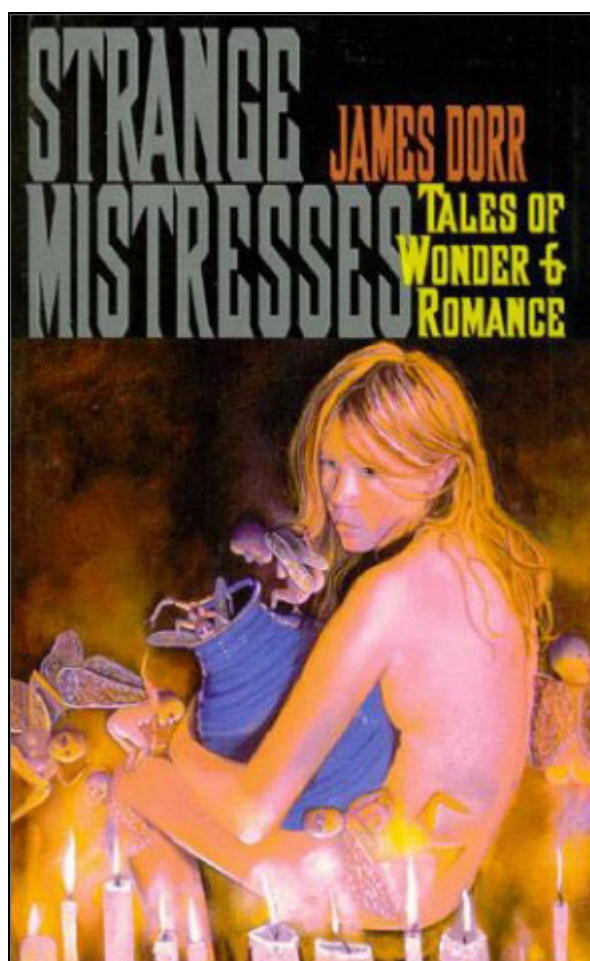
“I see that,” John persisted. “And yet it *was* the ghouls who were defeated. Or rather those who you say were to become the ancestors of the ghouls. That is what we are to learn here, is it not?”

Maracanda rose, one more time, from her couch. This time to her full height. “No,” she answered. She whipped off her day-mask and opened her *chador* to show her true self, and the children ran, screaming. Not seeing the thick chains that tethered her fast to the platform she spoke from. Her voice shouting after them:

“It was we *ghouls* who won!”

But they had already fled from the room, shrieking, streaming through corridors, up and down stairs through the library’s main floors and out to the streets beyond. Vowing they would indeed *not* tell those younger the true thing that they had learned. Let them learn for themselves! It was in this way the New City’s elders assured that the children would grow up to fear those lands outside its bright-lighted confines of safety, and rather always to shun to wander, unless in huddled, well guarded groups, into the ghoulish-countries of Old City and beyond.

THE END



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