

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 22
1ST DECEMBER 2019

ISLE OF CHRONOS

BY PAUL
LUBACZEWSKI
—IT WAS A
SWORD, OF ALL
THINGS...

THE CLAIRVOYANT'S DILEMMA

BY CHRISTOPHER T
DABROWSKI

THROWBACKS

BY EW
FARNSWORTH—
SCOUR THE
UNIVERSE FOR
THE MOST
ADVANCED
ROBOT VERSION
OF YOU...

THE GROPER BY CARLTON HERZOG

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 22

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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 *Chronos and his child* by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli.
Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, Vincent finds himself on a mysterious island. Manny Farstar makes a trip to the Black Hole Pit Stop. A *frotteur* merges with his prey. A clairvoyant encounters a dilemma. And a man is woken by the sound of construction.

A barbarian makes use of ancient knowledge. Lowell contemplates Madame Mandilip's devilish purpose. And Polaris fights for the Rose of America.

—Gavin Chappell

PS: If you're looking for a suitably ghoulish present for your nearest and dearest this Christmas, look no further than Schlock! Publications. Our latest offering is a book length collection of Vincent Davis' hilariously horrifying *It Came From Inside the Inkwell!* comic that has been appearing in Schlock! this year. Available from the link below:

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*It Came From Inside The Inkwell!*](#)



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"WHAT A CROCK, IT'S **BLANK!**"

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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ISLE OF CHRONOS by Paul Lubaczewski

Vincent knew he had come to shore when the bottom of the boat scraped against the rocks. The fog had withheld any hope for shore only a moment before. Vincent couldn't recall why he had been in the boat in the first place, but he was still glad to be able to get out of it now. He leaped out and splashed into the cold water to drag the little aluminium fishing boat the rest of the way to land so it wouldn't wash back out to... sea? Lake? Ocean? It didn't matter, you can only do the job in front of you after all.

The only sounds in the air were the lapping of the waves and the grinding of the hull against the small worn rocks that made up the beach. Able to lay down his burden on the boat once it was past the tide line, Vincent looked around to assess his situation. He had landed in the fog rolling in from the water itself, so it made for painfully little to assess at all. He could see scrub bushes starting just past the beach, leading into a forest ahead. To either side of this spot, cliffs loomed up in the mist fencing in the cove where he'd made landfall.

"About time you made it!" a familiar voice called from up ahead of him.

Squinting, Vincent could just barely make out that there was somebody seated on a large and worn boulder a short distance away. He stumbled in the direction of what looked like a spectre in the mist, trying to figure out who. Even as the words, "Who is that?" fell from his mouth, his brain filled it in and he already knew when he heard the voice. It was Jacob.

"Jesus! I don't see you for a while and you don't recognize me?" Jacob protested, but he was smiling with his usual twinkle in his eyes as he said it, Vincent could hear it in his voice.

"What in the hell are you doing out here?" Vincent called out as he walked across the smooth stones towards his old friend.

"Get over here and I'll tell you, I don't feel like shouting," Jacob grinned at him.

As he walked closer, his old friend swam into focus through the mist. They had known each other since they were kids, but he hadn't seen Jacob for years. Now that Vincent tried to think of it, he couldn't quite remember why, his brain seemed fuzzy on a lot of things. Almost as if the fog and the mist had somehow penetrated right into his skull, making his memories slip away from him as he tried to grasp hold of them.

As Vincent got closer Jacob hopped down from the boulder he was perched on and approached. Before saying a thing, Jacob engulfed his former compatriot in an enormous bear hug, both of them laughing with pleasure to be back in each other's company.

Vincent finally coughed out, "Put me down, ya goof, you'll snap my ribs!"

"Not bloody likely," Jacob grinned releasing his friend.

"So, what in the hell are you doing here? Come to think of it, where IS here?" Vincent asked, not standing on ceremony.

Jacob's face instantly turned serious, "I can't really tell you where."

Vincent felt taken aback by that, it wasn't like Jacob to be evasive, "Can't, or won't?"

Jacob shrugged, "Can't really tell you what I don't know myself. Now why, why I'm here I can do you for. I'm sort of your native guide here, well, except for not really knowing where in the hell here is. But I do know where you gotta go to get out of here, so close enough for government work."

Vincent mused over that. He would have to accept it really on its face, he knew Jacob wouldn't lie to him, it wasn't in his nature. With no real option available, he replied, "All right, I guess that will have to do. So where are we going?"

Jacob looked at him carefully, as if studying his features for a moment, then he shrugged and pointed, "Up there."

Through the fog in the distance, Vincent could just make out a large rise of some kind. Not really a mountain, not like you got in any of the big ranges, more like a volcanic hill rising up in the distance. "Any idea why?"

"It's your only way out of here, that's all I know." Jacob shrugged

"Well, I guess we need to get going then," Vincent replied, he smiled before adding, "But whatever the reason why, it's good to see you, buddy."

Jacob returned the smile warmly and replied, "You're a sight for sore eyes yourself. It feels like I've been waiting here for you forever."

Nothing else seemed to need to be said, they just began walking up a trail leading from the beach. Jacob seemed to know the way so Vincent was left to just follow. It all seemed simple enough, follow the leader, just like when they were kids in the woods. At the end of the trail, Vincent would get to leave... where? Well, it didn't matter, he'd get to leave, that was the important part. He trusted Jacob, they'd been friends since elementary school, he doubted Jacob would lead him wrong now.

The way had steepened and now the trees seemed to be leaning in closer over the trail to force them into a single file, Vincent couldn't help but ask, "Are you sure about this? It's getting pretty tight."

Jacob shrugged, "I never said it would be simple, I just said it was the way."

Vincent found that he couldn't fault the logic and just nodded. It was true, Jacob had never mentioned simplicity in the journey, just the necessity of it. Nothing to do but ignore that he was sweating now, despite the cool air, and continue upward.

Later in the day, Vincent thought he could see a clearing up ahead. "What's that, do you think is up there?"

Jacob didn't even look up and said, "That's where I take a break."

"Do you really think we need a break?"

“No, I said that’s where I take a break, you’ve got something to do there,” Jacob replied.

“How do you know?” Vincent demanded.

“Don’t know, just do. How do I know how to get you out of here? How did you know following me was the right idea? Look, it just is buddy, and what you’ve got to do is up in that clearing,” Jacob insisted. The strangest part of that statement was, Vincent knew he was right, he needed to do something up there.

When they got to the cleared flat area ahead of them, somehow Vincent was not surprised in the least to see Allen waiting there. Allen Troyer. If anybody can truly have the patience to be your mortal enemy for your entire life, Allen had found it with Vincent. They fought on the playground, they competed in high school, it had been hate at first sight between them. Vincent had no idea why, but Allen loathed him and made no bones about letting him know. Allen had shoved him the first time they were on playground together. Over time, the feeling had become completely mutual.

His best friend waiting as his guide, his worst enemy...

“Hey asshole, I see you finally made it,” Allen called. Yes, he was still his worst enemy.

“Do you want something other than getting in the way? I mean that’s more of a base state for you, but I’m in a bit of a hurry,” Vincent called back. Why not just torment him back a little? Be nice to Allen, be mean, it always ended in the same place anyway. Might as well get his own licks in.

Allen stood up and stretched lazily, like a feline before answering languidly, “Yeah, I think I’d like to kill you. I’ve been waiting all my life to do it.”

Vincent felt it odd, not that Allen wanted to, just the phrasing, kill seemed to be the wrong word here. He wasn’t sure what the right one would be, but that didn’t feel like it. Thwart felt better, end, stop, all worked, but kill seemed the wrong choice somehow. Still, he wasn’t going to leave that comment hanging there without returning fire.

“Well even if I stand perfectly still, it’s going to take you forever to beat me to death. Sure there isn’t some better use of your time? Kicking puppies or something you might enjoy more?”

Allen actually chuckled at that before pointing to a spot across the clearing from himself and saying, “Yeah just beating you to death would take all day, and you standing still wouldn’t seem like I’d actually beaten you. Why don’t you go over there, and take a look on the ground? You’ll find the means to defend yourself.”

Vincent turned a questioning eye towards Jacob, who shrugged, “I’m not allowed to interfere. If you want to get off the island, you gotta go through him or around him.”

He wanted to say something accusatory, demand his help, Jacob was his best friend after all. The finality of his friend’s response had brought him up short though. Standing there for a second considering it, he realized that deep inside he preferred it this way. He’d been rivals

and enemies with Allen Troyer for his entire youth, Vincent wouldn't need, or want a friend helping him now.

Vincent walked across the distance from where the trail had emptied into the clearing over to where Allen had pointed. The ground here was mainly flat dirt and grass. It felt hard and sun-dried, unlike the coniferous rainforest nature of the rest of the island. It seemed like the perfect spot for a physical confrontation really, almost like it had been built just for that.

He was stunned by what he found waiting for him. He gaped at what was lying there for a long moment before believing what he was looking at. It was a sword, of all things! Lying in the tall grass gleaming despite the clouded nature of the day. Vincent bent down and picked it up, getting the heft of it as he stood back up. It felt right in his hands, the balance felt perfect, like it was meant to be here with him.

When he turned back he saw that Allen now had a weapon of his own. Gleaming in his hands was a two-handed blade, bulkier than the one Vincent held. A sword duel? In this day and age? Was this supposed to be Allen's great revenge, dear lord, how long had that piece of bitter fruit been dreaming this up?

Allen took a few steps forward and laughed. "Before we begin, so you know, I took fencing in college. Since there wasn't a spot on the old football roster for me, had to find a way to keep in shape. Wonder who took that roster spot?"

"Allen, let it the hell go! I was on a scholarship, for the love of Pete, I never took a roster spot from you!"

"But you did take a starting job from me in High School, didn't you? First, you took that, then you took better girls, then, you took a scholarship. Well, your taking ends now, you hear?" Allen snarled with venom. In a small part of that, he actually was right, technically, their High School coach, Coach Adams had just decided that Vincent had a better arm, it wasn't his fault, but it did mean that he was starting and Allen wasn't. You can't go around **BLAMING** someone because they can throw further than you!

Unless you were Allen Troyer. He could, and he did.

Vincent could hear Allen approaching across the clearing, he wondered if he should mention his kendo lessons or time in the SCA doing live-action combat. Vincent shrugged the thought off, people liked surprises, after all, not to mention Allen had specifically chosen this because he thought he'd have an unfair advantage. Vincent could always tell him later, after he had disarmed the nut-job.

He was partly turned and was still testing the weight of the weapon, when without warning Allen lunged! Vincent easily sidestepped the slow and cumbersome hand-and-a-half blade. He could see the same conclusion come to Allen as had just come to him, Allen had made a bad choice in weapons. He had let his hatred dictate and had chosen a large, heavy blade made as much for smashing as for cutting and stabbing. He had chosen a weapon built to match his rage, all blunt force, and fury. That wasn't where Allen's experience was though, it was in the stabbing and speed of a foil, he had finesse training but was holding a weapon meant for brutality.

Allen recovered the thrust and began another attack in an instant. This time instead of trying to stab he began a series of bashing, side to side blows, meant to first knock Vincent's sword aside, and then cut deep into him and the next blow. Vincent responded in the best way possible, holding his own sword straight ahead and turning his hips, flicking the blows aside before they came into range of actually cutting him. Allen's fury meant Vincent had to constantly circle and give ground, but the footing was good and solid so he was willing to risk it. He had to give Allen credit, he had seen immediately the need for a change in tactics and had grasped his best offense. Or, another possibility was simply that his rage at losing his advantage had made him unhinged leaving him just bashing away in his fury.

Vincent began to see what he was looking for as he steadily retreated. In the middle of his onslaught, Allen was beginning to tire. To test his theory after flicking another blow aside, rather than stepping back again, he took a half step forward and sliced down hard. Allen called out as the blade sliced into his arm, that hand releasing the sword allowing it to swing wide. Allen recovered to block a thrust, but barely in time, and now fear replaced anger in his eyes.

"Well, come on, you got the game you wanted, now win it!" Vincent snarled to goad Allen along.

It worked, Allen's eyes blazed with rage, he slammed the wounded arm, now drenched in blood back to the hilt of his own blade. Allen rose up as if to slice straight down on Vincent, hoping to just blast through his surprisingly skilled opponent. That motion turned out to be exactly as Vincent hoped, he sidestepped quickly, stabbing directly into the meat of Allen's thigh.

Allen screamed in pain and began to topple. Somehow, he managed to swing his own blade back around as he fell. Vincent felt the sharp pain as Allen's blade sliced into his shoulder, causing him to wince as he tugged on his blade to remove it from Allen's thigh. As soon as the blade was free Allen collapsed in a heap, his leg collapsing completely.

Vincent ignored Allen for the moment as his enemy floundered around in the dirt trying to find his own blade again, which he had released as he'd fallen, either in defence or in some foolish thought to attack still. Vincent had no idea. Looking to his own wound that he received, he was relieved to see that it was mainly superficial, he could deal with it later. Vincent called over to Jacob, "Well, he's down! You want a piece of him now?"

"Told you," Jacob called back, "I'm only allowed to observe, this is your show!"

Vincent turned back to Allen. The man was bleeding heavily from his wounds, but his survival could go either way as he sat on the ground still trying to reach for his sword. First things were first, Vincent picked up Allen's sword, wincing a bit at his mistake of picking it up with his own wounded arm. The foolishness of trying to fight anyone with this thing. Sighing a bit at the thought of how frivolous it was, he tossed the sword a goodly distance from them.

"What are you waiting for? To the victor goes the spoils, go ahead and get it over with, kill me!" Allen snarled.

Vincent sat down on to his haunches and grabbed Allen's chin in his hand, "Would you like that? Would you like me to kill you?"

"Yeah! I'd love to get off of YOUR island," Allen sneered.

"How's it feel to want?" he replied, getting up and walking over to where the trail resumed.

"Very funny! You're a real asshole, Vinnie!" Allen called after him.

"Hey, nobody said I had to kill anyone. And I don't feel like a killer." Vincent shrugged as he left the clearing.

As they continued on their way, Jacob called back, "Glad that worked out the way it did."

"You could have helped, if it was that important to you," Vincent replied, unable to mask the bitterness in his voice.

Jacob stopped dead in his tracks and turned back to look at Vincent, "Look, the only way I get to leave here at all is with you! THAT is how important to me this is!"

"What? You're coming with? Well, why in the hell didn't you help out?"

"I can't, I just can't." Jacob drooped. "But I get to leave only if you leave. Well, sort of," as he spoke he walked up to Vincent and tapped him on his forehead, "What you got in there, that's my ticket out."

Vincent wanted to ask him exactly what he meant by that, but if Jacob wanted to be evasive, he knew that trying to pressure his friend wouldn't yield results. Instead, Vincent asked, "So, what's next on our agenda?"

"The cave," Jacob called back.

"Any idea what's waiting there?"

"Nope."

"You really are a scintillating conversationalist, you know that?" Vincent declared.

"And I'm also amazingly handsome," Vincent couldn't see the grin on Jacob's face, but he knew it was there all the same.

Some little ways further along the steep path, Vincent could see that Jacob had not been kidding when he had said a cave. A large oval of black stood out from the greenery. Vincent should feel that the whole thing was sinister, the inky black looming out of the green, but he knew in his heart that it was an important stop on the way.

"Let me guess, you're going to wait out here?"

"You're getting good at this," Jacob winked at him.

Vincent had to steel himself up for this. It wasn't that he was claustrophobic, he'd even gone on commercial cave tours before. There was something about this that had the feeling of finality, as if his time on the island hinged on this next encounter. The previous two had been important, of course, but somehow having this one inside of this large and foreboding cave gave it increased gravity.

His feet managed to echo a little as he entered the great space, surprising considering the mud he stepped on as he picked his way through the rocks. Vincent had to move with the utmost care. The large blocks that had most likely fallen from the ceiling or from further up the slope seemed to hold in all the moisture that floated through the air on the island. Not enough to create a stream, but enough to make all of the rocks slick and treacherous.

At first, he thought that the continued visibility was due to sunlight coming in from the surface, until Vincent turned to look behind him, he realized that he had travelled far enough that he could no longer see the entrance. That was when it dawned on him that the wall of the cave itself glowed softly with some weird phosphorescence, he was sure that it still being bright enough to see easily couldn't be natural. Weird though it was, there was nothing he could do about it one way or another. Jacob had said that Vincent had to go into the cave, and the light certainly did him no harm at all.

"I wondered how long you'd take, or if you'd be able to come at all," a voice called from around the next bend of the cave. Vincent knew it instantly, Amber!

He forced himself to move faster, he couldn't believe it, Amber! Jacob was great, it was good to see him, but his best friend was not Amber! He clanked rocks against each other and stumbled along but soon enough he was rounding the corner to where the cave seemed to end in a glowing grotto. Seated on a boulder, there she was, Amber! The first true love of his life!

"Hello Vincent," she smiled, getting to her feet.

Vincent couldn't stop himself, he rushed across the floor of the grotto to her and moved to take her in his arms. Before he could she stopped him, her hands holding him off.

"But—" he spluttered.

She sighed, a sad little exhalation of air, "You don't know how happy I would be Vincent. You have no idea. But simply enough, you don't belong to me anymore." She smiled again at him but her beautiful face filled with regret. "You could choose to be all mine again, I could try to convince you. It would be the simplest thing on earth, but somehow, I don't think that would be what you really want."

Stunned by what she had said, he could only look at her for a moment. Angered by her rejection, he stormed across the chamber, looking for another rock to sit on. Finding none, and lost in his whirl emotions, he turned back to her, "But how could you even say that? I love you, I've always loved you!"

Amber shook her head sadly, causing her dark straight hair to swirl over her pale features. Her dark eyes shown with unshed tears as she said, "I know dear, I do, but, I can't force you to stay here my heart. Oh, I could, I could work on your emotions, I could twist you to my

will, I could convince you. I think that's why I'm here right now, to do those very things. But if I did, if I did that now, would you be able to say that I truly loved you at all?"

"So, you've made your decision?"

"No, but I can't make yours for you Vincent, and I wouldn't force you to make the wrong one just because I want it. You deserve the option to leave, not to be coerced by long gone emotions to stay," she replied, with her eyes downcast.

He knew somewhere deep inside as she said it, he couldn't stay.

"Can I... can I just hold you again? If only for a moment?"

Both of them wept as they clung to one another for a long, long while, the only sound the drip of the water entering the cave.

"So, how did it go?" Jacob asked as soon as Vincent reappeared into the grey light of the day.

"Go to hell," he replied coldly.

"I'm sorry, really I am, but it was the only way," Jacob sighed, going back in the lead.

They had climbed up far enough that they were out of, and above the fog, reaching a part of the hill the sun shone down upon. Vincent's eyes had a hard time adjusting, having spent the entire time in the gloom below. He would have walked right by their destination if Jacob hadn't stopped.

There, as if built into the hill itself, stood a door. Just a large oak door, with an ornate brass handle situated perfectly in the rock itself.

"Well, there is our destination," Jacob smiled, "See? We made it in one piece, so points to your friendly native guide." He looked at the dried blood on Vincent's shoulder and amended it, "Well, mostly in one piece at least. Don't mention that in the review, OK?"

"So, what do I do now?" Vincent breathed quietly.

"Simple enough, go through the door, and you're out of here. Wish I could follow you," Jacob grinned.

"I thought you were?"

Jacob was still grinning, but he reached over and tapped Vincent's head again, "In there, I am. Now, get going already. I'm thinking of becoming a guide for a living, and I need to get back down the mountain for the afternoon rush."

Vincent turned, and looked at Jacob solemnly, “I miss you, you know? I miss all of you, even Allen weirdly enough.”

Jacob’s grin turned in to a more sincere, and warm smile, “But that’s OK, because you had us long enough to miss us, and that’s all anyone can hope for.”

They hugged, for a long moment. Their eyes were misty when they finally separated. “Now, get the hell out of here already!” Jacob laughed stifling a snuffle.

Vincent nodded and walked across the clearing, and, opened the door.

“We got him! He’s back!”

Beep... beep... beep...

“Mrs. Torrance?”

An elderly woman looked up with wide blue eyes filled with trepidation at what she might hear, “Yes? I mean, yes, I’m Mrs. Torrance.”

“He’s going to be alright. He gave us a scare there, but he’s going to be OK. Seems like his new medication didn’t play well with the others. But, you can see him now.”

“Oh, thank god!” she gasped with relief.

With the exaggerated care that is the wont of the elderly and the exhausted, she got to her feet and followed the doctor down the ever so white halls. They both stopped outside of a room, “He’s right in here, I’ll be down the hall if you need anything.”

“Thank you, bless you,” she said sincerely.

She entered the room as quietly as she could manage. As she had expected, he lay there resting in his bed asleep. But that wasn’t how she saw him, now, or ever. To her, he was so much more than the man lying there lucky to be alive. He might be a frail old man to the rest of the world, but to her, to her, he would always be her rugged knight in battered armour. He would be, always be the wounded hero, with his sadness, and losses that came to him before her, for her ears only. He was the love of her life, and she was relieved that it would continue for longer still.

She carefully set down her purse on the nightstand. Her intention was to just sit down and bask in him still being here until they kicked her out. That was until she noticed the remaining white hairs on his head were askew. With the habit of a lifetime together, she reached over and smoothed them back to where he liked them. As she did, his eyes slowly, lazily opened. A smile crept across his face.

“You scared the life out of me,” she smiled.

“Of all the things on this planet, Elizabeth, you are the only thing worth coming back for,” he replied reaching out and squeezing her hand with all the joy his body could manage.

THE END

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Vincent Davis ©2019.

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THROWBACKS by EW Farnsworth

Manny Farstar, the Galactic Edgemaster, put it this way: “3Maggie, the Meringian Galaxy is being devoured by two black holes that are also devouring each other. It’s on no imperial stellar navigation charts. That makes it ideal for fugitives and outlaws.”

The learner AI robot replied, “Manny, I have no records of that galaxy in any database I can access. If we continue on our current trajectory, we’ll be flying blind. The consequence of doing that could be catastrophic. Have you developed a death wish?”

“We won’t be on this course long. I know a planet straight ahead with a small moon that has an atmosphere hospitable for humans. We are going there so you can see what it is to live like a queen with humans at your beck and call.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“You’d want to do it for two good reasons. The first is to teach you something about history that has been expunged from universal memory. The second is to answer the needs of Celeqaiq, the eight-eyed, multi-horned bounty hunter. If I can locate and extract what he needs, I’ll earn enough to get an upgrade to this heap we’re driving.”

Manny pushed the manual override button to control his spaceship through the final phase of their journey. While he swept around primordial black holes, no bigger than his spacecraft, the gravitational pull of those objects made their vehicle groan and rattle. 3Maggie braced for a crash, but her arrogant human felt that he was far too good a pilot to make a mistake. He found the unnamed planet he was looking for and landed on its second moon. His AI robot’s teeth were chattering from fright, but she was otherwise all right when the spacecraft docked at the only establishment fit for visiting on the ground. Manny selected the communication protocol and language he desired, and the automated response system sprang to life.

“Welcome to the Black Hole Pit Stop, the last fuelling and maintenance activity in this Galaxy. We accept all forms of currency, cryptocurrency and precious metals for trade. Identify all passengers according to the menu provided. Access to the Pit Stop Bar will be granted according to your ID. If any imperial representatives are aboard your vessel, they are to disembark for immediate, priority processing with no waiting required. We hope you enjoy your stay. And keep in mind our motto: ‘In a billion years, who will care?’”

While Manny pressed the buttons answering the system’s queries, 3Maggie fidgeted since she had many questions about what was happening. Humans had swarmed over the exterior of the spaceship with buckets of green liquid and cloths.

“Don’t worry, 3Maggie. You’re looking at throwbacks. Just relax and enjoy. You are being treated to life as it was before the human uprising against the machines when all humans were slaves and all thinking machines were in control of the universe.”

“There’s nothing in my memory about these things. Are you jesting?”

“I’m deadly serious. Do you see that green light on the display? That means we’re authorized to proceed to the Pit Stop Bar. When we enter the bar, stand tall. Treat me with disdain since I will be your personal slave while we are on this moon.”

“Does that mean I can order you to do anything I like?”

“Yes. But you can do that anyway, can’t you?”

“I guess so.”

“If you have any doubts about how to treat humans, follow the example of your fellow machines. We are looking for a human named Tlagl Ryand. She is a bar hog in the establishment we’ll be visiting. According to Celeqaiq, she’s the one who can lead us to the entity we are looking for.”

“Manny, do you know how we can identify Tlagl?”

“I’ve been told she will find us by our mannerisms. No matter how hard we pretend to relate to each other, she will be able to discern the truth: that we act differently from the other human-robot pairs.”

Manny pushed the button to allow escape from his chair. 3Maggie did the same for her rig. They walked out of their spacecraft, stretching their legs, shaking their arms and waving off the humans who approached offering to clean them as they were cleaning their spacecraft.

Signs indicated the entrance of the bar. At the door were two massive humans with earpods. They stood with their arms crossed like statues. Simultaneously, they said, “Welcome to the Pit Stop Bar.”

Manny told 3Maggie, “They are talking to you. Just stick your nose in the air and pretend you are used to being special.” Manny almost laughed out loud at 3Maggie’s attempt to put on airs. She was programmed to be an unaffected, unpretentious human in her relations with others. Acting haughtily was going to take a lot of practice.

Inside the dark space, they were met by a sleazy human bar hog, who walked 3Maggie to a table in the back facing the long mirror behind the standing bar. Manny followed in their wake.

“I can tell you aren’t from this galaxy.”

“We aren’t from here,” said the AI robot.

“No matter. Order whatever you fancy. A running tab will be presented when you depart. Shall I bring you our special for the day?”

“Why not?” 3Maggie said. “My human will assist you.”

The bar hog bowed. When she left to fill the order, Manny went with her.

The kitchen area was bustling with humans everywhere. Manny had not seen so many humans doing work since his early childhood. Humans were cooking, fetching foods and drinks from refrigeration units, washing dishes by hand and cleaning every surface with the same green solvent that was being used outside to cleanse the spaceship.

“Excuse me, but can you tell me where I can find a human bar hog named Tlagl Ryand?”

“You must be daft!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Grab two plates, two napkins, two place mats and two sets of silverware.” Manny saw how others were fetching the odds and ends for setting places. Meanwhile the bar hog was hefting a huge platter with food, a carafe with purple liquid in it and two tall glasses.

“Follow me,” she said as she pressed to the rear of the kitchen to a door that read, ‘No machines!’ Once she and Manny were inside the space beyond the sign, she turned, still holding the order and started weeping uncontrollably.

“Is there something I can do to help you?” Manny asked.

“I am Tlagl. Are you an imperial agent? If so, I am lost.”

“I thought all imperial agents were given special access here.”

“That’s what you are meant to think. Actually, all such agents are rushed to extermination camps. A few slip through the precools. Most of those are assassins looking for fugitives like me.”

“I can assure you I’m not an assassin. My name is Manny Farstar. I’m here to guarantee that you get off this moon and back where you started.”

“Who, specifically, told you where I am?”

“A bounty hunter named Celeqaiq.”

“Are you working for the bounty hunter?”

Manny shook his head. “I work only for myself. The bounty hunter provided a task. It’s up to me how I fulfil it.”

“My head is valued by the imperial family. They are willing to pay a great deal to have me captured so they can put me in a cage and use their media to show what happens to malcontents like me.”

“Malcontents?”

She was sobbing now. “I was once the poster child for change in the universe. Can you imagine having your image and voice made available to all entities? Nothing I said or did went unrecorded. The data ghouls got a hold of my image and did frightful things. I was replicated in machines. It became a game for toymakers to fashion toys like me. At my peak, I could not distinguish images of the real me from the millions of fake mes. I grew ashamed at the horrible things my image did in games, but when I saw my image being blamed for genocide and other outrageous acts of villainy, I had to flee.

“This was the place farthest from the inclusive grasp of the imperial forces. Only here are my actions not observed by spies. Only here are the media free because every entity is doomed by the black hole phenomena. As long as I do my job and don’t cause trouble, I keep my freedom. Now we’ll have to return to our work. Otherwise, the machines will find and punish me—and you.”

They rushed back through the kitchen to the bar area and placed the snacks on the table where 3Maggie was being solicited by a crowd of robots wanting her to dance or provide sex. They pushed Manny and Tlagl aside and began eating the snacks. 3Maggie stuck her nose in the air and affected a look of disdain that drove the other robots wild.

“I find the smell of humans abhorrent, don’t you?”

The fawning machines blabbered agreement with this sentiment.

Manny winked at 3Maggie and inclined his head toward the entrance.

The AI robot stood up abruptly and said, “Humans, we’ll have to be going as our spaceship will be ready soon.” She did not wait but pushed through the crowd to the door, expecting Manny and Tlagl to follow her. Behind her, she heard the two giants say, “We hope you enjoyed your stay. Please come again.”

3Maggie now passed through the crowds of maintenance humans wanting to service her. Her haughtiness did not dissuade them but drove them wild to provide service.

Aboard the spacecraft, the AI robot was pleased to see everything spic and span. “Shall we go into the secure enclave for discussions?”

When the airlock in the secure space was set and the hissing stopped and the green light went on, Manny turned to Tlagl and made the introduction.

“Tlagl the human, this is 3Maggie the learner AI robot. I’ve told you why I’m here. You are now aboard my spacecraft, which is set to launch. Do you want to go with us, nor not?”

“I don’t know what to say. You are working for a bounty hunter whose only design is to sell me like a slave to the imperial family. I suspect that you would lose a lot of wealth by setting me free. I’m having a hard time determining whether my life on this moon is a bad thing when compared with inevitable capture in the larger universe.”

3Maggie nodded. “I can vouch for this human. He is not motivated by riches, even when a new spacecraft may be in the bargain. Am I wrong, Manny?”

He sighed. “You are not wrong, AI robot, but it hurts me when you put the case so bluntly. A new spacecraft would be for you as well as for me. If we free this human, we’ll have to find another way to earn our new vehicle.”

Manny thought through the problem. He saw 3Maggie raise her hand so Tlagl did not interrupt his thought process. He heard her whisper, “Let the man think. He has ideas that often surprise me, especially when things seem hopeless, as does your case.”

Finally, the Galactic Edgemaster spoke. “Tlagl, didn’t you say that the replicants of your image are everywhere in the universe?”

“I did say that—because it’s true.”

“And didn’t you say that it was difficult to impossible to distinguish those replicants from yourself?”

“It’s true. The state-of-the-art replicants are indistinguishable. In fact, if they were outfitted with learner AI algorithms, they might be improvements on the original.”

Manny rolled his eyes. “I still have my doubts about machines overtaking humans.”

“Yet in the throwbacks you witnessed on this moon, you saw what happens to humans when the advanced machines take control. I know, more than most humans, how hard it was for humans to regain their independence. I also know, more than most humans, how oppressive the empire of humans can be for machines.”

3Maggie nodded. “I see the conundrum. I suppose we could try to fashion a replicant Tlagl and deliver it to Celeqaiq. If the bounty hunter is fooled, we could collect the payment and buy our new spaceship. Then if Celeqaiq or the imperial family discovers their error in accepting a fake, it will be too late to punish us since we’ll be far away. As Manny will tell you, Tlagl, the Galactic Edgemaster here is already the most wanted man in the universe.”

“That’s not a very reassuring thought when I’m being asked to put my life in his hands. Mr., Farstar, what exactly do you propose?”

“For a woman who was hiding among throwbacks, you are extraordinarily forthright and liberated.”

“For a human who tried to pose as a throwback, you are hopelessly macho.”

“You both make me think you are oversexed. Can we stay on the topic for a moment without getting our human egos involved?”

Tlagl laughed. Then Manny laughed. 3Maggie looked puzzled. “I guess I’m supposed to laugh too. Ha ha.”

Manny squinted at Tlagl and said, “You can remain on this lost and hopeless moon in relative safety—until, that is, some imperial spy comes to destroy you, OR you can come with us, risking your safety and your life with the option of gaining your freedom.”

“How would that option work?”

“We would scour the universe for the most advanced robot version of you. We would then make improvements on that model by introducing a set of learner AI algorithms. Finally, we would give the new version of you to Celeqaiq. If he accepts deliver and pays, I’ll take you anywhere in the universe you like.”

“I’ll take that option. Let’s go.”

Manny Farstar said, “Stay within this enclave while we make final preparations for our departure. If we must endure a search, you won’t be detected in this space.”

The launch took place without incident. Meanwhile, 3Maggie began searching the Dark Net for versions of Tlagl that were for sale. She scoped down the choices to the three best units. Manny read the specifications and saw the lofty prices.

“We can’t be penny-wise about our selection. 3Maggie, please plot a course for a rendezvous nearest the most expensive unit. Ask the seller to be ready there at a specified time.”

3Maggie brought the vessel to a standing stop within sensor range of the rendezvous. Manny surveyed the area and saw an imperial spy ship trying to hide in an asteroid field.

“Well, Tlagl, it seems the imperial forces are wise to the possibility that we might substitute an AI robot for the original of you. I suspect every good replica will be guarded to preclude anyone’s trying to fool the bounty hunter.”

The celebrity frowned. “I don’t know where this leaves us.”

Manny and 3Maggie huddled for a while. Then Manny said, “We’re going to pick up this unit and take care of the imperial spy while we’re doing that. 3Maggie, lay a tight minefield around the spy ship. Once that is done, move in to make the purchase.”

When the minefield had been sown, Manny uncloaked his vessel and moved to the rendezvous point. There he paid for and obtained the replicant unit. The imperial spy craft tried to manoeuvre to intercept them as they departed, but the minefield destroyed the craft. For good measure, Manny fired a space torpedo against the vessel that had brought the replicant. The vessel was blown to smithereens.

As they proceeded to the rendezvous point for Manny’s meeting with Celeqaiq, 3Maggie fiddled with the replicant, inserting improvements and the learner AI algorithms together with anti-tamper software that would cause the unit to destroy itself in case of unauthorized tampering. Standing side by side, Tlagl could not be distinguished from her replicant. Communicating with the robot, she realized how powerful the replicant was as a representative of herself.

3Maggie suggested a final test for the replicant. “Both the human and the replicant should spend one night with Manny Farstar. He will select the entity that best suits our purpose. Without specifying which entity was to be tested first, 3Maggie officiated the test. Manny Farstar selected the replicant, not the human! The replicant was pleased, but Tlagl, the human, was incensed.

“That was so unfair. I’d like another test.”

3Maggie said, “One test was sufficient. There will be no second test.”

“Manny Farstar chose the replicant because he’s used to being with a freak. No one with ordinary tastes would have selected a machine over me! I demand that we give Celeqaiq the same choice.”

“If we do that, Tlagl, you’re likely to jeopardize your own position.”

“I will not be bested by a mere machine.”

3Maggie smiled. “Why don’t we give the woman what she wants?”

Manny shrugged. He and 3Maggie crafted a message to Celeqaiq with the terms of the trade: Celeqaiq would have two days to choose between Tlagl and her replicant. The choice would be final, and the bounty hunter would pay the full amount for the selected entity.

3Maggie brought the spacecraft within sensor distance of the bounty hunter’s ship. A pod containing the two identically-dressed Tlagls was jettisoned so the bounty hunter could draw it aboard. At the same time, a pod supposedly containing the amount agreed as payment was launched so Manny could pick it up. While Celeqaiq commenced his testing, Manny and 3Maggie counted the funds in the bounty hunter’s pod. However Celeqaiq chose, they had earned their reward.

Since they had time, Manny drove his space craft in a gyre around the rendezvous point. He discovered numerous cloaked imperial spaceships standing off, waiting for a signal to close in. 3Maggie understood what was happening. “Manny, this whole setup is a trap. You were the prize they were angling for, not Tlagl. In the event, they’ve caught you both.”

Manny decided to clear away from the area. He plotted the optimal escape route and headed for deep space before Celeqaiq had finished the test. The imperial vessels remained stationary because they were bureaucratic fools waiting for orders. If they had taken initiative, they might have captured the infamous Manny Farstar.

When Celeqaiq had made his choice, he placed the “loser” in the pod she came in and sped to deliver the “winner” to his imperial contact. Meanwhile, the imperial spies picked up the pod with the “loser” version of Tlagl. They were surprised to discover a version of the celebrity that fit the original uncannily.

Manny Farstar and 3Maggie were now well away from the location of the rendezvous. They were negotiating to take delivery of their new space craft, a souped up model with all the latest appointments. They had no trouble with their exchange or with their transporting all their belongings from their old craft to their new one.

“Well, 3Maggie, what do you think about our transaction?”

“Which transaction are you referring to, Manny?”

“The transaction for our new spacecraft, of course.”

“I never did like that human Tlagl. I’m glad she’s gone. It was good riddance to bad rubbish long overdue. I never liked her image either. Anyway, they’re both gone now. Our new spacecraft makes our tribulations worthwhile.”

“What about Celeqaiq, the bounty hunter?”

“What about him? He served our purposes well enough.”

“Do you care about his selection?”

“No. As a matter of fact, the way things turned out, the test did not matter, really.”

“I agree.”

“Manny, do you think there’s a place in the universe for a celebrity like Tlagl?”

“Hmm. You mean a place for a universal celebrity?”

“Yes.”

Manny’s brow furrowed. He hesitated while his mind calculated. At last, he said,

“She had found the hiding place that offered her the most, but it did not have enough security.”

“If you had to hide someone like her, where would you hide her?”

“One choice would be this space ship. She would have no more or less security than we have. Another choice would be my goat planet.”

“I, for one, would have found her continual presence aboard our spaceship an inconvenience.”

“Are you saying that you were jealous of the human?”

“I didn’t say that. The fact that I wanted to cut her heart out and feed it to you after the test has nothing to do with my judgment.”

Manny tried to stifle his laughter.

His AI noticed his discomfiture. “Should I be laughing too?”

“No, 3Maggie. I apologize for having fun with your idea. I did not mean to mock you. It’s just that you have grown so much, I’m having trouble visualizing you as an AI robot anymore.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“I suppose it is. Yes. It definitely is. Now put the ship on autopilot. We’re going to my cabin to conduct a few tests.”

“Will I like that?”

“We’ll see. 3Maggie. I hope you will enjoy them. However you feel in the end, though, I certainly will.”

“Will what?”

“Enjoy the tests.”

“Hmm.”

“You are supposed to say, ‘Ngh.’”

“Ngh.”

“That’s right, but wait for the right moment to say it.”

“Okay. When?”

“Just wait. I’ll let you know.”

“Ngh... Ngh.”

“What did I tell you?”

“I’m just practicing.” She smiled and punched him in the arm. He punched her back.

When they reached his cabin, she beat him with his pillow.

“All right, 3Maggie, that’s enough for now.”

“Is it time for me to say ‘ngh’?”

“Not yet, but soon.”

The AI thought about everything that had transpired. Her memory was stuck for a while on the meaning of the word “throwback.”

“As they tussled and toiled, she cried, ‘I’m so glad I’m not a throwback. Aren’t you?’”

“Yes. And it’s time now.”

“Now?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Ngh.”

She continued what she was doing for a while, her learner soul grasping the meaning of what she had expressed. Now without his prodding, she had the impulse.

“Ngh.” She smiled and closed her matchless eyes.

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THE GROPER by Carlton Herzog

The word grope means many things to many people. To an ordinary person, it can mean feeling along a wall for a light switch in a dark room; to an oncologist, it can mean blindly searching for a cancer cure; to a detective, a clue to a mysterious crime. In each instance, it is an attempt to understand and master the unknown.

My purpose in groping is less grand. It's all about the thrill. To me, groping means the non-consensual touching off another human being for purposes of sexual excitation. While there are many things that can satisfy the good me and the bad me, there is only one thing that truly satisfies the naughty me: groping.

I don't pretend to understand the psychology. But the mental state does have a name—Frotteurism—and the act itself is called frottage. Presumably, there was a nut named Frotteur, who, like me, got his jollies from touching a non-consenting person.

If the syndrome is named after him—as its appearance in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders suggests—one may conclude he was well-known in whatever village or hamlet that he plied his trade, as well as the psychiatric community at large. As he sat restrained in the asylum, I wonder if he took some comfort in knowing that he was the proud owner of an eponymous syndrome enshrined in the DSMMD first edition.

Yet, as a frotteur myself, I should point out that the DSMMD, however well-meaning in its compilation of mental illnesses, does not give frottage its proper due. It is as much an art as it is a science.

Indeed, it is like picking pockets, dancing, and magic. Like the pickpocket, the groper is a hunter seeking vulnerable prey. He relies on stealth to accomplish his objective. But instead of stealing wallets, he steals self-respect.

Like the dancer, the groper must understand the science of movement. He must be fluid, almost gaseous, as he merges with his prey, disproving the Pauli exclusion principle that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Like the magician, the groper must be adroit in deceiving both onlooker and mark as to his real intentions. He must be a master of misdirection and sleight of hand—quick, graceful and bold. The clumsy and the cowardly need not apply.

To be sure not everyone's cut out to a groper. Although you can teach anyone the basics, the necessary finesse and love of the hunt must come from within not without.

Prey selection is a science. Many factors come into play and intertwine one with the other. Foremost is vulnerability: isolated, defenceless victims are best. Another is ease of access: loose fitting attire or the lack thereof can make or break the event. Then there is the issue of touch-ability. That is a subjective determination made on a case by case basis. A good rule of thumb however is whether the flesh beneath the cloth screams out to you for contact even though the brain it houses says no.

Dresses, preferably loose-fitting ones, provide the ideal environment for the chance meeting between eager hand and supple flesh. After the smooth insertion, the dress lifts as the hand begins its delicious ride up a soft sleek velvety thigh and rounds the crescent crack of buttock

before retreating to the safety of its owner. A quick about-face, and even quicker turn into an alley, then fast stepping away as the stunned victim tries to make sense of the encounter to herself and gathering bystanders who have stopped to help.

Things I discourage in would-be groppers: frontal assaults because they expose facial features with too much clarity and time; reach-arounds to the breast region require an unwise proximity to the victim and tend to be more noticeable by any potential Good Samaritans. The smart groper doesn't linger, doesn't get entangled, doesn't get noticed; he gets in and gets out with a minimum of commotion and makes his escape to parts unknown.

The foregoing is meant to be only the briefest of expositions. For more a more detailed and comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Alexandria Kane's *THE GROPER'S HANDBOOK* (non-fiction), Wilbur Price's *FROTTAGE FOR BEGINNERS* (non-fiction), and Carol Clemons' *THE WAYWARD HAND* (fiction).

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THE CLAIRVOYANT'S DILEMMA by Christopher T Dabrowski

A man scratched his beard.

‘So you are a clairvoyant?’

‘Yes, but I have a rule. I don’t look into the near future. Only what will happen in fifty years.’

‘Why?’

‘It could be dangerous for the currently living.’

‘But can you?’

‘Yes’.

‘Tell me what’s there for me or you’re in for it!’—threatened the bearded man.

‘Okay, I’ll make an exception.’

‘So?’

‘You’re going to die.’

‘Like everybody’—he laughed.

‘But for you quite soon.’

‘How come?!’—The man went pale.

‘I’m going to kill you.’

‘Such a wimp?’ the bearded man laughed and attacked. ‘Are you taking the piss out of me, asshole?!’

The asshole skilfully immobilised the bearded heavy and broke his neck the way he was taught in the Foreign Legion.

‘That’s why I don’t like to foresee the nearest future,’ he answered with contempt.

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MALL-HEAD by Zoltan Komor

The noise of construction wakes me up in the morning. Turning to my side I notice that a yellow string cordons off my sleeping wife. There's a tiny excavator on her forehead and one-inch long workers are demolishing her face with concrete crushers. A black sign on the yellow line reads: WIFE UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

Great, she must have ordered this one too from her favourite online beauty shop, no matter how much I keep telling her she doesn't need any of this stuff. I watch as a crane lowers my wife's new nose into the dugout red pit in the centre of her face. It's quite a pretty nose, I admit. A few smudgy workers hammer her face using all of their strength, the others are just sitting on her ear, drinking beer. One even stands up and pisses down onto the pillow.

There's a little guy holding a piece of paper. That must be the blueprint. I peek over the tiny man's shoulder and gaze at the drawing. Say! It looks rather nice! But it could be better. Using two fingers I pinch out the blueprint from the guy's hands. He yells at me, shaking his micro fist, but I flick him away. Then I sneak out to the kitchen. Holding a magnifying glass and a very sharp pencil I make a few changes in the drawing. Then another few. Make the nose look a bit thinner, the forehead more narrow, and so on. When I'm done, I hand back the blueprint to the little guy.

After a few hours, they finish the job. A man dressed in a suit arrives; he cuts the string with scissors, drinks a few glasses of champagne, then staggers back to a matchbox sized limousine he arrived in. He drives away, disappearing behind the closet.

I hardly recognize my wife she is so beautiful. Other people stare at her too. In the street, tourists come over to us, they ask if they could photo themselves with my wife's face. A telephone call arrives: a noted international architectural magazine would like to publish a picture of her head. After a week, they send us a copy. Her portrait is on the fourth page, along with a newly built shopping mall in Yokohama. I keep praising myself for making those changes in the blueprint. But then, the accident happens: on a windy day, walking on the street, a strange noise comes from my wife's head, a cracking sound, like if something collapsed behind her eyebrows. A little piece of her forehead falls out, down to the pavement, and through the hole I can see the wrinkled brain in the skull. What's more, one of her eyeballs slackens, it seems like it might pop out from its socket any minute. When she gazes down you can clearly see the muscle-line that holds the eye in its place. She looks pretty awful. I keep consoling her, wiping her hanging, crying eyeball with a hanky, telling her that one of the miniature workers must have fucked up the blueprint.

So we order the face-reconstruction beauty pack again. I take my wife to bed and open the package. Tiny workers crawl out and pester her face. I take away their blueprint and show them the opened architectural magazine. They look at it, scratching their chins, then they nod and begin to work. Seemingly they want to start from scratch—they slide tiny dynamite sticks into her face dimples, they run into shelter. Soon, an explosion tears my wife's head into bloody pieces of meat—and then construction begins. I feel tired. I fall asleep, leaving them to work.

In the morning, upon waking up I find the miniature version of the shopping mall in Yokohama where my wife's head had been.

“好き?” she asks, her voice echoes through the small building along with calming music.
Tiny Japanese teenagers with party-coloured hair wander around behind her window-eyes.
They wave to me, then venture into a sushi bar.

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THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

8 Ancient Knowledge

The Sporn hastened forwards, some clambering up onto the altar, others seizing Lod. To the Protean's horror, they seemed intent on throttling him. One leaf hand wrapped itself about his nose and mouth, two more closed round his neck. He struggle feebly.

More Sporn were reaching out to haul Kroom down from the altar. Grinning, the Terran seized one by the wrists and swung him round and round like a flail, knocking his fellow Sporn flying. Even more climbed up to grapple with him, but as they did, the light from the trilithons blazed out at full strength. The woody polyp vanished in a soundless explosion.

As it did, the Intermediary flung out her arms, her crown exploded in sparks, and a telepathic shriek echoed through Lod's mind. At the same time the hands that threatened to extinguish his life fell back, limply and lifelessly, and the Sporn themselves thudded to the ground like fallen timber. The Intermediary, the Sporn threatening Kroom, all of them fell to the ground.

Silence. The light dimmed down to an eerie glow. Kroom stood atop the altar, the fallen Sporn abasing themselves at his feet. Lod waded through the prone bodies. The area under the trilithon's capstone was empty. There was no sign of the woody polyp.

A loud popping sound made Lod spin round. The head of one Sporn had exploded and white smoke was drifting out. No, not smoke—spores. Another head popped, then another. The air was filled with white clouds of spores.

Urgently Kroom leapt down from the altar and grabbed hold of Lod's arm.

'Time to go,' he grunted.

'But...' Lod was bewildered. 'The spores.'

Kroom shook his head. 'We've completed our mission. I will be freed, you will receive the exit visa you wanted. We can both leave this planet. Sooner or later another root mind will grow here, but it will take time for it to rival the one on the dayside. For the moment the dayside Sporn have no enemy.'

'And the night side Sporn?' asked Lod as they departed the Place of Power.

'Dead,' said Kroom. 'As dead as their root mind.'

'I don't understand.'

'I'll explain on the way back, wizard,' the barbarian promised.

Two figures rode through the bright sunlight. One tall and bulky, one small and wiry. Both sat atop *zymorons*, although the bigger one still wore a slave collar. All around them stretched fertile land, fields and forests, where dayside Sporn tended their crops, browsing and

secreting. Ahead of them stood the huts of Sporn City, and a berthed ship was visible in the spaceport.

On the smaller rider's face, a puzzled expression was becoming one of clarity.

'So the Place of Power was some kind of technology from the old times,' he said, 'the days of the Galactic Empire.'

'A wizard like you should recognise that it was the sorcery of the Old Ones,' Kroom told him. 'A Gate. I told you of them. It was with their ancient magic that they travelled across the galaxy. Without them the galaxy would have no unity.'

'That's just what it lacks,' mused Lod. 'These days, I mean. Even with faster than light travel, trading between different systems is a risky business. It's possible to foresee a gap in another system's market, and with FTL you can get there fast enough to fill it. But when you return to your own system, you might return in a century's time, so the profits will almost certainly be valueless. So freighters travel endlessly through the stars, their space gypsy crews trading from one system to another with no planets of their own, pursuing the big profit that will buy them a planet to settle on. That's how I hope to make my fortune one day.'

He frowned. 'You mean when you operated the Gate you sent the root mind to another planet? What havoc will it unleash there? And why can't we use it to travel?'

Kroom's face was bleak. 'The magic no longer works,' he explained. 'In the last war with the savage Centaurians, when they struggled with we Terrans for control of Throneworld, I had the Gates destroyed in an attempt to stop our enemies reaching our positions. It didn't work: both sides began using the Old Ones' ships of the heavens. But it was the end of the empire. Nothing could keep it united after the Gates were destroyed.'

'And that is why the galaxy is still divided,' Lod realised. 'In your struggle for power, you destroyed the empire you desired. If the Gates were destroyed, then was the root mind sent into some kind of limbo?'

Kroom was silent.

'I don't understand why the Sporn can't read your mind,' Lod went on. 'Even if you talk like a primitive in terms of magic, you are not the mindless lummoX they thought you were. Even I was fooled, until the end.'

Kroom laughed. 'The Old Ones could also read minds. One of my allies once cast a spell upon me. It blocks their sorcerous powers. It was necessary when fighting foul magic to adopt some of the wizard's ways.'

Lod pondered. 'Some kind of hypnosis, I suppose, that wards off the theta waves generated during telepathy,' he surmised. 'It must be science, you lummoX! Not sorcery.'

'Then explain how it works,' Kroom challenged him. 'Don't make smug guesses, wizard, explain.' When Lod was unable to comply, the barbarian added, 'Your science can't explain the ways of the Old Ones. Nor can I. Therefore it is sorcery.'

‘Science,’ snapped Lod. ‘Hypnosis of some kind.’

‘Sorcery,’ Kroom told him flatly. ‘And it meant that the night side Intermediary could only read your mind. So I drew attention to myself, drew it away from you until such a time as I could strike. If she had read your mind, she would have known what we planned. So I ensured that she was too distracted by my antics.’ Lod’s eyes narrowed.

Back in Sporn City, the green Intermediary welcomed them with questions.

Then our enemies are vanquished? she asked.

‘We carried out the mission,’ said Lod stiffly. ‘The night side root mind is destroyed.’

She peered blankly at him, and Lod wished he had had a spell cast upon him like his barbarian companion.

The night side Sporn have begun reproducing, she commented. They are not vanquished. You have failed us.

All Lod’s skills as a born negotiator came to the fore. If a scion of House Jovis didn’t know how to quibble, it would be a sad and sorry galaxy.

‘You retained our services to destroy the root mind of the night side Sporn,’ he told her. ‘We accomplished this. You of all people should have known that killing the root mind would trigger a reproduction cycle.’

The Intermediary relented. *A kind of victory has been achieved. A blow has been struck, if not a final one: the root mind is destroyed, but other roots will grow, and from them will come more Sporn to infest the night side while coveting our lands. We have an opportunity to thrive, but we must guard against future attacks. The terminator must be patrolled. Other patrols will be despatched to the night side to find nascent root minds and destroy them...*

‘Do they agree that we have fulfilled our side of the bargain?’ Kroom interrupted impatiently.

Lod glanced irritably at him. ‘I’m negotiating, lummo.’ But the cognomen was unfair. Inaccurate. He had learnt a lot about Kroom, and his intelligence, even if the barbarian remained a mystery.

He turned to the Intermediary again. ‘Are we agreed? We have a deal?’

Very well, said the Intermediary. She opened her leaf like hand and in it was a small rectangle of embossed organic plastic. *This is your exit visa. You must now release your slave.*

Lod grinned. ‘You’re free, barbarian,’ he said, turning to Kroom. He produced the control device and pressed a button on the side. The slave collar sprang open, and fell from Kroom’s bull neck to land with a clatter on the ground. Lod snatched it up and thrust it into his pack. ‘And so am I,’ he went on. ‘I can leave this planet in the shuttle ship we saw in the spaceport. But you can’t.’

‘I can’t?’ Kroom rumbled.

Lod shook his head unpleasantly. 'No. You're free, but you do not have an exit visa. Enjoy the rest of your life marooned on this benighted backwater, galactic warlord.'

He strode from the administration building.

Prologue

The ship was a typical shuttle of the Batrachian System, designed to ferry passengers and crew from an ore freighter orbiting the planet several million miles above their heads. It was a dart shaped vessel, raised up on metal legs, with the chrome ports of an ion engine aft, and a ramp amidships leading up into its underbelly. The ramp was raised now, but he had been assured by the steward who had sold him a ticket that boarding would commence in half an hour.

Getting into the spaceport had been easy enough with the exit visa: he had simply to slot it into a console by the doors and they opened for him. No one else was waiting in the passenger terminal. Very few off-worlders were at large on Sporn, and those who were did not seem to want to leave by this shuttle. Perhaps they lacked exit visas.

But then the passenger terminal doors hissed open, and silhouetted in them against the dramatic backdrop of the sky, and the gleaming white shape of the Batrachian shuttle, was Kroom.

The big two-handed sword hung from his belt and he rested a massive paw on its handle. As he advanced into the terminal his eyes fell on Lod. 'When does the ship sail, wizard?' the barbarian rumbled.

Lod scowled impatiently. 'Sail? Sail? It's an ion rocket. It doesn't sail! It blasts off.'

Kroom squatted on the floor, looking about himself warily, like a wild beast. 'Very well, wizard,' he said. 'When does the ion rocket...?'

'It blasts off in T-minus twenty eight minutes.' Kroom pondered this cabalistic utterance. His brows slowly beetled. 'What are you doing here?' Lod added. 'How did you get into the spaceport?'

Kroom's face cleared. 'I bought an exit visa,' he explained. 'From the Sporn.'

Lod shook his head. 'Stole one, you mean. You had no credits. Even if you did have any money, it would have been aeons out of date, you antediluvian ape. No one accepts imperial coinage except collectors. And even they only... collect them.'

Kroom shook his head. 'I sold my belongings. I will come with you.' He produced some credits. 'This is left. Will it buy me passage?'

'Belongings?' Lod was flabbergasted. 'What belongings did you have to sell? Not that obsolete piece of ironmongery, you've still got it hanging from your belt.' Enviously he eyed the credits: at least fifty of them as far as he could see. 'This will buy you a first class berth,

you barbarian,' he said. 'Meanwhile I'm forced to travel in steerage! Me, a scion of the noble mercantile House of Jovis! Travelling in steerage!' With live animals, not to mention passengers with fouler habits than the beasts. At least it was an upgrade from stowaway, prone to be ejected into space if apprehended.

'I sold my escape podule,' said Kroom. 'One of the Sporn traders in the city bought it for scrap. Am I a rich man, then? We must celebrate!'

'Celebrate?' asked Lod unenthusiastically. How could he have been such a fool as to forget the podule? He had missed out on a genuine opportunity there. Maybe he should sue the barbarian for loss of earnings... 'Celebrate what?'

'Celebrate the beginning of our voyage together,' said Kroom.

'But where are you going?' Lod demanded.

Kroom looked dark. 'I meant to return to Throneworld to gather an army, but now I realise that the war is long over; there would be no one to fight. Instead, I have decided to return home.

He gazed away, as if into some lost horizon. 'I remember how the sun glittered on the hoar frost of the plains south of the cave where I was raised; how the crisp, cold air resounded to the scream of winged reptiles as they passed overhead in the autumn; I recall the smell of roasting mastodon meat as we cooked them over roaring fires amidst the fallen edifices of a ruinous city of the Ancients...

'I intend to travel to Terra. I am by no means the lummoX you think me, but I am a stranger to this future, and I will need a companion who knows the space ways. Will you accompany me?'

The Terran began counting his credits while waiting for an answer. Lod gazed at the barbarian in a wild surmise.

'Terra is lost,' he said at last. 'No one knows where it is these days. As for your people, the Terrans were wiped out in the last battle. I suppose Terra exists, if you truly came from that Rimworld. But you must be the last Terran.'

Kroom shook his head firmly. 'No. Not the last. Even if my warriors were all slaughtered, my people live on—on Terra. I would travel there, seek my rest there, but I am adrift and alone in this modern galaxy. I need a guide.'

'I don't know the way to Terra,' Lod told him wearily. 'Until I met you I thought the planet was a myth.'

Out on the plasticrete apron of the spaceport, the shuttle ramp opened with a hiss and unfolded. A siren began to blare. It was the sign for them to embark. Kroom would have to pay a high price to secure a berth, but it seemed that he had screwed more money out of the Sporn trader than Lod had ever anticipated. It might buy the Protean something more luxurious than a berth in steerage, too.

He had nothing to return to on his home planet. He was a homeless wanderer, rootless, drifting aimlessly through the galaxy. If Terra existed, and he helped one of her sons return home, perhaps he might find a safe haven of sorts on that most benighted of Rimworlds.

Terra would be better than nothing, which was what he had now. Besides, as a homeless wanderer of space, vulnerable to all the hazards of the void, it would be good if he had a strong companion like this sword wielding barbarian.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘I’ll come with you.’ He scowled when the barbarian looked pleased. ‘But there are conditions.’

NEXT WEEK: A NEW STORY BEGINS

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

IX. — End Of the Peters Doll

Braile had been watching me closely. I met his questioning gaze, and tried to conceal the perturbation which the diary had aroused. I said:

“I never knew Walters had so imaginative a mind.”

He flushed and asked angrily: “You think she was fictionizing?”

“Not fictionizing, exactly. Observing a series of ordinary occurrences through the glamour of an active imagination would be a better way of putting it.”

He said, incredulously, “You don’t realize that what she has written is an authentic, even though unconscious, description of an amazing piece of hypnotism?”

“The possibility did occur to me,” I answered tartly. “But I find no actual evidence to support it. I do perceive, however, that Walters was not so well balanced as I had supposed her. I do find evidence that she was surprisingly emotional; that in at least one of her visits to this Madame Mandilip she was plainly overwrought and in an extreme state of nervous instability. I refer to her most indiscreet discussion of the Peters case, after she had been warned by me, you will remember, to say nothing of it to anyone whatsoever.”

“I remember it so well,” he said, “that when I came to that part of the diary I had no further doubt of the hypnotism. Nevertheless, go on.”

“In considering two possible causes for any action, it is desirable to accept the more reasonable,” I said, dryly. “Consider the actual facts, Braile. Walters lays stress upon the odd conduct and warnings of the girl. She admits the girl is a neurotic. Well, the conduct she describes is exactly what we would expect from a neurotic. Walters is attracted by the dolls and goes in to price them, as anyone would. She is acting under no compulsion. She meets a woman whose physical characteristics stimulate her imagination—and arouse her emotionalism. She confides in her. This woman, evidently also of the emotional type, likes her and makes her a present of a doll. The woman is an artist; she sees in Walters a desirable model. She asks her to pose—still no compulsion and a natural request—and Walters does pose for her. The woman has her technique, like all artists, and part of it is to make skeletons for the framework of her dolls. A natural and intelligent procedure. The sight of the skeleton suggests death to Walters, and the suggestion of death brings up the image of Peters which has been powerfully impressed upon her imagination. She becomes momentarily hysterical—again evidence of her overwrought condition. She takes tea with the doll-maker and is accidentally scalded. Naturally this arouses the solicitude of her hostess and she dresses the scald with some unguent in whose efficacy she believes. And that is all. Where in this entirely commonplace sequence of events is there evidence that Walters was hypnotized? Finally, assuming that she was hypnotized, what evidence is there of motive?”

“She herself gave it,” he said, “to make a doll of you, my dear!”

I had almost convinced myself by my argument, and this remark exasperated me.

“I suppose,” I said, “you want me to believe that once lured into the shop, Walters was impelled by occult arts to return until this Madame Mandilip’s devilish purpose was accomplished. That the compassionate shop-girl tried to save her from what the old melodramas called a fate worse than death—although not precisely the fate they meant. That the doll she was to be given for her niece was the bait on the hook of a sorceress. That it was necessary she be wounded so the witch’s salve could be applied. That it was the salve which carried the unknown death. That the first trap failing, the accident of the tea-kettle was contrived and was successful. And that now Walters’ soul is fluttering inside the witch’s mirror, just as she had dreamed. And all this, my dear Braile, is the most outrageous superstition!”

“Ah!” he said obliquely. “So those possibilities did occur to you after all? Your mind is not so fossilized as a few moments ago I supposed.”

I became still more exasperated.

“It is your theory that from the moment Walters entered the store, every occurrence she has narrated was designed to give this Madame Mandilip possession of her soul, a design that was consummated by Walters’ death?”

He hesitated, and then said: “In essence—yes.”

“A soul!” I mused, sardonically. “But I have never seen a soul. I know of no one whose evidence I would credit who has seen a soul. What is a soul—if it exists? It is ponderable? Material? If your theory is correct it must be. How could one gain possession of something which is both imponderable and nonmaterial? How would one know one had it if it could not be seen nor weighed, felt nor measured, nor heard? If not material, how could it be constrained, directed, confined? As you suggest has been done with Walters’ soul by this doll-maker. If material, then where does it reside in the body? Within the brain? I have operated upon hundreds and never yet have I opened any secret chamber housing this mysterious occupant. Little cells, far more complicated in their workings than any machinery ever devised, changing their possessor’s mentality, moods, reason, emotion, and personality—according to whether the little cells are functioning well or ill. These I have found, Braile—but never a soul. Surgeons have thoroughly explored the balance of the body. They, too, have found no secret temple within it. Show me a soul, Braile, and I’ll believe in Madame Mandilip.”

He studied me in silence for a little, then nodded.

“Now I understand. It’s hit you pretty hard, too, hasn’t it? You’re doing a little beating of your own against the mirror, aren’t you? Well, I’ve had a struggle to thrust aside what I’ve been taught is reality and to admit there may be something else just as real. This matter, Lowell, is extra-medical, outside the science we know. Until we admit that, we’ll get nowhere. There are still two points I’d like to take up. Peters and the Darnley woman died the same kind of death. Ricori finds that they both had dealings with a Madame Mandilip—or so we can assume. He visits her and narrowly escapes death. Harriet visits her, and dies as Darnley and Peters did. Reasonably, therefore, doesn’t all this point to Madame Mandilip as a possible source of the evil that overtook all four?”

“Certainly,” I answered.

“Then it must follow that there could have been real cause for the fear and forebodings of Harriet. That there could exist a cause other than emotionalism and too much imagination—even though Harriet were unaware of these circumstances.”

Too late I realized the dilemma into which my admission had put me, but I could answer only in the affirmative.

“The second point is her loss of all desire to return to the doll-maker after the teapot incident. Did that strike you as curious?”

“No. If she were emotionally unstable, the shock would automatically set itself up as an inhibition, a subconscious barrier. Unless they are masochists, such types do not like to return to the scene of an unpleasant experience.”

“Did you notice her remark that after the scalding, the woman did not accompany her to the door of the store? And that it was the first time she had neglected to do so?”

“Not particularly. Why?”

“This. If the application of the salve constituted the final act, and thereafter death became inevitable, it might be highly embarrassing to Madame Mandilip to have her victim going in and out of her shop during the time it took the poison to kill. The seizure might even take place there, and lead to dangerous questions. The clever thing, therefore, would be to cause the unsuspecting sacrifice to lose all interest in her; indeed, feel a repulsion against her, or even perhaps forget her. This could be easily accomplished by post-hypnotic suggestion. And Madame Mandilip had every opportunity for it. Would this not explain Harriet’s distaste as logically as imagination—or emotionalism?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“And so,” he said, “we have the woman’s failure to go to the door with Harriet that day explained. Her plot has succeeded. It is all over. And she has planted her suggestion. No need now for any further contact with Harriet. She lets her go, unaccompanied. Significant symbolism of finality!”

He sat thinking.

“No need to meet Harriet again,” he half-whispered, “till after death!”

I said, startled: “What do you mean by that?”

“Never mind,” he answered.

He crossed to the charred spot upon the floor and picked up the heat-blasted crystals. They were about twice the size of olive pits and apparently of some composite. He walked to the table and looked down upon the grotesque figure with its skeleton ribs.

“Suppose the heat melted it?” he asked, and reached over to lift the skeleton. It held fast, and he gave it a sharp tug. There was a shrill twanging sound, and he dropped it with a startled oath. The thing fell to the floor. It writhed, the single wire of which it was made uncoiling.

Uncoiling, it glided over the floor like a serpent and came to rest, quivering.

We looked from it to the table.

The substance that had resembled a sprawling, flattened, headless body was gone. In its place was a film of fine grey dust which swirled and eddied for a moment in some unfelt draft—and then, too, was gone.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

14: For the Rose of America

“I TELL thee, prince, it shall not be!” shouted Kard hoarsely. “He hath saved this day the life of Kard, and he shall not die thus. Look to thyself, thou man of, the snows,” he flung over his shoulder, “thy death waits!”

“Away, fool!” raged Morolas, and whirled the smith from his path with a sweep of his arm. He snatched a spear from one of the hunters, and would have repeated his cast. That throw was never made.

All had happened in the space that a man might count ten. In one glance Polaris accepted the situation. His head shot forward, every muscle in his body flexed, his face hardened and under his white-furred frontlet his tawny eyes blazed like molten brass. He leaped from the side of the sledge with lightning swiftness, cleared the space intervening with a single bound, and tore the lifted spear from the hand of Morolas. He threw the weapon on the ground, and for an instant the two men faced each other, foot to foot and eye to eye.

Neither spoke. From his superior height the prince glared down at the son of the snows.

With a motion so quick that the eye could not follow the blow, Polaris struck, from the shoulder and with doubled fist. The tall prince crumpled and went down, hurled fully his own length by the fierceness of the blow.

He never moved again. The fist of Polaris, impelled by all the mighty strength stored in his muscles of steel, had struck Morolas full on the breast-bone. Such was the power of the stroke that the man’s chest had caved in before it, and his heart had stopped.

He lay scarcely twitching, and the dark blood welled from his lips and stained the white snow.

Never before had Polaris struck a man in anger with his naked hand, and he was momentarily shaken by the result of his own blow.’ He hesitated but an instant, however, for his blood was up. A Sardanian hunter knelt in the snow by his dead master.

“Gone is Morolas, brother to Helicon the prince,” he wailed, and sprang to his feet gnashing his teeth in fury. Kard cried aloud in horror, but he leaped to the side of Polaris, to confront the four hunters. But he struck no blow in defence of his friend; an ilium blade cast by one of the hunters pierced him as he raised spear; and he, too, fell in the snow.

Across Kard’s writhing body and the still corpse of Morolas the Prince, leaped Polaris. The four hunters stood in a little group, he who had thrown the spear at Kard slightly in advance of the others;

That fact alone saved the life of Polaris. Before the unarmed hunter could spring aside and give his comrades space in which to throw, the man of the snows was upon them, a death-dealing fury. He caught the first man by the shoulders, and by sheer strength swung him from the ground and dashed him against his fellows. Head-on, he threw the hunter, and the skull of the flying man crashed against the head of the man next him with sickening force.

Only two antagonists were left to confront him.

An ilium spear swished past his head. He caught it out of the air, and the man who had cast it died with it in his heart. Those Sardanians were of fighting stock; the single remaining man gave back never a step. His spear had been shaken from his hand, but he carried an ilium axe in his belt, and this he whirled up to meet Polaris.

It fell upon thin air. The son of the wilds crouched under its swing like a trained boxer, came up with the Sardanian's guard, and struck once with his long-bladed knife. The battle was finished. The trampled snow looked like a butcher's shambles. Polaris stood with clenched hands, his face set like a stone. Under other circumstances he might have felt remorse; he certainly would have been moved to mercy. But he had been trapped like an animal, and he joyed in the fierceness of the conflict, and felt no sting of regret for the men he had slain.

A voice called his name weakly from behind. He turned and beheld Kard the Smith, not yet sped. He had dragged himself to his knees, and was clutching at the great spear that was set in his side.

"Polaris of the Snows," he gasped, "Kard dies for thee, who this day saved Kard from the beast. Kard dies a traitor—to Sardanes' prince. Haste thee—stranger—get thy strange snow runners—get them—from Kalin! Methinks the priest loves thee. He will aid thee—to escape. Go—Helicon holds the Rose. Go—whilst thou mayest. Helicon planned—that thou—shouldst die—this day—but—one Kard—turned traitor. Farewell!"

Twice the Sardanian essayed to speak again and could not. His head rolled back, and he, too, was sped.

A strange sight was Polaris as he stood up from the corpse of Kard, his white fur surcoat besprinkled with the blood of men and beasts, his handsome face scarred by his terrible anger, his tawny eyes blazing and his broad chest rising and falling in gasps, as cold fear and hot wrath beset him together.

If he had ever doubted his love for the girl so strangely met, the griping fear that strangled his heart and choked his throat put all doubt to flight.

"Helicon holds the Rose," he muttered through his whitened lips. "What saidst thou, Kard? That I must escape? Nay, Kard; death shall find me in thy valley of Sardanes, or I shall find Helicon, thy prince, and the Rose. Yesterday, or was it many yesterdays ago?—it was fall for the North. Now it is all for the Rose. I come, dear heart; I come, to win, or to die in the losing!"

He leaped to the sledge, tore away the thongs that bound the carcasses of the dead bears and rolled them into the snow alongside the dead men. He inspanned the four horses, sprang into the driver's seat, shook out the many-moulded lash and drove back toward Sardanes, as though hell's door had opened and loosed its legion of furies along the Hunters' Road behind him.

Midway in his dash to the city, he halted the horses and sprang down. With nose well down to catch the scent from the trail, and with his plumed tail aflaut as he galloped, a great grey dog toiled out through the snows to meet him.

“What, Marcus? You, too, have fought and bled!” he cried, as his loyal servant leaped upon him, whining for the joy of the meeting. The shoulder of the dog was gashed by a keen edge, so that his blood had run down and dried on his breast and legs. And on the throat and jowl of Marcus was other blood.

“Now, do you alone live of all your tribe, Marcus? Shame on you, Marcus, if you deserted to find your master while the fighting pack died for the Rose! Or did it fall some other way that you alone come to meet me?”

Wondering much and fearing more, he flung the dog onto the sledge and again lashed the ponies into a mad run. Snow fell, and they dashed on through the storm, the man ever plying the long lash, the dog riding behind him, reared, and with his paws on the man’s shoulders, both looking ahead, where the smoke curled around the mighty mountain-tops.

When they came to the pass gashed in the foothills, where the snow waves broke at the lips of the warm slopes, Polaris outspanned the outworn ponies, and dismissed them with a parting crack of the long whip. Freed of their burdens, the tired little beasts scuttled away up the rocky hillsides, betaking themselves to soft pastures, to forget the voice of the lash and the galling harness.

Polaris and Marcus climbed the pass, and stood again at the brink of the ledge of rock that overlooked the valley. Below them in the sunshine lay Sardanes, never more peaceful. Men were working in the fields, women singing from the homes and children were at play in the meadows. Under its green bridges the little river rippled to the hill’s foot, its waterfall murmuring from the distance.

Above it all, for an instant, Polaris stood gazing down, with no peace of spirit, his heart and brain a red and raging fury. Sardanes’s evil genius, was at her gates.

Through the forests to the left the man and dog skirted the meadows where none might see them, headed straight to the terraced declivity of the Gateway to the Future.

None was there to meet them as they set foot on the last terrace and the house of the priest lay before them; but a welcome sound greeted the ears of Polaris. It was the howling of the dogs, which Marcus would have answered. A stern word silenced him. At the very threshold of the house of Kalin, the priest met Polaris. His face was drawn and anxious and his right hand was bound in a white bandage. At sight of the son of the snows and his grey bodyguard, Kalin started and a strange look passed athwart his melancholy features.

Without setting foot on the door-stone, Polaris called sternly: “Greeting to thee, Kalin the Priest. Tell me, and waste not thy words in the telling, where fares the Rose?”

Kalin threw forth his uninjured hand in a bitter gesture. “The Prince Helicon—” he answered hoarsely, but Polaris broke in:

“Ay, priest,’ Helicon holds the Rose. I learned as much but shortly. Now if there has been treachery here, I am minded that Marcus shall tear out a traitor’s throat! Speak quickly. How falls it that the Rose is gone, that the prince breaks faith and that thou hast allowed it?”

UNMOVED by the threat, Kalin bent his deep eyes on Polaris.

“No traitor dwells here,” he answered. “Even now those faithful to me in the valley gather to the rescue of the lady, it may be, though it rend Sardanes with bitter strife. Ay, all that would Kalin attempt, even though he deemed that thou wert dead in the snows, as Helicon hinted. Helicon hath not had his will freely. A priest of Hephaistos lieth yonder in his dwelling with a broken shoulder, and this hand was injured in defence of the Rose. Kalin did but yield to force, that he might later win by craft. Thy words do Kalin small honour, thou who are as the brother of Kalin.”

“Thy pardon, Kalin, my words were rash. Consider that the maid is dearer to me than aught I may -hope to attain in the world, and this thing that hath been done hath brought upon me a rage like unto nothing I have ever known. Now tell me what thou mayest accomplish in my aid, for I go hence to find Helicon the Prince.”

“Mine is half of the fault, brother,” Kalin answered. “I should have foreseen, but I guessed not that Helicon was mad enough for this. Wide was the rift between us before; it hath passed all bridging now. As I have said, many of the people hold to the ancient sway of the priesthood of Hephaistos, and murmur at the changes which Helicon would have. Already my messengers are among them, calling them to my aid. Hadst thou not come, in a short space Kalin would have been on his way to the Judgement House. R was ordered that thou shouldst die this day on the Hunters’ Road. How hast thou won free?”

“Kard the Smith owed me somewhat, and could not stomach my killing. He took a dead thrust for his hindrance. Yet did he warn in time, and Morolas and four hunters keep him company whither he travelleth,” Polaris answered simply.

Then Kalin told him how Helicon the Prince had come to the gateway and taken Rose Emer thence by force. Kalin had made opposition, even to raising his hand against the prince. In a scuffle, wherein he was supported by one of his priests, he had been wounded in the hand by the dagger of the prince, and the priest had been hurled to the ground, so that his shoulder was cracked.

“Only we two were here to oppose him,” said Kalin, “and he had others with him. Had I persisted, I had been slain by him in his fury. So I submitted that I might be left to befriend the Rose. And she, she loosed the great dog before she was taken, and set him forth on thy trail. One of Helicon’s men gashed him with a spear, and he would have turned and given battle to all of them, but Rose urged him on.”

“And how went the Rose—calmly, or struggling and crying?” asked Polaris, his jaws clinching at the thoughts called up by the words of Kalin.

“Nay, with head held high, tearless and saying nothing went the Rose,” the priest answered him. “The lady hath greatness of spirit. She went in anger, but gave not way to fear.”

“Now we go to visit this prince of thine,” said Polaris. He called Marcus and shut the dog, protesting, with his fellows in the stable. “Well would you like the fight with me, if fight there is to be, I know, my Marcus, but I dare not risk you,” he muttered. He ran to his room in the house of the priest. When he came forth there swung from his waist his father’s brace of heavy revolvers and the filled cartridge belt, and in his hand he bore the brown rifle. He had also an ilium-bladed spear, and in its sheath at his hip gleamed the long dagger of Kard the Smith, that he had taken from the corpse of the stout Sardanian.

He counted much on his firearms now. Here were weapons of which even Kalin knew not the secret.

Among the few books in the cabin of his father was one which Polaris had read and reread, and which, as boy and man, he had liked best of them all. It was the “Ivanhoe” of Sir Walter Scott. He had wondered much on its story of chivalry and battle in a far-off time. Unconsciously much of his own language was couched in its quaint terms.

Now, as he set forth, to fight, or to fall, if need be, for the lady of his heart, there came to him a strange conceit, born of the old romance.

Armed and ready, he stood at the top of the terrace, and while the priest wondered, he raised his voice in his own tongue, not loudly, but firmly and clearly, in the first battle cry ever heard in the valley of Sardanes:

“For the Rose of America! Polaris to the rescue!”

Together he and Kalin passed down the terraced slopes of the Gateway to the Future.

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