

# Rocket Fall

by David Prill

## THE RISE OF THE PAINSHIPS

*Rocket Fall ...*

*Rocket Fall ...*

*Rocket Fall ...*

Welcome children of the night to the darkest hours of Rocket Fall. Rocket Fall, when green turns to brown, when all that is living becomes dead. Rocket Fall, when the psychic exhaust is so lethal that anything caught in its wake is driven insane. Rocket Fall, when the Painships are rolled into place at the launch umbilical towers, their translucent cords stretching from the terrible gantries to the human fuels below ...

.....

*Augmented target docking adapter shrouds attached?*

Check.

*Ethereal demon detectors withdrawn from their inner anticoincidence mantle?*

Check.

*Torturnauts in their psychic isolation garments?*

Check.

.....

"While we're waiting for the countdown to begin, let's send it over to one of our correspondents, Larry Klaus, the man on the scene down at the fuel cells. Larry?"

"That's right, Walter, I'm talking to you from the fuel cells, where the guards have just begun to open the cell doors and release the tormented souls. As you know, these are the sorry folks who are actually going

to provide the propulsion for the Painships once they reach the Other Realms. Here come the Ethyls now, a more disconsolate group of individuals you'd be hard-pressed to find—they're really looking tormented today, Walter! I'll see if I can interview one of them now. Ma'am, ma'am, just a quick question or two, I know you're busy. So, where do you call home?"

"I hurt inside."

"I bet you're from the village, most of you are. Now, how does it feel to be part of this grand and may I say noble endeavor, rescuing our Baron's bride from the clutches of all Eternity?"

"I hurt inside."

"Well, I'm sure you do. Don't we all! And how long have you been in the fuel cells? ... Don't remember? Well, they always say memory is the first thing to go. Any last words before you embark to the Other Worlds?"

"I hurt inside."

"Back to you, Walter!"

"Swell interview, Larry. Now we head to Stan Stein, who is over in Pain Management. Stan?"

"That's right, Walter. I'm here up close and personal with Otto Jedermann, Fear Engineer First Class, one of the top sadists in his field. He's outfitted in the traditional leather mask, cat-o'-nine-tails, and pocket protector. Otto, I imagine the nerves are a little jumpy this evening."

"You always get butterflies at a time like this, Stan. I'm just trying to stay within myself, stay focused."

"That's a very modest assessment of your talents, Otto. Folks, I can tell you that Otto Jedermann has all the tools, he's been around since the first test frights began, and is arguably the most versatile of the Engineers of Fear. The Rack of Loneliness, The Iron Maiden of Broken Dreams, The Garrote of Regrets, The Brank of Shame, it doesn't matter: if it hurts, he's had a hand in it, usually up to the elbow. Otto, could you explain in layman's terms exactly how the whole sadistic schematic works?"

"My pleasure, Stan. It's a simple calculus of fear. Pain is the surest pathway to send soul energy to the Other Realms. The Baron has conducted double-blind, triple-amputee studies that have demonstrated this fact. Pain is introduced to the volunteers, although it's not always simple physical pain. It could be psychic pain, spiritual pain, the pain of never-ending nightmares, simple daily degradations, it really varies from person to person. That energy is then accumulated and introduced into the Painships through a transsacrum injection. Of course, for the launch itself, an immense amount of energy is required, so some of the Ethyls are actually part of the gantry apparatus, hooked up to the Painships to provide adequate power for lift-off. The remainder ride in the fuel coffins within the Painships themselves."

"Fascinating, Otto. Now about ..."

"Sorry to interrupt, Stan, but Roderick Armstrong is walking past our booth ... Mr. Armstrong do you have a minute, sir? Yes, folks, it's Roderick Armstrong, Baron Armstrong himself, inventor of the Painships. (*lowers voice*) As you all know, the Baron's wife, Madeline, died suddenly three years ago at the tender age of twenty-three. Her body has been preserved in a nitrogen-cooled casket in the catacombs of the castle, awaiting the return of her immortal soul ... Baron, sir, how are things looking this dark night?"

"All is prepared. I eagerly await the return of my beloved."

"I think I can speak for our captive audience when I say we all wish for the very same thing! Thanks for stopping by ... Hang on, my producer is trying to tell me something ... There's been a delay in the countdown? Eva Struber? Are you there?"

"I'm here, Walter."

"Let's go to Eva Struber, who's with Fritz Himmel, director of Project Painship."

"Thanks, Walter. Director Himmel, what can you tell us about the delay?"

"Just a minor technical malfunction—one of the Ethyls was discovered to be contaminated with happy thoughts. We'll have a replacement installed shortly, and the countdown should resume at that time."

"Happy thoughts. That sounds dangerous."

"*Itis very dangerous.*"

"So do you expect the Painships to launch on time?"

"The screaming should begin soon, God willing."

"Back to you, Walter."

"Thanks for that fine report, Eva. While we're waiting for the countdown to resume, let's take a look at a documentary we prepared earlier on the Making of a Torturnaut. We'll cut into the report if necessary to bring you breaking news ..."

. . . . .

It all begins in this room ...

This is the Shock Generator, Type ZLB, manufactured by the Milgram Instrument Company, Waltham, Massachusetts. The ZLB sports a series of switches, thirty in all, marked from 15 volts to 450 volts. Wires lead under the table to a volunteer seated behind a partition.

This is Bob.

Bob is a trainee.

(Bob watches as the head of his training team asks the volunteer to memorize a series of words, but unfortunately the volunteer doesn't seem to have a very good memory.)

"That's an incorrect answer."

(Bob depresses the switch.)

(A light on the generator glows bright red; an electric buzzing is heard. A blue light, labeled "voltage energizer," flashes; the dial on the voltage meter swings to the right.)

"Ow, what are you doing, that hurts."

After each wrong answer, the voltage is increased by 15 volts.

"Wrong answer."

Fifty volts.

"Oh, sorry."

One hundred volts.

"You are incorrect, sir."

Bob is worried. "I can't do this anymore. That man is hurting. I'm hurting him."

"Please go on."

One hundred fifty volts.

**"MY GOD IT HURTS!"**

"Listen to him . . ."

Bob should know better by this point.

"For the sake of science and progress of mankind, you must continue," says the scientist.

Two hundred volts.

Major shrieking from volunteerland.

"I can't . . ."

"It's absolutely essential that you do, Bob. I'll take all responsibility for the safety of our volunteer."

Three hundred volts.

No answer.

Still none.

None at all!

"I think that man is in real trouble!"

Hang in there, Bob!

When the 450-volt threshold is reached ... it's graduation day! Congratulations, Bob, you've just become a certified—

.....

"Sorry to interrupt, folks, but the technical difficulties have been fixed, and the countdown has resumed. Larry Klaus, you have some news on the Painships?"

"Yes, Walter. Everything is looking A-OK. The glitch was on the *My Life Has No Meaning and I Wish I Was Dead*, but the problem fuel coffin has been refitted with a backup tormented soul—redundancy is everything, you know—and all systems are go."

"What about the other ships, the *He Never Called Back*, and the *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation*?"

"They're all looking ready for launch, Walter."

"Okay, here we go. The final countdown has begun, folks. Let's count along."

T-minus 10 ...

*Aiaieeeee!*

Nine ...

*Yaaarrgh!*

Eight ...

*Eeoowww!*

Seven ...

*Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!*

Six ...

*Ahhhhheeeee!*

Five ...

*Eeaaaaaaa!*

Four ...

*Yiiii!*

Three ...

*Gaaaaa!*

Main engine ignition

Two ...

*Aghhh!*

One ...

*Eeeeeyaaaaaa!*

Lift-off.

Yes, we have lift-off.

The Painships have cleared the launch towers.

*The My Life Has No Meaning and I Wish I Was Dead, the He Never Called Back, and the Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* and their payloads of pain are on their way to the Other Realms.

What will they find?

What *will* they find ...

.....

This was Rocket Fall, the golden age of occult rocketry. Painships arise, arise ...

.....

"Hi, honey, I'm home!"

This was Otto Jedermann yesterday after work. He had reached such a high level of trust within the Painship pantheon that he was allowed to leave the castle after his duties were done for the day.

When he walked the walk down to his little cottage at the foot of Mt. Armstrong, Priscilla was there as always to help him off with his hood and wax his whip before hanging it up on the rack inside the door.

"Strudel, tonight," she said, pecking him on the cheek.

"Ah, strudel," Otto said, eyes widening in the way that only a call to strudel could achieve at this altitude.

The strudel tasted good. It was just like mother used to make before she left for the asylum.

"How was your day, dear?" asked Frau Jedermann.

"Good, good."

"You give the pain?"

"Yah, pain, much pain. Pain put the bread on the table."

"And the strudel."

"Yah, strudel."

After the hour in strudel heaven, Big Otto went into his study and changed into his ragged coat and baggy pants and applied the white greasepaint to the exposed flesh above his neck, gave himself a big sad face, affixed the green fright wig, and glued the red ball, funny red ball, onto his own nose.

He looked at himself in the mirror and saw not Otto Jedermann, King of Pain, but Patches, the Big-Hearted Clown.

Patches, who could take an ordinary balloon, and with a deft twist of the wrist, transform it into a romping puppy or a kitten playing with a ball of yarn. Only, Otto Jedermann had not yet perfected the art of balloon animals, because every time he tried to make a puppy, it came out looking like a man being dismembered by a rip saw or something equally work-related.

Pfffffft.

Otto sadly tossed the deflated balloon into the corner with his other deformed children. He gazed at his hands, flipping the big meaty things over. What is wrong with me? he wondered. I have an image in my mind of what I want to create, I search for that certain kind of energy that gives a creation life and meaning, yet what these hands form are abominations. What is inside me that does this thing?

He stared at himself in the mirror, this tortured clown. He felt distraught, without hope, his dream of performing at children's parties horribly unreachable. More than once he had considered ending it all, turning the devices of his own design upon himself. Life seemed so unfair, but death probably wouldn't be any more nonpartisan.

.....

"We interrupt your regularly scheduled laments for Madeline to bring you this breaking news.

We're getting a report via etherphone from Painship *He Never Called Back*. Where are you? What have you found?"

"We're on a world of wolf-creatures who turn into human beings once a month when the Earth is full in the sky!

"No sign of Madeline!"

"*Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation*, come in please!"

"We're on a world where the machine is in the ghost!

"Madeline's not here!"

"*My Life Has No Meaning and I Wish I Was Dead*, are you reading me?"

"We're on a world where things are always exactly the way they seem!

"Can't find Madeline anywhere!"

"Keep looking, Painships! Keep looking as if our lives depended on it!"

.....

## **THOSE WHO WEAR DARKNESS LIKE LEDERHOSEN**

What happened a few weeks ago is told here. The bonfires had been lit throughout the village of Goldstadt, Florida, in dread of the ordeal that was to come. No protective grass and sand yet on the doorsteps of the neat bungalows and mobile homes—that would happen soon, before Those Who Wear Darkness Like Lederhosen appeared. The darkness that would take their loved ones into an even higher darkness.

Lock the shutters and bar the doors and pray like a priest. Pray to anything that will listen. Pray until it hurts.

Betty Ouspenskaya had no time for entreaties to the great undefined. She had sealed her daughter in the hall closet of their mobile home with care in hopes that Those Who Wear Darkness Like Lederhosen would soon be somewhere else. She wrestled a scotty plaid armchair from its spot where it looked out upon the county dump, dragged it across the orange shag carpeting, and wedged it in the narrow hallway right up against her only child's huddling place.

Then she put crosses on the doors and windows, garlic on the crosses, holy water she swiped from Pastor Frank's baptismal font on the garlic.



Inside the closet, Maria fretted. She was worried that she would be fired if she didn't show up for her shift that night at the Hofbrau Drive-in. She didn't know why her mother was making such big fusses. Maria had heard that Those Who Wear Darkness Like Lederhosen only took virgins, so what was to worry?

As it turned out, plenty, because before the holy water was dry, the trailer shook and the back wall of the closet opened like a can of tuna packed in spring water and Those Who Wear Darkness Like Lederhosen were there, only the darkness they were wearing was more like the darkness of a walk through Gator Swamp at midnight.

They made her sleep, then trundled her out of the mobile home to a waiting coach. The black horses snorted and launched into a muscular, fearful gallop even before the door to the coach slapped shut.

It took only moments for the coach to pass by the last trailer park on the fringes of Goldstadt, sallow scared faces staring out from behind reclaimed freight windows. Then the coach was shooting up the mountain pass, riding on the rims as they cut curves, the trees becoming more tense now, the castle battlements and gantries coming into view through the snaking fog.

.....

When she woke, Maria found herself in a small room with stone walls and straw floor and bars on the impossible door. They fed her infrequently and did painful things to her with regularity and all the time she really didn't understand why. She hadn't lived that long, always stayed pretty close to home, both in body and in mind.

She knew there were others like her. When the guards weren't around she tried calling out to them, heard the frail replies. She figured they had been locked up longer, their hope hustled away to some unreachable realm. She wanted to communicate with the others, plan their escape or their funerals. She was a people person; she couldn't help it.

And then the guards released her and the other tormented souls.

A microphone was thrust into her face.

"So, where do you call home?"

.....

Maria was lashed to the gantry with the other Ethyls. Above her loomed the terrible glory of Painship*He Never Called Back*, a great nausea-green glow-in-the-dark hulking spectral mass, a hive, almost alive

itself, the skeleton of a hull encasing the vital organs of their journey.

The pain began without warning, continued without pause. It was a different kind of pain than her daily agonies: deeper, more all-encompassing, more permanent. Before, the pain had seemed to alternate between the physical and the spiritual, testing her limits it seemed. Now they knew her vulnerable areas, and they exploited them without mercy. Pain beyond screaming. Pain beyond life itself. Pain that ripped her soul from her husk of a body and hurtled it with the Painship up the gantry and into the night sky. The air itself seemed to explode.

And then all was still again, the Ethyls exhaling.

They drifted apart for a while, then came together as they neared the swamp on the edge of the launch area. Here their momentum ebbed, and they hovered in the spirit space above the brackish water, and it is here that they rested and waited and planned.

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## GHOSTS ON THE LOOSE

"Welcome to Thirdeyewitness News. I am Hans Krogh, and now you will listen to the top stories.

"It has been three nights since *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* was in contact with Pain Management. Brother Painships all reporting in as scheduled from Other Realms. Fuel running low, they are coming home, but not *Humiliation*. Something wrong? Etherphone not working? They find something? What is going on? Don't know, don't know.

"In other news, ghosts reported on castle grounds, down by swamp. Rumors! Only children believe in ghosts. Believe in finding the beloved Madeline, that is enough for all of us.

"Now commercial.

"Headache? Aches, pains? Take the pills that come under your door every night. Pills good for you, will not sap your will. Now back to news ..."

.....

After witnessing the strange wonder that was the world where the Machine was in the Ghost, the *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* cruised into farther-out realms.

Bob the Torturnaut stalked the fuel coffin corridor, searching for his next victim, his psychic isolation garment wrapped around him like a dark cloak. He sang the Pain Song, the traditional torturnaut spiritual,

his discomfoting bass voice echoing down the dim passage ...

*Where shall you go?  
Where shall you go?  
Where shall you go for to ease your troubled souls?*

*You went to the rock for to hide your face  
For to ease your troubled souls  
The rock cried out "no hiding place"  
For to ease your troubled souls.*

*The Ethyls who are chosen to serve the Baron  
For to ease your troubled souls  
Will surely be in for their share of scarin'  
For to ease your troubled souls ...*

Bob powered up the Rack of Loneliness and the Iron Maiden of Broken Dreams, the devices making gibbering noises as they came to life.

The Ethyls stirred. One of them began to thrash about in her coffin as the Iron Maiden closed upon her. Bob moved in, checking her readings on the terrormeter. Her fear was profound. The needle was in the red: the blood of the Ethyl.

At that moment the Ethyl went into cardiac arrest and breathed one last time, wait, one more, a sad ellipsis to her life. As if in semiconscious sympathy, the other Ethyls mimicked her. This wasn't good. Bob was only trained to give lasting pain, not first aid.

The Painship suddenly veered. The greenish black mystic casserole of the Other Realms was pummeled by the light as the Painship *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* abruptly picked up speed, faster faster, faster faster.

The light was white, and the white was bright.

They were no longer being propelled, but pulled.

But by what?

Or whom?

And, most importantly:

To where?

.....

"It shall not be long, my dearest, most beloved turtlebat, Madeline," Baron Armstrong murmured softly, the echoes a chorus of his devotion in this the deepest catacomb of the castle, below the wine cellars, the torture chambers, all things decadent and worldly. His spindly, numb fingers caressed the frosted surface of her nitrogen-cooled casket. Moisture on the stone walls dripped like tears.

Fair-haired, most-adored Madeline appeared as she did the black day she passed from this world. Her skin was the purest glowing Onyx-marble. You have probably heard about her cheekbones. Those cheekbones, that nose, these eyes were the product of a sculptor's most inspired session. Still wearing her black walking dress, which fit perfectly around her pleasing form.

Yet for all these wondrous vistas of Madeline, it was not enough-there was a barrenness within the Baron. As long as her sweet soul was lost in some mysterious post-life absentia, there would be emptiness, and loneliness, and sadness, and, perhaps, even pain.

Memories of Madeline swirled in again to fill the empty basin behind those temporarily lifeless eyes. Their long walks along the swamp, the moonlit dinners among the parapet gargoyles, the feeling of her warm neck in his cold hands.

Yet he knew these visions of her were uninspired reproductions compared to the reality of their life together. He was living dead without her. Even though she was only a villager, there was something regal, inspiring, about Madeline. Perhaps she still retained something that he had lost long ago. She was too young, too pure, to have passed from this life so soon. She even stayed after he gave her a birthday present: the release of her parents from the Pain Management volunteer corps. Love, coercion, mind control, was there really any difference?

Now the flood of memories became a torrent, and riding the crest of that dark wave was the awful day when Madeline took ill. He tried to push the memory aside, but it had too much force. She was chipper one day, and the next morning at breakfast she suddenly slumped to the floor and became spastically sick and fever-stricken. Her bodily fluids, all colors, leaked out. Even the best doctors abducted from the village couldn't figure out what was wrong, or how to help her. The only mercy was that her death came swiftly.

The Baron suspected poisoning, and the revenge he took on those who had contact with her can only be viewed with curtains drawn.

It wasn't just. Dear beloved Madeline was meant to be one with the Baron forever. The Baron had to have her back. He would bring her back. Death would bow to him as had everything else in the tri-county area.

Painships arise, arise.

His time with the awaiting vessel of Madeline was over. The Baron felt pain propagating deep within himself: the Hanging Cage of Broken Hearts.

As he left her shrine and slowly made his way along the shadowy, torch-lit corridor, a faint sound caught his attention. A voice. He stopped, listened. Was it a conversation from elsewhere in the castle? The castle settling? A mouse?

No, a voice, a human voice. Weak, lost. A long, lowing cry.

He listened more intently.

No, not a cry. It seemed to be saying something.

It seemed to be saying:

*"Soon ...soon ... soon ..."*

.....

From a voice to a visitation.

Before retiring that evening, the Baron passed by the bureau on the way to the ornate four-poster, its cold sheets, and another troubled slumber. His eyes were drawn to the mirror.

A vaporous form gazed back at him. A female, too tenuous to see distinctly.

He reached out to the glass, his mind filling in the blanks on the phantom face.

"Madeline ... is this you? You have come to me? Where are you? Help me find you."

"Soon," a tender voice whispered, before the specter lost its grip on the mirror. "Soon ..."

.....

Well, that went pretty well, Maria thought, drifting back down to the swamp.

.....

"The Painships are coming back!

"This is Walter Von Braun with this breaking news special report.

"It's been three long weeks since the Painship fleet left for the Other Realms on their quest to find the

beloved Madeline and return her to her rightful place alongside the Baron. Painships *He Never Called Back* and *My Life Has No Meaning and I Wish I Was Dead* have been positively identified on the Etherscope. Painship *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* has not yet appeared. Speculation is that Torturnaut Bob has found Madeline and is bringing her back. There's no proof of this, but that is the speculation and that is what we all hope!"

. . . . .

No interviews, no dead-of-night parades, no nothing for the torturnauts on the Painships *He Never Called Back* and *My Life Has No Meaning and I Wish I Was Dead*. They did not find Madeline. A trip to the Brank of Shame for them. Shame on them who do not find the beloved Madeline.

. . . . .

Bob the Torturnaut rode the white highway of the dying Ethyls all the way to the end of the line, the blinding light giving way to a sunny, flowery hillside from a painting you put over your discount warehouse couch. The blues of sky and water were painful in their purity. The greens of grass and leaves provoked uncontrollable weeping.

Bob checked on the Ethyls; they were on empty, pain drained. They had all perished during the flight.

He left the Painship. The light was so bright, so unlike the dankness of the castle. Bob didn't like it. Bob was hot. He felt weak. He peeled off his psychic isolation garment, and it was then that he began to sense the presence of the dead Ethyls all around him, even though he glimpsed a fleeting phantom form out of the corner of his eye.

The Ethyls didn't seem angry; they seemed peaceful, understanding, searching. Now that he no longer wore the PIG, he felt a kernel of kinship with them. They had come a long way together.

On the top of the flowery hill stood a tall, dark-haired woman, her white robes moving rhythmically in the summerland breezes.

Bob staggered up the slope toward her, the Ethyls patiently keeping pace. He fell near the summit and crawled the rest of the way.

"Are you ... Madeline?" Bob asked when he reached her bare feet.

"No, I am not."

"Where is this place? I've been to the place where the Machine is in the Ghost and this isn't like that at all."

"It is not so much a where as a what."

"Heaven?" Bob couldn't lift his head. The strain of the journey had been too much. He felt so spent.

Another pair of unshod feet joined the first.

"You asked for me."

"Madeline ...," Bob said in a hoarse croak.

"Yes."

"Come ... come with me. The Baron ... the Baron ..."

"The Baron ..."

"The Baron can fix it. It's all set up. See, just get in my ship, and I'll take you back to him. You can live again. He preserved your body. He did a real nice job, you should see it."

The bare feet disappeared.

Madeline was gone.

Bob was alone again with the tall woman. Bob could raise his head now, and as he did he watched as the spirits of the Ethyls passed through her body, her arms extended in an embrace, and then they were gone, too.

"I ... I could stay, too ... couldn't I?" said Bob in a shaky voice. Something long-abandoned in his heart was saying this, but the Baron's pull was strong, too, maybe stronger.

*"Where shall you go?"* the woman began to sing in a soft, clear voice that was like a hurricane of knives to Bob.

*"Where shall you go?"*

*"Where shall you go for to ease your troubled soul?"*

Bob scrambled back down the hill, finally getting to his feet near the bottom, her voice propelling him all the way there.

*"You went to the rock for to hide your face*

*"For to ease your troubled soul."*

He grabbed his PIG, feeling relief as he zipped it up, and ran up the ramp to the ship.

*"The rock cried out 'no hiding place'*

*"For to ease your troubled soul ..."*

The door whisked shut. A mountain of white light again bombarded the ship, and before Bob could buckle in, the *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* was hurtling back from whence it came.

. . . . .

The following day while the castle slept, a servant politely woke the Baron, gingerly tapping on the shockproof glass that protected the Baron in those vulnerable hours when he could not defend himself.

"The Painship *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation*, " said the servant. "It has returned."

The Baron rocketed down to the launch area to meet the ship.

*Soon, soon ...*

The Painship was glowing green cut with hot red, ribbons of the battered exoskeleton corkscrewing to the stone tarmac. Torturnaut Bob staggered down the ramp and was collared by the Baron even before his boots hit the castle ground.

"Where is she? Did you find her? Bring her to me!"

Bob was having trouble communicating; Painship lag, apparently. He dropped to his knees, staring at himself in the shine of the Baron's black Enforcers. "Where shall you go ... don't go ... to the rock ... the hiding place ..."

"Fool!" the Baron shouted, punting Bob aside and vaulting up the spectral ramp to the interior of the Painship.

The Baron scoured the entirety of the vessel, from the Supercritical Harrow Tank to the Debasing Pods, and not only did the Baron not find Madeline, the Ethyls appeared to be missing, too.

. . . . .

"Staff meeting," Baron Armstrong announced, hoisting Director Fritz Himmel and Engineer of Fear Otto Jedermann into position on the Judas Cradles. The men were lowered onto the point of the pyramids below repeatedly, first lightly, then with an increasing amount of their body weight.

After the preliminaries were over, the Baron said, "I'm open to ideas. Mr. Himmel, you first."

"Must make ... better ... be ... good boy ..."

"Mr. Jedermann?"



"Unnhhhh ..."

"Let me help you," said the Baron, finally releasing the pair from the Cradles, the bodies and blood slopping onto the floor. "You failed. You will try again. You will create the next generation Pain Delivery System. A PDS that will hurtle a Painship to whatever distant realm beloved Madeline is lost in and return her safely to the place she belongs, her home, this castle, with me, forever."

"I'll ... see ... what ... I ... can ... come ... up ... with ...," Engineer Jedermann offered between gasps.

"Excellent. Meeting adjourned."

.....

This is Otto back home after the meeting. It was a longer walk down the mountain. The Judas Cradle had rocked him until he cried like a kinder.

"No, no, no time for strudel," he said, shuffling into their house.

"You give pain?" asked the wife, looking for something to wax.

"No, Iget pain."

"Why you get pain?"

"No Madeline, my fault. So I must work. No time for strudel. No time for clowning. Only time for work."

Otto locked himself in his basement workshop, experimenting with prototypes of pain. He was a do-it-yourselfer. He sought inspiration, and as always is the rule, when inspiration is sought, inspiration has to wash hair.

However, that night something even better came to pass, floated into their bedroom while his wife slumbered. In the past he had prayed to his Muse for enlightenment but never experienced a personal visitation from her. She told him exactly what to make, right down to the rivets. Otto was grateful, and she dematerialized before he could offer his thanks.

In the morning Otto followed his vision. His hands seemed to know more than the rest of him did, and before long he had carved the shape of a horse. The Horse of Hurt. The Mare of Misery.

He planed it smooth and used a Back Bent Gouge to get the detail right. Then he painted it, white body with red trim.

He made a heavy base to set the horse upon, so that it would be stable when the punishment was being dished out.

Now to the main event. He had some spare hydraulics and electronics left over from a failed attempt at a Guillotine of Need. This took some nights. The Baron was beginning to get impatient. Every day he asked when the new creation would be ready. Soon, Otto told him. Soon. This answer seemed to anger the Baron even more.

Otto worked nonstop, and when the project was complete, he summoned his wife to his workshop. Routine. Priscilla had an objective viewpoint—it was hard to judge one's own work with anything approaching a critical eye. She had a high pain threshold, too—it was one of the things that first attracted him to her when they had begun dating.

"This is unusual," she said, eyeing his creation while circling it. "How does it work?"

"First, you get on horse."

She did.

"Now you put coin in slot."

"Coin? I do not have coin."

"I have coin." He slid a pfennig into the slot.

The horse began rocking. Priscilla held on tight, her face wincing in anticipation of the agony, the torment, that was surely to come.

The horse continued to rock, gently.

Until it stopped rocking altogether.

"Should I put another coin in?" Otto asked eagerly.

"It is broken?"

"No, it is working perfectly."

"Maybe not the best," Priscilla said, dismounting.

"No?" Otto wanted to tell her about their strange guest, but he held back.

"Needs something. Shackles, barbed wire, electrified saddle."

Otto thought for a moment. "Perhaps you are right. Need to sleep on it."

"Maybe need strudel."

"Ah, strudel ..."

.....

That night Otto was visited again by his Muse. He spoke of his wife's misgivings. Muse told him not to listen to her, she was just being argumentative, probably not first time, eh? Added that his new creation was wonderful, his best ever, a crowning achievement, and that the Baron would love it and don't worry about anything, just sleep, sleep, sleep.

That sounded good to Otto. He was bushed. He slept splendidly that night, taking comfort in knowing he was on the proper artistic path.

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Like putty in my hands, Maria mused, skimming low over the pine tree tops on her way back to the swamp called home.

.....

The next day Otto loaded the mechanical horse onto a wagon and hooked the wagon to a flesh-and-blood horse and away they went, up the winding mountain road to the castle. Although his Muse had reassured him, his confidence was tempered by the sobering light of day and the lingering sores of the Judas Cradle.

When the Baron saw what his Chief Engineer had created, he raged in disbelief. "This is what you bring me? This is the next generation in pain-giving? This ... this ... horsie?"

"Yes, Mr. Baron."

"What do you call it?"

"The Stallion of Lost Souls."

"Show me."

"It ... it is too dangerous. Can only be used once."

"It does not look dangerous."

"That is the secret."

Now the Baron nodded. "Ah, I see. Well, Engineer, you have been one of my most loyal and dedicated

servants, and I will trust your judgment. For now."

"Thank you, Baron," Otto said, sweating in many places.

.....

"Welcome to Thirdeyewitness News. I am Hans Krogh, and now you will listen to the top stories.

"Tonight is the night that the our good friend and leader Baron Armstrong will take *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* to the Other Realms to find and bring back beloved Madeline. If you want job done right, do yourself.

"In other news, more ghosts reported on castle grounds, in castle itself. Your reporter has seen ghost. Ghost talked to me. Ghost was dead wife, an Ethyl. Sorry. Personal ... moment, please ... We, we come to Goldstadt on holiday you understand, and she is taken. I am taken when I come to castle searching for her ... Personal, personal ... Sorry for tears ... Sorry ...

"No commercial. Take the pill that comes under the door, just take and forget, forget I told you anything ..."

.....

The moon was dread full the night Baron Armstrong decided to take the journey to the Other Realms himself. Another visit from the ghost of Madeline had sealed the deal. She said it was getting late, that she was growing weaker and more distant by the moment. He didn't want to rely on the Torturnauts. They had no connection to Madeline apart from the edicts and rituals he bestowed upon them, and as sacred as they were, only the Baron had that intimate connection, and only the Baron would be able to locate and bring her back to the world she had been removed from so cruelly, so young. She had the rest of her life to live with him.

The Pony of Peril was loaded into the Painship *Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation*, and the Ethyls were set into place in their fuel coffins, hooked up carefully to the coin-operated device of doom.

An aide tried to fit the Baron for a PIG, but he shunned the man with a cold glare and made for the launch pad.

The gantry Ethyls had already been taken from their fuel cells and were in place at the base of the Painship.

"Good luck, sir," Engineer Otto told the Baron, the green glowing aura giving him an unearthly tinge.

"For your sake, I hope so," the Baron said and ascended into the heart of the Painship.

. . . . .

The Painship felt familiar and comfortable to the Baron, like a dear, old friend. The basic construction of the craft had appeared to him in a dream, during his most disconsolate days following Madeline's demise. The scientific application of pain, he discovered, opened a door to worlds of horror and wonder. Fortunately he already had the inclination.

As he settled into his Fibroacoustic Psychic Induction Recliner, the Baron suddenly sensed that he wasn't alone. A similar experience to when Madeline had visited him, but this was on a different scale. The sisters of Madeline, although Madeline was an only child.

The countdown began in his ear.

Across from the induction recliner was a silver reflective panel covering the Debasing Pods. In its surface he saw faces. Pale female faces, an ocean of them. They wore tired, sad, angry expressions.

"Wait a minute," he said.

The faces grew larger.

"*Now, now ...*," Maria whispered.

"Hold the countdown!" the Baron called out.

The faces left the panel.

"Stop the—"

The specters were on him. They penetrated his soul and inflicted pain on him, a pain unlike anything he had ever received, or delivered. This wasn't torture. This was pain with a purpose.

The Baron screamed.

The Painship began to rise.

As the pain accumulated and explored every region of the entity called Baron Roderick Armstrong, Painship*Junior High Locker Room Shower Humiliation* entered the Other Realms. A darkness deeper than the dead swept over the ship. The Painship abruptly picked up speed, faster faster, faster faster.

The light was black, and the black was very dark.

They were no longer being propelled, but pulled.

But by what?

Or whom?

And, most significantly:

To where?

.....

The Ethyls did not back off. Roderick the Torturnaut rode the dark highway of his own soul all the way to the end of the line, the darkness retreating slightly, a reddish light visible now, the Painship easing to a stop near a craggy hillside. The sky was bloody, the ground wet and shadowed.

The Baron thought he was still alive. The Ethyls used their energy to revive him before departing for a better, brighter place, and he left the Painship under their power.

One small, blistering step for man.

The Baron wandered this wasteland, confused, driven. Madeline. Madeline must be here. That's why the journey was so difficult. She is in a troublesome place. It made sense.

"Madeline!" he cried out. "Madeline! It is I, your Roderick! Where are you?"

The Baron came at last to the base of a rock-ridden hill. Lightning showed him the scene. There was a woman stationed on top of the bluff, her dark robes fluttering in the dank breeze. She watched.

The Baron lurched up the hill toward her. He fell near the summit and crawled the rest of the way to her.

"Madeline?" the Baron asked when he reached her feet. He sought her hand.

When they touched, his fingers began to smolder.

"Eeeeeyaaaaaa!" howled the Baron. He yanked his hand back. He raised his head to look into the bleak gray eyes of the woman.

"I . . . I know you," he said, struggling to his feet. "I know where I am."

"Then come," said the woman, taking his hand again. They walked along the hillside, the Baron's head bowed, his hand on fire, as the woman led him to a cave, where the others had been suffering for their sins forever, and he took his place among them.

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## SUGARPLUM DAYS

The village of Goldstadt slowly edged back toward normality, the sky scrubbed clean of Castle Armstrong's ominous battlements. The torchy villagers had stormed the castle, trashed the place, liberated the occupants, buried the dead, comforted the survivors. They had been under the blood-caked heel of the Baron for so long, it was some time before they reclaimed their old lives. Bonfires were still lit, in remembrance of lost times. The garlic was used in homemade spaghetti sauce recipes. The crosses were hung wherever they looked best aesthetically, not just on vulnerable entry points. The holy water stayed in the holy places.

Part of the return to the natural routine was celebrating holidays and events as before. Although Halloween was skipped, they did up Thanksgiving and Christmas right, scars balmed with sugarplums.

Birthdays were no longer a time to take cover, hide progeny under a bushel. The parents of Goldstadt tried to make up for all that their children had missed during the years of siege.

For instance, today it was little Greta Schulz's tenth birthday party. Greta lived in a trailer park on the west side of town, across the street from the waste treatment plant. Her mom and dad had scrimped and saved for weeks to give Greta a very fine birthday indeed. They even hired a clown to entertain.

Patches the Big-Hearted Clown performed a few card tricks, including the Teleporting Card and the Magic Riffle. He did the Color-Changing Rope trick. He pinned the tail on himself. He sang the old nonsense standard, "Who Threw the Lederhosen in Mrs. Schmidlapp's Strudel?"

"Now is time for balloon animals!" announced Patches.

"Hooray!" cried the children.

"A puppy dog, you'll see."

His hands were busy busy, and finally he finished. He carefully studied his handiwork.

"That is not a puppy dog," one of the kids pointed out.

"You are right," the clown agreed, letting the warped balloon go pffft. "Now what should we do?"

"Play games!" a boy called out.

"Okay, we play games now," Patches agreed, removing the lid on a mysterious red box, the diversions he had devised provoking screams of joy among the party guests, yes joy, the end, now take pill that comes under your door and go to sleep.

The End

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