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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 18
3RD NOVEMBER 2019

PETRO 184

BY SCOTT
MCGREGOR—
LET THE
NIGHT
COMMENCE...

KIMBERLEY'S

BED

BY
MICHAEL J
MOORE—
A KNIFE IN
EACH
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**THE STARRY
MESSENGER
BY CARLTON
HERZOG**

**THE DOLPHIN IN
THE TOILET
BY STEVE LAKER**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

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Michael J Moore, Carlton Herzog, Blake Rogers, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 15, Issue 18
3rd November 2019

Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to editor@schlock.co.uk

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Satan, Sin and Death (A Scene from Milton's 'Paradise Lost')* by William Hogarth. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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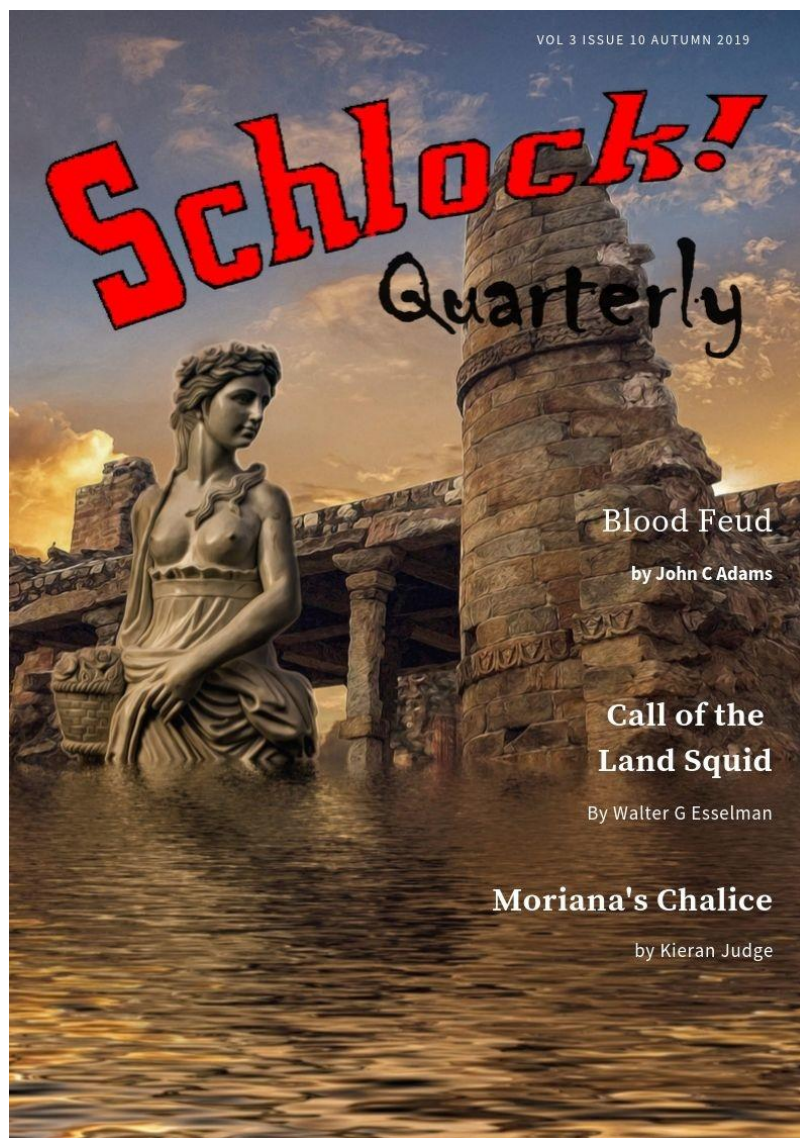
EDITORIAL

This week, a gas station attendant learns something new about his co-worker. Kim tries to tell her mom about the monster that wants to play with her. An astronaut returns from space to face the New Inquisition. A trapped dolphin feels the need to breed. A man's insight drives him mad.

Lod Jovis and his barbarian companion cross the terminator. Lowell is still bewildered by murderous dolls. And Polaris learns the terrible secret of the Gateway to the Future.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"I'M SORRY, MADAME ZORA IS NOT AVAILABLE BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 2 AND 5PM. SHE DOES REMOTE CHANNELING DURING THOSE HOURS."

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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PETRO 184 by Scott McGregor

As I stepped through the front door, I heard the tunes coming from Vicky's outdated music collection.

"Shit," I mumbled upon seeing her.

Today I debated not showing up for my shift. I even pondered quitting altogether, entering 2020 with some sense of spontaneous uncertainty. But I slugged my way into the same job I knew I'd be working for another year, if not longer.

At the front counter, Vicky leant back with her headphones in and her eyes shut, a snore wheezing. She was too absorbed in her metallic tunes to acknowledge my arrival. Vicky Grewal, a girl hired two months ago, consistently late and inattentive, covered in sleeves of tattoos that forced any father to undergo disappointment. She wore the same necklace daily, a red upside-down pentagram to go with her lousy taste in style.

I kicked the desk and said, "You're relieved of duty."

Vicky awoke, then smacked her lips with gum and looked at me with the sort of annoyance an atheist had when listening to religious fanatics preach about the meaning of life. "So I am," she sneered. Then, after a dirty gaze, "How do you plan on spending your New Year's, Trent?"

"The usual." I opened up my laptop and signed onto Netflix. "You?"

"I'm meeting up with some friends. New Year's is a time of celebration, and nobody should ever be alone, don't you think?"

I rolled my eyes. Each shift I shared with Vicky often passed with her speaking like a shrink, acting thirty years older than her age.

Don't humour her. "Yeah," I said monotonously. "Have a nice time."

"I'll see you next year, Trent." She gathered her belongings, walked towards the door, but paused, and glanced back over. "You know, Petro has some really nice food available, don't you think?"

I looked at the overcooked hotdogs, shrivelled pizza, and greyed corndogs and said, "Yeah, if you want your stomach pumped."

"Oh Trent, don't be so hard on yourself. You don't give yourself enough credit."

I had no clue what she meant by that, and I didn't amuse her with a retort. She left the store, and I sat near the desk and watched an episode of *Black Mirror*.

Despite my utter loathing for Vicky's insinuation, she had a point. For the past four New Years, I had attended a shift at Petro, never receiving something better to do. Tonight, fragments of *Stranger Things* and *The Walking Dead* gave me moments of satisfaction in an

otherwise disappointing final hour of 2019. The voice in the back of my mind which sounded awfully similar to my mother whispered *get some friends, you fucking loser*.

“Hey mister, you open?” The shallow voice belonged to a burly fellow outside the door. “I just want to buy a few things.”

“Come on in,” I said boorishly, more attentive to what played on my laptop.

My unexpected customer returned to the counter with a pack of cigarettes, a case of Budweiser and a retail magazine. “So, you alone tonight?”

“Unfortunately.” I scanned his items, avoiding conversation.

“You don’t have to be.”

“Not many people like to hang out at a gas station this time of year.” I made out the tattoo on the customer’s chest; an upside down pentagram. “You know a girl named Vicky Grewal by chance?”

“Fear not his coming, my friend, and let the night commence.”

I stared at him blankly, saying to myself *he’s clearly drunk*. He placed his money on the counter and rushed out the store with his purchase.

Exactly as I predicted, I ordered myself a pizza at 11:45. As I waited, the clock struck midnight, fireworks imploding in the far distance. Ten minutes later, the pizza delivery man knocked on the door.

“I ordered this last year,” I joked.

“Pardon?” he asked, an empty look.

“Never mind.” I slipped him a twenty and shut the door, refusing to explain the humour.

The smell of the pizza overpowered the stench of gas and cigarettes, and my stomach roared in hunger. I opened the box and gazed in horror at the pineapple covered crust. Pineapple, the one ingredient nobody should put on top of a pizza, put my appetite at momentary pause.

I peeked out the door and saw the delivery man approach his car. “Hey!” I shouted across the parking lot. “This isn’t what I ordered.”

He turned back and stared at me with perplexity, as if he heard me speak in a different language. Then he looked inanimate when the club struck the back of his head. He dropped to his knees, blood spurled out from his forehead while someone dressed in black slipped a knife around his neck. A gurgling sound followed when the stranger opened the deliverer’s throat.

“Christ,” I choked. The pizza box slipped through my fingers and rained the ground with pineapples.

The stranger's gaze shifted towards me, his eyes hidden behind a mask with a red upside-down pentagram sprung along the surface. He strolled over the corpse towards the store, and I hastily re-entered Petro and locked the door.

Two more strangers emerged onto the parking lot, dressed exactly like the murderer. The smallest of the three of them met with me face to face behind the door, pulling out a knife. I was being stared at, not by the psycho's eyes, but by the pentagram symbol on their mask, screaming at me saying *you're next*.

"Hey," she said, a familiar voice. Vicky slipped off her mask and tapped her knife against the door. "You're relieved of duty."

"Vicky, what the hell are you doing?"

"Careful, Trent. Only the most dedicated of servants are allowed to use that word." She fidgeted with the door handle. "Can you let me in, please?"

I wasn't religious by any means, but I thanked God that Vicky wasn't a key holder at Petro. I whipped out my phone and dialled 911. "You're crazy. I'm calling the police."

"That's fine. By the time they get here, it won't matter." She slipped her mask back on, and she, along with the other two, walked back to the deliverer's corpse.

"911, what's your emergency," the receiver said, a woman's voice.

"Hello, hello, I... there's uh... shit." Words didn't properly flow out of my mouth. How could they, considering in the span of two minutes I witnessed my co-worker and her friends murder a pizza delivery man for reasons unbeknownst to me. "There's been a murder. Three people dressed in black with red masks just killed a guy outside of my workplace. I'm locked inside but I think they want to hurt me."

"What's your address?" she said.

"184th Avenue, Petro Gasoline!"

Emergency services hung up. I pressed my face against the glass as I waited for the police to arrive, too scared to take my eyes off Vicky and her friends. I knew she was fucked up, but I never imagined she was capable of something like this.

Vicky and her friends dragged the corpse beside a pump. The deliverer's body lay flat against the ground as they sprayed gasoline over him, followed by a lit match. The flames ran and created a pattern, the same upside-down pentagram I had seen all night. The three of them spread out evenly, and my mouth hung open, counting away the seconds for someone to appear and put a stop to this madness.

Vicky's accomplices removed their masks. The same beefy customer from earlier stood next to Vicky, along with a new face, a bald individual with the pentagram tattooed on his forehead. He opened up a book, and they all started speaking at once, word for word the same. It took me a moment to register they weren't merely talking, but chanting, and the fires whirled and danced in rhythm as the body charred.

And from the flames, it was born.

It started out tiny, a shrivelled little abnormality rolled up in a ball, wrapped in a jelly looking cocoon. As it enlarged, the womb like home of the creature popped like a teenage pimple. The creature spread its abnormally long arms and legs, with saffron nails comparable to an expensive acrylic set. Twice as tall as any of the Satanists, the vermin stood on its two feet, circled by the fire that bore it.

Its lengthy body pulsed, a crimson tone, redder than an unscathed sunburn. The wings scrunched behind its back throbbed and stretched like a vampire bat out of hibernation. Two edged horns rested atop its forehead, with an upside-down pentagram in the centre. It winked with eyes blacker than a blank laptop screen. Its face, its mouthless, glistening face looked as smooth as a brass instrument. The tail sprung out from above its butt, a slimy appendage split in half with two sharpened ends. It stared down the parking lot, past the three Satanist and into Petro, its attention on me.

In the span of a second, maybe less, the glass shattered and the monster's slimy hand wrapped around my waist. It pulled, and I gasped for air while it dragged me against the pavement, a trickle of urine running down my pants.

Vicky lingered by, positioned to the side of the demon and held a slice of pizza. "Should've let me split this with you. I love Hawaiian."

"What is that thing?!"

"Trent, allow me to introduce you to my good friend, Satan." She and the other two Satanists bowed. "He only comes out to play once a year."

Satan's purr sent a shiver down my spine, but that was minuscule compared to the sound that followed. The sound of skin stretching, then a lengthy tear. Blue fluid seeped out as Satan's mouth ripped open, his teeth perversely disjoined. He purred again, and I felt his hot breath caress my face.

"It was supposed to be you, Trent," Vicky stated. "You could've been his vessel for tonight, but you had to order a pizza and bring an innocent stranger into this. Oh well. At least you're not spending New Year's alone this time."

Satan inched closer to me until his tongue brushed across my face, his saliva warm and sticky. I couldn't look away from his blackened eyes, staring deeply into the grotesqueness of this creature's face, far more horrifying than the Demogorgon, Walkers, and other monstrosities that appeared in my favourite television shows put together. It was in that moment that my brain finally put two and two together. *I'm tonight's dinner.*

The sound of sirens grew louder and louder at a distant pace, and the flashes of red and blue hurtled onto the parking lot. Two men, one slender and plump, exited the cop car and stood in momentary awe. They drew their firearms, taken aback in horror by Satan's presence.

"What the hell is that thing, Mick?" the hefty deputy asked.

Satan purred again, his tongue whirling. He dropped on all fours and glided to the two cops. Without hesitation, they opened fire, and I realized a well-placed bullet could make even the devil bleed. Yet despite the amount of blue fluid that spurted out, Satan charged forwards unfazed.

Satan dug his nails into the plump deputy, and with his wide, gaping mouth, sucked the cop up like a bowl of noodles and gulped. He grew bigger, well over ten feet tall now, and veins pulsated over his hardened biceps.

Mick fired until there were three distinct clicks from his gun. Satan jolted upwards, his wings spread out and taking flight. He landed atop the thin deputy feet first and pinned him against the pavement.

I couldn't bring myself to watch again when I heard the slurping. Then I noticed it, the open door of the pizza boy's car. A wave of energy rippled inside me and I sprinted to the car while Satan continued to feast. From behind, I could tell someone was chasing after me, but I dared not look back. I entered and slammed the car door moments away from being grabbed by Vicky. With the door locked and keys still in the ignition, I put the car into drive.

I pressed firmly onto the pedal, and after years overdue, I ditched my shift at Petro. The lights from the police car continued to flash as I exited the parking lot. Then I heard the loud thump from above, and saw the double ended tail wafting left and right. Satan latched on top of the car. His tail pierced through the windshield and grazed my shoulder, and with a sudden haste out of my control, I drove the car to a sharp left, and crashed straight through a DVD store up for lease.

Once I regained consciousness, the first thing I noticed was the clock flashing 12:42, and then the surge of agony hit me harder than the cancellation of *Arrested Development*. In my twenty-two years of life, I can confidently say I've never broken a bone. Now, at the start of 2020, I could cross something off my unwanted bucket list, as I stare at the bone poking out of my forearm. In the rear view mirror I saw the blood trickling down my forehead. In front of me the movie shop burned, charring up the Blu-rays. The scent of burnt plastic and smoke clung in the air, and fireworks still exploded in the far distance.

I pried open the door and tumbled onto the road. My knees ached and legs throbbed, merely crawling with my one good arm against the pavement, leaving a trail of blood behind.

Once again, the purr loomed.

I glanced back and noticed the demonic shadow emerge from the flames, its muscles jacked and throbbing like a waxed body builder. Satan stood taller than the building itself, his wings spread out wide and firm, a king claiming his throne.

Whenever moments of weakness occur for me, I hold back tears. Stuck working at a gas station, having no friends, and spending New Years alone; those were all moments I could retain my self-esteem. But knowing I'd be part of tonight's meal for a creature I once thought a religious myth, the waterworks streamed.

The thumps moved closer, and I continued to crawl, until I saw the boot in front of my face.

“Happy New Year, Trent,” Vicky said, as I felt the hot breath slithering down my neck.

THE END

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KIMBERLEY'S BED by Michael J Moore

The bed was shaking and Kim was afraid because it was dark and it was almost like the earthquake that had happened one night before mom told her what an earthquake was. To make matters worse, raindrops were tapping on the roof of the trailer, and it sounded like giant spiders scurrying around up there.

Kim could have handled another earthquake. She was four, and earthquakes couldn't hurt you—not the little ones that happened in Washington, at least. But this was no earthquake because only the bed was shaking. The rest of the trailer was as still as the car that the next-door-neighbours kept on blocks. She knew because it had happened last night, too, and that time she might have thought it was an earthquake, had the monster not been in her room.

The shadows had been there, though, like they were now. Lots of them. Thin, wavy ones, that looked like snakes crawling up every wall. So she'd rolled off of the mattress, but the floor hadn't moved. Neither had her dresser or toy box. Only the bed, which just kept shaking the way Mom's phone did whenever daddy called from jail. It made the picture of Cinderella on her blanket almost seem like she were dancing.

The shadows had swayed like seaweed under water, and then Kim had glanced at the mirror above her dresser and saw the monster's eyes, glowing orange—the same colour as her one-piece pyjamas—staring right at her like she were a bowl of ice cream. She'd screamed so loud that her throat burned, and she'd run to mom and learned her lesson because Gus was over.

Gus was here again tonight, so Kim didn't dare scream. The bed shook, and the shadows squirmed, letting her know that the monster was back, but Kim wasn't going to look in the mirror again. She'd known he was coming anyway, because he'd been here every night for close to a week.

So she hugged the stuffed dog that she used to think would keep her safe, feeling her pyjamas stick to her body from sweat. Her chest heaved up and down, up and down, and she wanted to cry, but didn't because that only helped if somebody cared that you were crying.

A gust of cold wind blew her red hair over her eyes.

"Stop!" she whispered, releasing her grip on Dog McGee, and brushing her bangs so fast that she slapped herself in the face. "Please, just go away! Leave me alone!"

Then the monster laughed, and Kim couldn't hold the tears back any longer because he had never laughed before.

It had all started under the bed. The very first night, she'd just thought there was a mouse down there, running around and scratching at the carpet. It had scared the living daylights out of her anyway, so she'd gotten mom, and they'd spent nearly half an hour searching for the pest.

That happened for a couple of times, then toys started moving and falling onto the floor, and mom had taken a wooden spoon to Kim's bottom for not being in bed. When Kim swore it was a ghost playing with her toys, and not her, mom hit her again for lying. But when the

shadows appeared, Kim knew it was a monster, and not a ghost. She didn't tell mom until the next day after Gus left.

The monster's laugh wasn't like anything she'd heard before. It was almost a whisper, because it hissed and whistled like the wind. Kim cried and sniffed as he continued to laugh and the bed continued to shake. She used to like the rain on account of it reminding her of running under the sprinkler in the summer. Now she hated it because if it wasn't so loud, mom would have been able to hear the bedposts as they tapped the trailer's floor, then she'd believe her.

The monster whispered her name and she covered her eyes with her hands, pressing so hard that she saw red.

"Please just stop!"

"Hahahahahahaha! Are you afraid, Kim? Oh, baby, you don't have to be scared. I just wanna play with you."

Then she knew it didn't just sound like the wind. It was the wind. It was icy-cold, like she was lying next to a fan. It made her think of orange and green leaves, blowing along the sidewalk. It shouldn't have been able to form words, yet she could understand it perfectly. She felt her bottom lip curl into a frown. Every muscle in her face scrunched up without her consent.

"Oh Kim," the monster whispered. "Are you gonna cry, pretty girl? Are you gonna cry out to your mommy now? She doesn't care, baby. You know that. She's just gonna hit you with a spoon, or make you eat soap for telling lies. Don't cry to Mommy, Kim. Play with me instead."

That's when Kimberly Brenton lost control. It started deep in her stomach, and grew in volume faster than Mom's car could even pick up speed at a green light. She let out a long wail, crying like a new-born, and the bed stopped shaking but the shadows still danced on the wall, letting her know the monster hadn't left. So Kim kept crying until heavy footsteps appeared in the hall. The door flew open, and the room filled with light, causing the shadows to finally vanish. Mom stood in the doorway looking like a tall, thin clone of Kim, her straight red hair flowing over a baby-blue robe.

"Kim? Baby, what is it?"

Kim stopped screaming, stared at her mom attempting to catch her breath. The music Mom liked to dance to while she cleaned played lightly from somewhere outside the room. Kim was aware that her face expressed nothing less than pure agony, but she was unable to do anything about it. She opened her mouth to tell Mom about the monster, thought about the spoon, hiccupped, and shut it again. She wiped away tears and snot with the back of her hand.

Mom didn't take another step into the room, just locked eyes with her daughter, and Kim knew what was coming next.

"No. No. No. Don't even think about it, girly. You're not sleeping in my room. For fuck's sake, Kim. You're four years old."

“Mommy—”

“No Kim. This is BS. You know I don’t wanna hear about any monsters tonight, don’t you?”

Kim sniffed.

Mom raised her voice. “Don’t you?”

“Yes Mommy. I just—”

“You just nothing! You always do this when Gus is over, don’t you?”

“No.”

“Oh?” Mom let out a fake laugh. “But I think you do. I think someone’s a little jellyfish. But listen up, ‘cause mom needs a life too. So I don’t wanna hear another peep come outta this room tonight. You hear me?”

Kim told her mom that she’d heard.

Mom said, “But do you understand?” then turned her head toward the hall. “What? Why? Dude, just smoke in the room. No. Just open the window. Yeah. I’ll be right there.”

Gus’s hand appeared around Mom’s waist. He smacked her bottom, then he was gone. When mom looked back, she was smiling, but her expression quickly went flat.

“Do you, Kim?”

“Mom, I just—”

“Uh-uh. No more noise. You’re going to sleep. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Good.” Mom smiled again. “Always nice to have an understanding. You know I love you, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then what do you say?”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

“I know you do, baby. Now get some sleep.”

With that, she killed the light, shut the door, and the monster laughed again, the cold breeze that accompanied his voice nipping at Kim’s face.

“See, Kim? See? Didn’t I tell you she wouldn’t care?”

As Kim's eyes readjusted to the dark, she saw the shadows once again dancing on the walls.

"My mom cares!" she hissed back, refusing to cry again. "She loves me."

"Hahahahaha! She does, does she? Then tell me, Kim. Why won't she believe you about me?"

"Because," Kim spoke through a frown. "You hide every time she comes in. You won't let her see you!"

Her hair tossed in an extra strong gust of wind as the monster said, "Because I shouldn't have to, should I? A mother who loves her daughter would believe her. I needed you to see that, baby. I need you to understand so we can play together." The snaky shadows grew thicker, and stretched across the walls, reaching for Kim like they wanted to tickle her. Every muscle in her body tensed, she trembled. Outside, the rain continued to tap the aluminium roof like a giant was pouring a bag of rice over the trailer. "Don't you wanna play with me, Kim? We'll have so much fun together. It's almost Halloween, and I wanna dress you up like a princess and take you trick-or-treating. It'll be so much fun you won't know why you were ever afraid."

Kim's voice came out in hiccups and yelps, but remained a whisper as she asked, "What are you gonna do to me?"

"What do you think, baby?"

"Please. Please don't kill me. I don't wanna die. I swear I'll be good."

"But you have to, pretty girl. You have to die first, then we can play. I just need you to remember one thing, okay?"

"Please," Kim sniffed.

"Don't yell, Kim. You don't want your mom to get the spoon, do you?" The shadows were so big now, that only small slivers of light existed in Kim's bedroom. Two bright orange eyes appeared just over her face, glaring down at her, and the freezing wind blew so hard that her hair went absolutely wild.

That was it. Kim could take the spoon. She could take the strap from Mom's suitcase. She could take whatever punishment awaited her. Sucking in a deep breath, she prepared to scream. But a thick shadow covered her face, as another wrapped around her wrist. Then the other wrist. Two more coiled on her ankles, and Kim's body was stretched across the twin-sized bed like the letter X. She couldn't move. She couldn't scream, because she couldn't even breathe.

The wind howled and whistled as the room grew so cold it was like being in a freezer. The monster said, "Remember, Kim, your mom let this happen because she doesn't love you. She's a liar. All she cares about is that guy in her bed. What's his name? Russ? Raul? Oh, yeah. Gus."

Kim tried to kick, to fight, to scream through her nose, but that was covered too. Her eyes averted to the right, where Dog McGee sat smiling, his cloth tongue sticking out of his mouth, his black plastic eyes staring into hers. She felt hot tears once again pouring down either side of her face and into her ears. Before she could stop herself, she wet her pyjamas. Her body jerked, and after what seemed like forever, her ears began to ring. The room spun briefly, and Kim went to sleep, but the monster didn't let up.

The bed started vibrating again, but this time it was because Kimberly Brenton was going into convulsions. When her heart finally stopped beating, she soiled herself as the shadows uncoiled from her limbs. The one on her face slithered into her mouth, and once its tail disappeared, Kim's eyes popped open, but she still didn't breathe. Her heart still didn't beat. She sat upright, looked around, and climbed out of bed, walking barefoot to the door.

Twisting the knob, she opened it slowly and carefully so it didn't squeak too loud. The entire house was dark, but Kim saw everything perfectly. Mom's door was shut, a few feet down the hall, on the left. Kim shut her own door, and tiptoed past it, hearing mom's music inside, and her bed moving as she made the noises she always made at night when Gus was over. Kim had opened the door once and seen her sitting on his belly, bouncing up and down, up and down, then she'd crept back to her own room giggling before she earned a spanking for being out of bed.

Kim walked through the living room, where Grandpa's old coo-coo-clock hung high up on the wall. Mom's grey cat, Silas, hissed at her from the couch, then darted across the room as she stepped into the kitchen. Sliding a chair quietly from the table to the counter, she climbed up on the seat and stood looking at everything she wasn't allowed to play with. Toaster. Blender. Mom's glass baking dish which needed washing. A black ashtray with cigarette butts sticking up like tree stumps.

A wooden block full of knives with smooth black handles.

Kim selected two of the smallest ones, the ones mom used to cut her meat. Taking the ashtray as well, she hopped down as quietly as she could, and made her way once more through the living room. She stopped at the entrance to the hall—two knives in one hand, dirty ashtray in the other—and stared down at her closed bedroom door. Silas growled like a lawnmower from somewhere out of sight, but Kim paid him no mind. She could still hear all the noises coming from Mom's room: movement, moaning, music.

Kimberly watched and waited for nearly seven minutes. Then, just before eleven, she cocked her arm back and sent the ashtray hurling toward her bedroom door. Grey ashes flew everywhere, and butts landed softly on the brown carpet just before it smashed into the thin wood.

The movement in Mom's room stopped abruptly, then the bed squeaked, her door flew open, and the dance music grew louder. Mom appeared, completely naked for a fraction of a second, before she pulled the robe over her pale body.

"I don't know. She's flirting with an ass-whooping, is what she's doing. What the—did you spill an ashtray?"

"No," Gus called from out of sight.

“Sure?” Mom treaded carefully through the butts, and headed toward Kim’s room, reaching for the door. “Dude, there’s a—”

THOOONG! The clock wailed as its tiny doors swung open and the bird flew out, mounted to its perch. COO-COO! COO-COO! COO-COO!

Mom jumped startled, shook her head, then gripped the knob, as Kim took off at a full sprint down the hall, a steak knife in each hand. Mom didn’t hear her approaching over the noise of the clock.

COO-COO! COO-COO! COO-COO!

Kim passed Mom’s open door, catching sight of Gus in her peripheral. He lay nude on her bed, his legs open, his penis pointing to the ceiling.

COO-COO! COO-COO! COO-COO!

Mom still hadn’t opened the door when Kim reached her.

COO-COO! COO-COO!

Reaching up, Kim thrust one of the serrated blades into her mother’s lower back, just inches to the left of her spine, and pulled it back out, watching dark blood expand on thin baby blue fabric. Mom gasped, pressed her palms and chest against the closed door. Kim stabbed her again, this time with the other knife, on her right side. The second it came out, Mom spun around and screamed, backing into the door, then sliding down and landing on her bottom. Two red lines trailed above her, and her robe opened, revealing her ta-tas as she grasped at the rug with both hands. Her eyes looked like they wanted to fly out of her head.

“KIM! WHAT THE—NO! AAAHHH!!!”

Kim thrust one knife after the other like a gorilla beating the dirt, stabbing her mom in her face, in her neck, in her bare chest.

“Carrie?” Gus’s voice rose over the music. “Babe, you good?”

But Mom couldn’t answer because all she could do was scream and cry, and try to shove her daughter off of her. A gargling noise came from her mouth, followed by hissing. She choked and fell limp, but Kim didn’t stop stabbing her because the monster was right. She was having fun. Then she was grabbed by her hair and thrown down the hall, where she landed on her back and saw Gus’s naked butt. He was standing over mom.

“WHAT THE FUCK!” He leaned down and took her face in one hand, moved it around. His fingers left bloody streaks on her cheeks when he finally let go. Mom just stared at the corner where the wall met the ceiling, her mouth open like there was something she wanted to say, dark red liquid decorating her body and face in splotches. Gus stood up straight, turned and glared at Kim wide eyed. “What the fuck did you do?”

He was a pretty boy. Even at four, Kim knew this, had heard Mom's friends say it all the time. He had blond hair, which he shaved on the sides, and it looked like he combed it all day. Kim always laughed when he put his finger with the teardrop tattoo under his eye so it looked like he was crying. His penis wasn't pointing to the ceiling anymore, but shrivelled and attempting to hide inside of his body like a turtle.

"Jesus, Kim. Holy shah—What the fuck did you—" He took a step forward. "Kim, gimme those fucking knives!"

Kim jumped to her feet, bared her teeth and hissed like Silas had. Gus stumbled back, falling over and landing on top of Mom. He cried out and slid over so he was sitting next to her, and her head toppled onto his shoulder. Kim smiled, turned around and walked off, leaving bloody footprints in the hall. Behind her, Gus's breath seemed to be exhaling with the beat of the music in Mom's room.

Kimberly Brenton opened the front door, stepped out into the cold night, and made her way through the trailer park, a knife in each hand. Rain washed over her, leaving crimson puddles in her wake.

As she passed a home with a motion sensor out front, the porch light clicked on, casting her shadow on the wet gravel. It looked like tentacles—like the shadow of an exaggerated squid—or like snakes coming off of the little girl's body, dancing and swaying in every direction.

THE END

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THE STARRY MESSENGER by Carlton Herzog

The tritanium walls reflect the noonday sun with a laser-like intensity. Pristine shrines to man's ingenuity, they are impervious to bullets and artillery. Indeed, their impenetrability makes them both an ideal prison and backstop for executions—so long as the firing squad remains behind the ricochet guard, also made of tritanium. Thus, while much of science has spun retrograde these last hundred years, metallurgy has, along with weapons, continued to evolve. The need to kill seems hardwired into human DNA.

Colonel John Russell found the walls grotesque. Partly because they were inscribed like stain glass windows with the lives of the saints, and partly because he was about to be executed within the hour. A positive view of things seemed out place. And all that reflected light hurt his eyes. The firing squad was issued protective polarized eyewear; the condemned were not.

Russell knew there would be no last minute gubernatorial or presidential reprieve, because there were no more governors or presidents. They had been shot when the prisons were still made of stone walls and iron bars. Barring a divine revelation or an outright *deus ex machina*, Russell—like every other heretic before him—would be shot to death—on Live Link, the global information feed.

Russell's troubles started two hundred years earth time, 13 years dilated mission time, ago. He along with eleven other men and women had been chosen for the *Icarus* mission. Its goal was to explore an earthlike planet discovered by the Daedalus Space Telescope. Mission time was six years out, six years back, with a year in between to study the planet's flora and fauna.

On paper it was a straightforward affair. Go see and report back. Confidence in the mag fusion engines was high because they had performed flawlessly in all their trials achieving near relativistic speeds.

The *Icarus* had all the amenities necessary for crew comfort and sanity for such a long voyage: stores of food to last for thirty years, three enormous greenhouses, livestock and fish, a running track, pool, escape pods and shuttlecraft.

When *Icarus* launched, its crew was revered as a band of heroes. Children flocked to science and math and biology as never before. It was the golden age of enlightenment. It seemed that man had finally shed the choke hold of irrationality and superstition and all things make-believe.

But outward appearances were not inward reality. Many people yearned for a return to simpler times. Life they believed was too fast paced, complex and technical. That yearning for simpler times was ecumenical, transcending national borders and religions.

So, the Later Day Luddites watched and waited and schemed. After a few decades most people had forgotten about *Icarus*. There were more pressing problems here. War, famine, pestilence and death. The four horsemen it seemed were unimpressed by man's accomplishments in space and thought little of his newfound enlightenment.

Religion began to inch its way back up the food chain. It was helped along the way by science's inability to explain the whys of existence in a chaotic world. It could for the most part explain the how. But that was not enough. And when it came to the big questions of life

after death, the existence of god, right and wrong, it fell, in most peoples' eyes, flat on its face. Thus, the religious model of the world over time, gradually displaced the scientific one. And with that displacement came the ouster of political leaders in favour of spiritual ones, and after that a spate of anti-blasphemy laws carrying capital punishment. Non-belief, especially when openly voiced was a form of self-induced suicide in the hyper-religious climate that was thriving a hundred years after the *Icarus* left.

John Russell came back to a world of few books. Most had been burned. Censorship was the order of the day in all the media. A minor slip of the tongue could mean twenty lashes. A major one meant a visit from the New Revived Inquisition and life imprisonment or death.

The Master ran the world, aided by the Seven Holies, the super-bishops who administered the seven continents. With famine vanquished, pestilence a distant memory, and abiding peace world-wide, there were no grounds for complaint. So according to the Master, dissent was the work of the Devil.

When Russell landed at the spaceport, there were no marching bands or reporters to greet him. Instead, the ship was surrounded by the Master's Personal Guard. Questions needed to be answered not the least of which being why 11 members of the expedition were missing. The Guard escorted him to prison for interrogation by the Grand Inquisitor.

As he sat in his cell, he tried to make sense of what was happening:

"I am the only man to visit another star system and live to tell of it. And this is how they treat me? Has everyone gone insane? They treat me as if I carried an infectious disease."

The Inquisition was short and to the point.

Inquisitor: "What was your mission?"

Russell: "We were ordered to explore Zavenga three, an earthlike planet."

Inquisitor: "Sir, you do know there is only one earth. To say otherwise is blasphemy."

Russell: "I said earthlike."

Inquisitor: "You did indeed. The Master is of the mind that you visited an impostor maliciously created to lure you from the path of righteousness. You, sir, are nothing more than the devil's errand boy sent to corrupt us."

Russell: "I don't think the devil had anything to do with it because he doesn't exist."

Inquisitor: "Doesn't he? How, sir, would you know that?"

Russell: "Reason."

Inquisitor: "You have misplaced your faith. Surely you know there is an infinity of things beyond reason. The New Bible teaches us that the greatest deceiver in the world next to the devil himself is reason. Unchecked, wild it will undo a man. But let us return to this later. I wish to know more about your crew."

Russell: "How they died?"

Inquisitor: "That can wait. I want to know about the sexual activities aboard ship. According to your written statement, six unmarried men and six unmarried women lived in sin for the duration of their time on ship. Is that true?"

Russell: "It was believed that sexual release would alleviate the tension and boredom of such a protracted journey. So yes. There was sexual activity aboard between the men and women."

Inquisitor: "And was there also same sex sexual activity."

Russell: "I suspected it, but regardless, if it did occur, it didn't violate mission rules."

Inquisitor: "Was there a chaplain on board?"

Russell: "Yes. Rogers the psychologist was also an ordained minister."

Inquisitor: "Did he have a problem with all the fornicating couples around him?"

Russell: "Not that I am aware of."

Inquisitor: "How did the other eleven die?"

Russell: "The trip to Zavenga was relatively uneventful. Boring in fact. Things changed. People changed, after we made planetfall."

Inquisitor: "You mean after you met the Inhabitant."

Russell: "Yes. He didn't do anything directly. It was what he had to say. I think it made everybody crazy."

Inquisitor: "He was human?"

Russell: "He appeared human. A middle-aged man. He said it would be easier for us to process his existence and understand what he had to say. I think he underestimated the impact of his words. Or overestimated our abilities to process such heady information."

Inquisitor; "Did you ever stop to think he might be Satan himself?"

Russell: "Not for one minute."

Inquisitor: "What did he tell you?"

Russell: "He said that what we think of as the universe is a power plant feeding energy into a higher dimension. Life is just a by-product of energy manufacture."

Inquisitor: "That makes no sense."

Russell: “You asked me what he said. I didn’t get it either. He explained that all the matter we see was created to generate trans-dimensional energy in the form of gravity, dark matter, and dark energy. For example, gravity is so weak relative to the other three forces—electromagnetism, the strong and weak nuclear forces—because it’s bleeding through to that other dimension. He went on to say that dark matter and dark energy would likewise be stronger here were it not for this bleed-off effect.

Inquisitor: “Did you ask him about God?”

Russell: “I did.”

Inquisitor: “And?”

Russell; “You’re not going to like it.”

Inquisitor: “What did he say?”

Russell: “He said that man was like that extremophile bacteria—*radio durans*—that lived in the cooling ponds of nuclear power plants. The difference between man and his bacterial counterpart is that the bacteria do not believe that the nuclear plant was created just for them, or that they are the centre of the universe.”

Inquisitor: “And?”

Russell: “That’s it. That’s all he said. But I think it screwed with everybody’s head. The idea that we are nothing more than arrogant bacteria, coupled with our lack of emotional anchorage to our families back home, sent everyone around the bend.”

Inquisitor: “Do you believe him?”

Russell: “I think it’s a more likely explanation than the one offered by you. Namely, that the 100 billion galaxies each containing a hundred billion stars are all here for us. Did you know that there are as many galaxies as there are grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts all over the world?”

Inquisitor: “I am not Archimedes, so I do not count sand. Nor points of light. My job is to pull out sinners, root and branch. Whether you know it or not, you sir, were touched by the devil himself. “How did the others die?”

Russell: “The day after we left, seven committed suicide by stepping out of an airlock. They didn’t leave a note. Hendriks stabbed Clemens, Ricci and Amos to death before slitting his own wrists.”

Inquisitor: “Well, it seems the devil got to them in due fashion. That only leaves you. From where I sit, you have one of two choices: you can either maintain your story as you have related it to me, or you can recant. Specifically, you will deny having made first contact with an alien being. You will also go along with the flight surgeon’s assessment that the stress of prolonged space flight affected the sanity of the entire crew. Hence the suicides of your fellow crew members and the more fantastic elements of your story. Then we can put this matter to rest and get back to the business of serving the Lord.”

Russell: “That’s it.”

Inquisitor: “It would help if you spiced your story with descriptions of the wonderful heavens around us, so long as you leave out any of the other nastiness.”

Russell: “I feel like Galileo when he was under house arrest.”

Inquisitor: “Who?”

Russell: “I want to keep my head, so I will do as you ask. This world is too far gone for one man to change.”

Inquisitor: “A wise choice.”

Russell: “And yet it moves.”

THE END

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THE DOLPHIN IN THE TOILET by Steve Laker

The dolphin downstairs got in last time the Thames flooded. In this road, the ground floor was under water for months while they repaired the barrier. Most people have moved out, but I can't because I've got the dolphin. I live upstairs in my bedroom now.

He swam in at the start of the flood, and every day the water level didn't go down, he just made himself at home. He's got my sofa and armchairs down there in what was my living room; there's a telly in there too. In the kitchen, he's got my cooker and washing machine; and there's the downstairs toilet. See seemed to like it in there, so that's when I called him Donald, like the duck. Like the toilet duck, except Donald is my dolphin.

Well, seeing as he'd decided to take up residence, when the river went down outside, I kept all the water which had come in on the ground floor. That was Donald's home. All the doors are damned-up with plastic bags full of soil. I use the upstairs window to jump down to the garden. I mean, hardly anyone lives round here anymore, so no-one's going to come and rescue Donald, are they?

Do you want to meet him? Do you want to say hello to Donald?

If you come out of my bedroom, there's the bathroom on the left and here's the stairs. You can see we can't go down, because the water's up to the ninth step. There's fourteen in all, so we can see five. The water's a bit brown, but he's light grey, so he looks like a ghost.

When Donald comes up to the surface to breathe, he sometimes moves his blowhole like a mouth, like he's trying to say something. I've got most of the language worked out, and I can buy him fish. He's a captive animal which I'm protecting though, so he relies on me for everything. He has other needs. He needs to breed. And so do I. You should leave now.

THE END

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MADMAN by Christopher T Dabrowski

Translation by Monica Olasek

A man was acting like he was mad. Passers-by reacted differently. Some pretended they didn't see him, others were laughing and pointing fingers at him. Some even poked him aggressively. The man didn't pay attention to it; at first he cried, then screamed and a moment later he laughed to tears, to abdominal pain, in a moment he was sad, next merry, scared, embarrassed.

They considered him a madman, but they did not know! He was extremely sensitive because he had an extraordinary gift. He could watch people's minds—feel them! It was like amplified, one-way telepathy. He watched what was happening in their heads like a movie. And he experienced it extremely... extremely intensely.

THE END

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THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

4 Edge of Darkness

Two figures, one big, one small, trotted over a broad landscape. The small one was mounted, and as such was at head level with the other, who trotted alongside the first one's mount at equal speed, seemingly tireless. They were traversing a wide expanse of sterile rocks, a plain of stones and dust between the crags. A sun shone down from high above but ahead of them was the mountains vanished into a wall of darkness.

They halted at the top of a low rise. The mounted traveller got down, produced a water skin from his saddlebag, took a swig, then poured more into his hand and held it to the zymoron's mouth. Only after it had slurped its fill did the rider throw the skin to the tall figure who stood silently to one side.

'When you've finished,' Lod Jovis instructed, as Kroom drank thirstily, 'find a pool to refill it.'

Kroom was too busy drinking to reply, but his eyes flashed dangerously. Lod sat down on a rock and gazed at the line of darkness that swept across the horizon. It was as if night had half fallen, but got no further. He rubbed at his aches and pains as Kroom wandered off in search of water.

It had been a hard journey: not long as the reptile flew, but involving a snaking, winding trail through the rocks, full of dead ends and unexpected turns back on themselves. No map existed of the plain of stones, perhaps for the simple reason that the Sporn had never come this way except in times of war, and they had forsaken the futile conflict with their paler kin long ago.

Kroom was long in returning. Lod fingered anxiously at his control device, then examined the long knife that he had been given. An Ophidian mercantile had provided it, although the Sporn had paid him handsomely. The Ophidians were notorious cowards but they knew a good deal when they saw one, and they had insisted Kroom be supplied with a similar knife. Both of them would need to be armed to survive the horrors of the journey, he explained.

Lod had known misgivings even then. Had Kroom decided to make a break for it? The Protean cursed himself for a fool. Now the lummoX had an opportunity to run off, but he had been tired after the long journey, and not thinking too clearly. How extensive was this thing's range, anyway? Maybe a blast of energy would tell him where the fugitive was hiding...

Then the massive shape appeared from behind a large rock, lumbering towards Lod at a jog trot. He was carrying a full water skin.

'Where did you get that?' Lod demanded as the barbarian came into earshot. He hadn't anticipated any success in this barren country, just wanted Kroom out of the way while he rested.

'Over yonder,' Kroom rumbled, gesturing with one paw towards the line of darkness.

Lod followed his pointing finger in wonder. 'You've already been over the edge?' he whispered. He was terrified of the coming journey. If there was one thing he hated more than darkness, it was the cold, and this little jaunt promised plenty of both. 'What was it like?'

Kroom shrugged, handing over the water skin. As Lod hung it again from his saddlebow, the barbarian said, 'I went just over. Naught but dust was to be seen this side of the terminator. Further on is only ice, a glacier. The edge of the glacier is melting. I filled the skin with ice melt that otherwise sank into the dust.'

Lod shuddered. 'Did you see any... inhabitants?'

Kroom shook his head. 'Neither hide nor hair of the night side Sporn,' he said. 'A few white arthropods were feeding on the lichen that grew near the ice melt. That was all.'

'We must continue,' said Lod, climbing back into the saddle with his slave's assistance.

He whipped up the zymoron and with Kroom jogging at his side they rode down into the plain of stones. The darkness loomed over them, mountain slopes climbing impossibly high and impossibly steep on either hand.

The closer he grew to the wall of darkness, the more it seemed to fade into greyness, and his sharp eyes picked out details. Mountain slopes on either side: the plain of stones became the bed of the valley taken up by a white, luminescent sweep of snow and ice: the glacier. Soon they were out of the light and into the grey shadows that lurked at its foot. Cold descended, and Lod was glad he had already had the nous to wrap himself in furs purchased at the start of the journey in Sporn City.

The ice towered above them in mockery of the cliffs. Up above Lod could see stars glimmering in skies of evening blue, when shortly before only Sporn's star had lit the sky. Ice melt trickled in rills from the glacier's side and flowed through a morass of fungal plants that resembled blue and yellow sea anemones. He halted again and glanced questioningly at Kroom.

'Where now?' he said.

There was a scuttling from the gloom. Turning in his saddle, he saw unidentifiable things scurrying through the lichen that swathed the rocks at the foot of the ice. Chitinous forms glimmered in the gloom.

'I went no further,' Kroom rumbled. He pointed. 'A path leads round the side of the glacier.'

Lod held up a hand for quiet. 'What was that noise?'

While Kroom was speaking, he had heard more scuttling, somehow magnified by the crags that loomed so steeply above. Kroom looked about him.

'Creatures dwell here,' he commented. His paw shot out and he snatched a scuttling something from within a stand of pale land anemones. It was almost the length of his own arm, writhing in his grasp, armoured with chitin, fringed with many hard, jointed legs, and a claw like stinger at one end that twitched futilely in an attempt to sting the barbarian, but he

held it too cunningly for that. With a grin, he lifted it to his open mouth and tore its head off with his strong teeth.

Lod cried out in revulsion, and his voice resounded from the towering crags. 'You animal!' he hissed, as Kroom crunched the thing's armoured carapace in his mouth. The barbarian spat out a few shell fragments, then swallowed. The abdomen had stilled into immobility, and Lod watched in disgust as Kroom sawed it open with his knife to reveal pale flesh beneath.

'It's good,' the barbarian declared, picking at it with his fingers and eating it raw. 'Try some.'

'I'm not hungry,' Lod said, feeling sick. 'And when I am hungry, I'll sample the rations we packed, not some filthy arthropod. How do you know it's not poisonous?'

Carelessly Kroom shrugged, and kept chewing. As he did, Lod heard more scampering. He whirled round to peer into the darkness. For a second, he thought something huge had darted up the rock wall, but it was so rapid he dismissed it as an illusion. Enough things were creeping and crawling through the lichen and fungi and land anemones to explain the sound.

'If you've quite finished stuffing your gullet,' he said, 'we need to find a way up the valley. Where's this path you mentioned?'

'I saw it on my first visit,' said Kroom. 'It lies yonder.'

He led Lod round the edge of the meagre vegetation where more of the scuttling things could be heard. Shortly afterwards they came to a slope. Zigzagging between lichen covered rocks, a narrow trail led towards the ravine created by the gap between the towering ice and the cliff. Lod took one look at it and his heart sank.

It was barely wide enough for Kroom to pass through, and he had a feeling that he, Lod, would have to get down from the zymoron and lead his mount on foot before they could get through that gap. Before the gap opened, the pale, squishy growths attained such heights they were almost as tall as trees. Some of them quivered, as if in a strong breeze. But there was no breeze.

Nervously, Lod dismounted. He gestured curtly to Kroom, the control device clasped meaningfully in his hand. Placidly, the big barbarian lumbered ahead of him. Lod wondered what would happen when Kroom got his emancipation, assuming that they ever returned from this mission. Somehow, he felt, despite Kroom's apparent imperturbability, that in that eventuality, he, Lod, would be well advised to get aboard the next shuttle out of here.

'What will you do with your freedom, O wizard?' Kroom asked as they entered the cold ravine. The sheer ice wall rose on one side, the dank cliff on the other, snow and slippery rock lay at their feet and the stars glittered above.

'I will continue my wandering,' said Lod, leading his zymoron behind him. 'I am a star tramp now. Life on Proteus was less mutable than you might expect: it was a stagnant civilisation with little future. I have left it far behind me. At first I just wanted to get out of trouble, so I stowed away on a freighter bound for another system. What I didn't fully realise at the time is, what with warp travel and hibernation, the House I left would be generations on if I ever returned, Proteus would be another world. I can never return home, only to an alien planet.'

One of the perils of space travel, but one I have learnt to live with. What about you, galactic warlord? You must have journeyed far further into your own personal future.'

'I left Terra when I was young, too,' Kroom admitted. 'One of the Old Ones came out into the Rimworlds, looking for support in an attempt on Throneworld. Back then, the worlds of the galaxy were linked by the Gates, magical portals leading from planet to planet, and you could voyage from one rim to the other in barely any time. Kondakor enlisted men of my planet and many others as shock troops, and we journeyed with him to Throneworld. It was a glorious fight, even if Kondakor was defeated. His nephew took his place. I became Warlord and led my Terrans and other Rimworlders to fight against his foes. We travelled the heavens fighting for rival gods until it was decided that I would depose the last emperor and rule the galaxy myself. But enemies came against us, and we were defeated again. It seems like only yesterday...' He looked over his shoulder. 'For me it is.' He broke off. 'Wizard!' he bellowed.

Lod Jovis heard a slithering, scurrying, scampering, followed by a tearing, rending sound and the whinnying cry of the zymoron. The leading reins slackened suddenly.

Turning, he saw that his mount had fallen into a snowdrift. Looming behind it, feasting ravenously upon its entrails was the thing—the huge, alien thing that had been following them up the ravine.

'Kroom!' He snatched his long knife from his belt, but it slipped from his cold numbed fingers and went slithering into the ice cold stream running beneath the glacier. 'Kroom!' he cried again. 'If ever you were a galactic warlord, now is the time to show your prowess!'

He broke off as Kroom shoved past him, his sword gripped firmly in his paw. What faced him, rising on its back limbs, mandibles stained with the zymoron's ichor, was a huge version of the creature that Kroom had devoured; a long, flexible length of chitin-armoured arthropod, with multiple limbs, a sting at one end, a vicious maw at the other. As it reared, it flung the carcass to one side and it slid down into the running stream of ice melt, which carried it swiftly away.

Beast and barbarian faced each other down the narrow ravine. For a moment neither moved. The arthropod surveyed the Terran, moonlight glinting yellowly off its pale, luminescent carapace. Its mandibles twitched, it drooled. Its sting curved round.

And Kroom leapt in low, sword outthrust. Head parts darted, mandibles clacked, but Kroom came in low at its underbelly. The sword point struck the carapace, scored a long line across the hard pale chitin, and gouged into a jointed section. The arthropod spasmed, sting jabbing at Kroom, who leapt back deftly, avoiding its thrust by a hair. The jaws writhed round, colliding with the back of Kroom's head, sending him sprawling.

With one look at the fallen Kroom and another at the stream down which his mount had been dragged, Lod flung himself into the pool of ice melt, scrabbling for his fallen knife. The snow and the cold water sent shudders through his frame. The weapon was more than a foot beneath the surface, lying on stones at the bottom of the pool. As Lod's numb fingers closed round the haft, he heard the crash and thud of the fight.

Rolling over, he sprawled on his back, holding the dripping knife aloft. But to his surprise, the great arthropod was now prone and it was Kroom who was sitting on its back, paws

throttling round its narrow neck. As Lod watched, Kroom's biceps bulged and he yanked hard. The mouthparts twitched desperately, then suddenly went dead. Kroom tore the head off and it whirled through the air to bounce off the ice wall directly above Lod. The carcass shuddered into immobility, as the head bounced downwards to shatter on the stones of the path.

Lod heard a noise from further up the rock wall and looked up to see pale, running figures moving rapidly along a ledge. He rose as they vanished round a corner.

'Kroom,' he hissed. Looking round saw that the Terran was cutting the arthropod up for meat. 'You barbarian!' he cried. 'Will you please stop trying to eat the entire planet?'

Kroom looked up, ichor staining his lips as he munched contentedly. 'We'll need food to sustain us on the journey, wizard. Now we shall go slower. You'll be held up, since we lost your zymoron. And with it went all the provisions.'

Hand to his brow, Lod gazed back down the stream of ice melt. There was no sign of the zymoron carcass now. For a moment he wanted to search for it. But then he remembered the night side Sporn he had seen.

'Hack off enough for the whole journey,' he said. 'We'd better get moving. I think we've attracted unwelcome attention...'

As they hurried onwards, the wind began to howl and a blizzard blew gusts of snow into the icy ravine.

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

V. — The Thing in Ricori's Car (Continued)

I SAID, incredulously, "McCann, you surely don't expect me to believe that?"

He did not answer, rolling another cigarette which this time he did not throw away. The chauffeur staggered over to Ricori's body; he threw himself on his knees and began mingled prayers and implorations. McCann, curiously enough, was now completely himself. It was as though the removal of uncertainty as to the cause of Ricori's death had restored all his old cold confidence. He lighted the cigarette; he said, almost cheerfully:

"I'm aiming to make you believe."

I walked over to the telephone. McCann jumped in front of me and stood with his back against the instrument.

"Wait a minute, Doc. If I'm the kind of a rat that'll stick a knife in the heart of the man who hired me to protect him—ain't it occurred to you the spot you're on ain't so healthy? What's to keep me an' Paul from giving you the works an' making our getaway?"

Frankly, that had not occurred to me. Now I realized in what a truly dangerous position I was placed. I looked at the chauffeur. He had risen from his knees and was standing, regarding McCann intently.

"I see you get it." McCann smiled, mirthlessly. He walked to the Italian. "Pass your rods, Paul."

Without a word the chauffeur dipped into his pockets and handed him a pair of automatics. McCann laid them on my table. He reached under his left arm and placed another pistol beside them; reached into his pocket and added a second.

"Sit there, Doc," he said, and indicated my chair at the table. "That's all our artillery. Keep the guns right under your hands. If we make any breaks, shoot. All I ask is you don't do any calling up till you've listened."

I sat down, drawing the automatics to me, examining them to see that they were loaded. They were.

"Doc," McCann said, "there's three things I want you to consider. First, if I'd had anything to do with smearing the boss, would I be giving you a break like this? Second, I was sitting at his right side. He had on a thick overcoat. How could I reach over an' run anything as thin as whatever killed him must have been all through his coat, an' through the doll, through his clothes, an' through him without him putting up some kind of a fight. Hell, Ricori was a strong man. Paul would have seen us—"

"What difference would that have made," I interrupted, "if Paul were an accomplice?"

"Right," he acquiesced, "that's so. Paul's as deep in the mud as I am. Ain't that so, Paul?" He looked sharply at the chauffeur, who nodded. "All right, we'll leave that with a question mark

after it. Take the third point—if I'd killed the boss that way, an' Paul was in it with me, would we have took him to the one man who'd be expected to know how he was killed? An' then when you'd found out as expected, hand you an alibi like this? Christ, Doc, I ain't loco enough for that!"

His face twitched.

"Why would I want to kill him? I'd a-gone through hell an' back for him an' he knew it. So would've Paul."

I felt the force of all this. Deep within me I was conscious of a stubborn conviction that McCann was telling the truth—or at least the truth as he saw it. He had not stabbed Ricori. Yet to attribute the act, to a doll was too fantastic. And there had been only the three men in the car. McCann had been reading my thoughts with an uncanny precision.

"It might've been one of them mechanical dolls," he said. "Geared up to stick."

"McCann, go down and bring it up to me," I said sharply—he had voiced a rational explanation.

"It ain't there," he said, and grinned at me again mirthlessly. "It out!"

"Preposterous—" I began. The chauffeur broke in:

"It's true. Something out. When I open the door. I think it cat, dog, maybe. I say, 'What the hell—' Then I see it. It run like hell. It stoop. It duck in shadow. I see it just as flash an' then no more. I say to McCann— 'What the hell!' McCann, he's feeling around bottom of car. He say— 'It's the doll. It done for the boss!' I say: 'Doll! What you mean doll?' He tell me. I know nothing of any doll before. I see the boss carry something in his coat, si. But I don't know what. But I see one goddam thing that don't look like cat, dog. It jump out of car, through my legs, si!"

I said ironically: "Is it your idea, McCann, that this mechanical doll was geared to run away as well as to stab?"

He flushed, but answered quietly:

"I ain't saying it was a mechanical doll. But anything else would be—well, pretty crazy, wouldn't it?"

"McCann," I asked abruptly, "what do you want me to do?"

"Doc, when I was down Arizona way, there was a ranchero died. Died sudden. There was a feller looked as if he had a lot to do with it. The marshal said: 'Hombre, I don't think you done it—but I'm the lone one on the jury. What say?' The hombre say, 'Marshal, give me two weeks, an' if I don't bring in the feller that done it, you hang me.' The marshal says, 'Fair enough. The temporary verdict is deceased died by shock.' It was shock all right. Bullet shock. All right, before the two weeks was up, along comes this feller with the murderer hog-tied to his saddle."

“I get your point, McCann. But this isn’t Arizona.”

“I know it ain’t. But couldn’t you certify it was heart disease? Temporarily? An’ give me a week? Then if I don’t come through, shoot the works. I won’t run away. It’s this way, Doc. If you tell the bulls, you might just as well pick up one of them guns an’ shoot me an’ Paul dead right now. If we tell the bulls about the doll, they’ll laugh themselves sick an’ fry us at Sing Sing. If we don’t, we fry anyway. If by a miracle the bulls drop us—there’s them in the boss’s crowd that’ll soon remedy that. I’m telling you, Doc, you’ll be killing two innocent men. An’ worse, you’ll never find out who did kill the boss, because they’ll never look any further than us. Why should they?”

A cloud of suspicion gathered around my conviction of the pair’s innocence. The proposal, naive as it seemed, was subtle. If I assented, the gunman and the chauffeur would have a whole week to get away, if that was the plan. If McCann did not come back, and I told the truth of the matter, I would be an accessory after the fact—in effect, co-murderer. If I pretended that my suspicions had only just been aroused, I stood, at the best, convicted of ignorance. If they were captured, and recited the agreement, again I could be charged as an accessory. It occurred to me that McCann’s surrender of the pistols was extraordinarily clever. I could not say that my assent had been constrained by threats. Also, it might have been only a cunningly conceived gesture to enlist my confidence, weaken my resistance to his appeal. How did I know that the pair did not have still other weapons, ready to use if I refused?

Striving to find a way out of the trap, I walked over to Ricori. I took the precaution of dropping the automatics into my pockets as I went. I bent over Ricori. His flesh was cold, but not with the peculiar chill of death. I examined him once more, minutely. And now I could detect the faintest of pulsation in the heart a bubble began to form at the corner of his lips—Ricori lived!

I continued to bend over him, thinking faster than ever I had before. Ricori lived, yes. But it did not lift my peril. Rather it increased it. For if McCann had stabbed him, if the pair had been in collusion, and learned that they had been unsuccessful, would they not finish what they had thought ended? With Ricori alive, Ricori able to speak and to accuse them—a death more certain than the processes of law confronted them. Death at Ricori’s command at the hands of his henchmen. And in finishing Ricori they would at the same time be compelled to kill me.

Still bending, I slipped a hand into my pocket, clenched an automatic, and then whirled upon them with the gun levelled.

“Hands up! Both of you!” I said.

Amazement flashed over McCann’s face, consternation over the chauffeur’s. But their hands went up.

I said, “There’s no need of that clever little agreement, McCann. Ricori is not dead. When he’s able to talk he’ll tell what happened to him.”

I was not prepared for the effect of this announcement. If McCann was not sincere, he was an extraordinary actor. His lanky body stiffened, I had seldom seen such glad relief as was

stamped upon his face. Tears rolled down his tanned cheeks. The chauffeur dropped to his knees, sobbing and praying. My suspicions were swept away. I did not believe this could be acting. In some measure I was ashamed of myself.

“You can drop your hands, McCann,” I said, and slipped the automatic back in my pocket.

He said, hoarsely: “Will he live?”

I answered: “I think he has every chance. If there’s no infection, I’m sure of it.”

“Thank God!” whispered McCann, and over and over, “Thank God!”

And just then Braile entered, and stood staring in amazement at us.

“Ricori has been stabbed. I’ll explain the whole matter later,” I told him. “Small puncture over the heart and probably penetrating it. He’s suffering mainly from shock. He’s coming out of it. Get him up to the Annex and take care of him until I come.”

Briefly I reviewed what I had done and suggested the immediate further treatment. And when Ricori had been removed, I turned to the gunmen.

“McCann,” I said, “I’m not going to explain. Not now. But here are your pistols, and Paul’s. I’m giving you your chance.”

He took the automatics, looking at me with a curious gleam in his eyes.

“I ain’t saying I wouldn’t like to know what touched you off, Doc,” he said. “But whatever you do is all right by me—if only you can bring the boss around.”

“Undoubtedly there are some who will have to be notified of his condition,” I replied. “I’ll leave that all to you. All I know is that he was on his way to me. He had a heart attack in the car. You brought him to me. I am now treating him—for heart attack. If he should die, McCann—well, that will be another matter.”

“I’ll do the notifying,” he answered. “There’s only a couple that you’ll have to see. Then I’m going down to that doll joint an’ get the truth outa that hag.”

His eyes were slits, his mouth a slit, too.

“No,” I said, firmly. “Not yet. Put a watch on the place. If the woman goes out, discover where she goes. Watch the girl as closely. If it appears as though either of them or both of them are moving away—running off—let them. But follow them. I don’t want them molested or even alarmed until Ricori can tell what happened there.”

“All right,” he said, but reluctantly.

“Your doll story,” I reminded him, sardonically, “would not be so convincing to the police as to my somewhat credulous mind. Take no chance of them being injected into the matter. As long as Ricori is alive, there is no need of them being so injected.”

I took him aside.

“Can you trust the chauffeur to do no talking?”

“Paul’s all right,” he said.

“Well, for both your sakes, he would better be,” I warned.

They took their departure. I went up to Ricori’s room. His heart was stronger, his respiration weak but encouraging. His temperature, although still dangerously subnormal, had improved. If, as I had told McCann, there was no infection, and if there had been no poison nor drug upon the weapon with which he had been stabbed, Ricori should live.

Later that night two thoroughly polite gentlemen called upon me, heard my explanation of Ricori’s condition, asked if they might see him, did see him, and departed. They assured me that “win or lose” I need have no fear about my fees, nor have any hesitancy in bringing in the most expensive consultants. In exchange, I assured them that I believed Ricori had an excellent chance to recover. They asked me to allow no one to see him except themselves, and McCann. They thought it might save me trouble to have a couple of men whom they would send to me, to sit at the door of the room—outside, of course, in the hall. I answered that I would be delighted.

In an exceedingly short time two quietly watchful men were on guard at Ricori’s door, just as they had been over Peters’.

In my dreams that night dolls danced around me, pursued me, threatened me. My sleep was not pleasant.

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

10: The Gateway to the Future

EVERY Sardanian hand in the great hall was uplifted in salute as five men entered through one of the pillared arches.

Two of them were of bearded middle age, evidently persons of station in the land; but the eyes of the throng and the eyes of Rose Emer and Polaris passed them indifferently, to gaze on the three who followed.

It did not need the whisper of Kard the Smith, "He in the centre is the prince," to distinguish the ruler of Sardanes. He was not more richly garbed than his companions, or differently. Neither was he taller than they, or of more commanding presence. All of the three were of great height, and all carried themselves regally. Something in the mien of his high-featured, thoughtful face, in his large black eyes, and in the lines of his smoothly shaven countenance bespoke his kingship as surely as though a herald had preceded him and cried out: "This is Helicon, Prince of Sardanes!"

The three were brothers, Helicon, the eldest, was well under thirty years. The two who walked on either side of him were of the startling likeness to each other found only in twins.

Surprise was written large on the features of all of the party as they came into the open space before the throne, and they halted. The two nobles stared frankly. The faces of the twin princes expressed a kindly curiosity, not unmixed with the general awe in which the Sardanians held the strangers. In the face of Helicon was a similar expression, but with less of awe and more of grave dignity.

His eyes roved over the pack of dogs, to him the most unusual figures of the group; hesitated in admiration at the splendid form of Polaris, and passed to Rose Emer.

As their glances met, the eyes of the prince opened wide, and seemed suddenly to become suffused. Then they snapped back to the face of Polaris, and seemed to carry a quick question. The son of the snows regarded him calmly; but there was in his calmness a challenge, the more deadly because of its quietude. His right hand, which rested on the neck of Marcus, contracted so powerfully that the dog whined in pain. Polaris knew that he had found an enemy. Helicon swung on his heel and ascended the steps to the throne.

The nobles and the two tall princes took seats, and Kard the Smith, with the enthusiasm of the born orator, stood forth to tell his story. -

"The man, sayest thou, cometh out of the snows, and speaketh our tongue?" interrupted Helicon in the midst of the tale.

"Even so, prince," said Kard. "And the woman cometh from beyond, and speaketh not our language, but one of her own, which the man speaketh also? And the woman is a princess in her own land?"

"That, O prince, is true!"

“Then cease though thy tale, Kard, and let us hear from the man in our tongue, of himself and of the princess, and of how they came hither.”

With little relish for such cutting short of his bombast, Kard the Smith stood back and yielded the floor to Polaris.

In a few words the man of the snows sketched the chances which had brought the girl and himself to Sardanes.

“Then thou wert reared in the great wilderness, and knowest naught of the world, or of Sardanes, or even of who thou thyself art?” questioned Helicon. His voice was even and courteously intoned; but, though the man he questioned was of little experience, Polaris understood the sneer that lay in the words.

“So it seemeth, Prince Helicon,” he answered quietly.

“And the woman thou didst find in the snows, she is a princess? I can well believe that.”

“Nay, prince, for she cometh from America, a great land where there-are no princes or princesses. Yet is she of high rank in her land, as her birth and wealth entitle her.”

Helicon frowned. “How meanest thou—a land in which are neither princes or princesses?” he asked quickly. “How, then, are the people in that land ruled?”

“By the people themselves are the people ruled in America, O prince,” Polaris answered. “The whole of the country and its lesser divisions are governed by men chosen by the people to rule for certain spaces of years, when others are chosen.”

“Are there, then, no kings or princes in the world?” asked Helicon sharply.

“Aye, princes and kings rule in many of the lands of the world,” answered Polaris, “but their power is limited more and more by the wishes of their people. In some other lands the government is like that in America.”

“Truly, this America of which thou speakest must be a strange country. Here in Sardanes I hold the power of decision over life and death; aye, even unto the Gateway to the Future extendeth the power of Sardanes’ prince.”

“Yet,” and the voice of Polaris rang like a bell— “yet, of all lands in the world,-Is America the greatest—and hath no prince or king.”

Over the face of the prince passed a flush of annoyance. He waved his hand in dismissal of the conversation.

“Hospitality shall be thine, outlander of the snows. Thou shalt rest and be refreshed. More of thy strange tales will I hear anon. And the girl—” His eyes softened as they strayed again to Rose Emer, and again the red blood flashed up in his cheeks. For a moment he seemed lost in his thoughts.

ALL THROUGH the interview the young man in the black stone seat had sat motionless and attentive, his eyes glued on the strangers, his ears drinking in every word spoken by Polaris, his expression rapt. Now he arose and stepped forward. Before the Prince Helicon could speak again he interposed.

“If it be pleasing to the strangers, I, Kalin the Priest, will make them welcome at mine own home in the Gateway to the Future.”

Without waiting for the objection which the prince seemed to be framing, Kalin addressed himself directly to Polaris.

“Is the hospitality of Kalin welcome to thee, O man with the hair of the sun? Much there is that Kalin fain would learn from thee, and perhaps some little that he may tell thee in return. Say, wilt come, thou and the woman?”

Polaris looked into his eyes, and somewhere in their dreamy depths he thought he read more meaning than the words of the priest conveyed to him. He stepped forward and tendered his hand, a form of salutation which, although new to the Sardanians, Kalin accepted.

“Thy most kind offer of hospitality I accept for myself and for the lady,” Polaris said. “She hath, I fear, much need of rest.” They left Helicon on the throne in the Judgement House, looking as if he liked the new arrangement little enough. As they passed out of the hall, five or six men, all dressed in sombre black, detached themselves from the crowd of Sardanians and joined Kalin the priest. Under his direction they fetched the sledge and drove it toward the lower end of the valley, whither Kalin and his two guests followed.

On the way Polaris told Rose Emer of the meaning of the conversation in the hall, which she had understood only so much as she was able to guess from the demeanour of the prince and of Polaris. As they talked, Kalin, although their tongue was unknown to him, courteously walked ahead.

“They seem to be a happy people, but I don’t think I’m going to like this prince of theirs,” said Rose Emer when she heard the details of the talk. “And you, who never have seen America, have so defended it that you have put the gentleman out sadly. From what you have said to him, he will think that we have no very exalted opinion of princes. If he were not such a grave-looking personage I should think that he tried to flirt with me.”

“What is the meaning of ‘flirt,’ lady?” asked Polaris.

Rose Emer’s answer was a silvery laugh, “Sometimes, in your cold and snows, your knowledge makes me feel like a child; but when you get back to where I came from you will have a great deal to learn,” she said lightly.

In spite of the privations and terrors through which she had passed, and the grief at the loss of her brother, the spirits of Rose Emer were rising amazingly in the warmth and sunshine of Sardanes. For all her lightness of speech, the girl could not but feel alarmed at the expression she had read in the eyes of the Prince Helicon, although she would not admit to Polaris that she had taken note of it.

They crossed the little bridge again, and the plain beyond it, and began the ascent of the one green mountain that stood verdure-clad in strange contrast to its score of bleak-crowned sisters.

“What do they mean by the ‘Gateway to the Future,’ Polaris?” asked the girl.

Polaris, in turn, put the question to Kalin.

“It lieth before us,” said the priest, pointing to the green mountainside. “Hast thou not noted that in all Sardanes no man or woman is old, or crooked of body, or diseased? When the first chills of age creep upon a Sardanian and bow his form and whiten his hair, then he cometh to me and passeth through the gateway. Thither likewise come the dead when one dieth in the land through a mischance or sudden illness. To me also are brought the babes that are misshapen at birth or that give promise of but puny life.

“To that which lieth beyond life, be it of glory or of oblivion, all Sardanians pass through the Gateway to the Future; and I, Kalin, am guardian to the gateway. The gateway itself shalt thou see anon.”

Polaris translated. Rose Emer shuddered. “And I thought them such a happy people!” she said. “How can they be with such strange, terrible customs?”

Kalin, it seemed, had the trick of reading people’s thoughts, for he answered:

“It hath been so almost from the first. When our ancestors peopled Sardanes they came to realize that for them to live on in the small land and remain a people their numbers must be limited. Thus hath it been done.

“Sardanians know of no other way, and are content therewith. Think of what is spared—terrible old age that creepeth on a strong man and decays him; that withers his limbs and fades the bloom of youth in his cheeks; of the horrors and distempers which make of life a misery and a mockery; of the sorrow of living on misshapen and helpless. In thy world do all such abide with thee?”

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