

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 17
27TH OCTOBER 2019

SOMETHING HAS AWOKEN

BY MIKE
JAMIE—
ABYZOU...

PUMPKIN SPICE LATTE

BY GK
MURPHY—
SEASON
OF THE
WITCH...

SHOP TIL YOU DROP BY COLE EVANEK

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THE ABYSS BY SANDRO D. FOSSEMÒ

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Cole Evanek, Sandro D. Fossemò, Blake Rogers, A Merritt, Charles B Stilson*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 17
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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 *Awesome Silver Skull and Clock* by Carlton Herzog. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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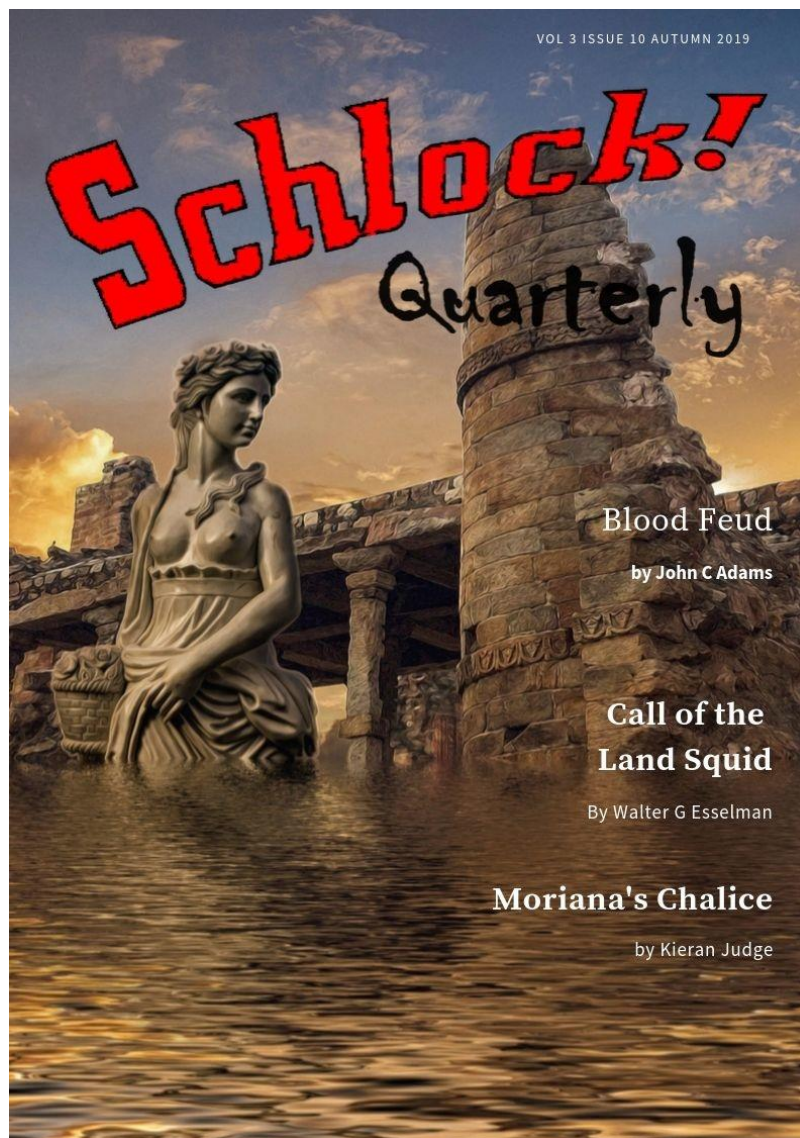
EDITORIAL

In this Halloween edition, something sinister is afoot in the Lake District. We remain in the same place and same day for another Cumbrian tale of Halloween horror from the blood-soaked pen of GK Murphy. Next, a visitor to the mall contemplates the many methods of suicide. Sandro D. Fossemò celebrates the season with a horrific poem. And a demonically possessed boy demands Hubert Crying's soul.

A self-confessed space gypsy and a former galactic warlord are taken before the Intermediary of the Sporn. Lowell considers the sinister significance of dolls. And Polaris and Rose reach the city state of Sardanes.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"IT AIN'T NOT ENOUGH THAT THEY MASHED BIG AL INTO PANCAKES, BUT THEY HAD TO SIT US IN FRONT OF HIM FOR AN *INSTAGRAM* PHOTO TOO?"

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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SOMETHING HAS AWOKEN by Mike Jamie

Consciousness.

It came suddenly. Although it wasn't fully understood in those first few seconds.

Senses rushed to the forefront of the mind. Sound, touch, smell, taste, complemented with a sense of utter darkness.

A flood gate of emotions opened. Fear and anxiety at first. Followed by a rush of confusion, anger and hatred. Then finally through the mass confusion, self-awareness.

The darkness subsided as the being entered the light.

Halloween

Famed now for an American holiday where children knock on strangers' doors begging for candy. They dress up like some god damn spawn of supermarket cheapness. Stinking of grease paint, nylon capes, plastic masks that scrape the skin and sticky sweet fake blood. Fitting more for an ice cream, than creating a monstrous scene.

The history of Halloween goes all the way back to the pagan festival known as Samhain. Rituals surrounding Samhain included bonfires, dancing, feasting and building altars to honour their deceased ancestors. A far cry now from what the western world celebrates. With the old ways long forgotten, big business took full advantage, the Hallowed Day was twisted by its exposure to the corporations. The result being what you witness every year, a mockery to the ancient beliefs of a now forgotten people.

The Bowder Stone

On an ancient site nestled in the forests of the Borrowdale Valley. There stood remnants from the last ice age, some 11,700 years ago.

The forest was littered with boulders and rocks of sarsen stone and slate. The Bowder Stone lay not far from the slow-moving waters of the River Derwent. Many unsuspecting travellers met their fate in its icy clutches trying to ford the river. Still resting in the same place it was deposited thousands of years ago. The Bowder Stone was a local landmark and tourist attraction. The Victorians would later build wooden ladders, attaching them to the rock. This resulted in a magnificent viewing point. Cast from the mountains and thrown to the bottom of the valley it towered over everything.



On the 31st October 2019 the solitary rock's enigmatic presence ceased.

Resonance

Deep in the centre of the stone at the core, a supernatural energy began to stir. To all who saw the "rock" over the thousands of years it inhabited the valley. Not one of those souls could have possibly imagined what they had witnessed. It is a certainty that if they had foreknowledge of the "rock," it would have sent their minds passed the edge of madness. At 22:22 on All Hallows Eve 2019, after over 7000 years, it moved.

An unseen motion startled the creatures of the forest, a windless force. The birds suddenly fell silent and scattered from the trees. The game animals burrowed furiously into their holes as the unseen anomaly passed by. Deep in the "rock" a resonating energy began to emit from its core. Small vibrations at first. Building stronger and stronger with each pulse.

The Void

In the void it is black and without form. Time and space have no power there. Lost souls linger, unaware of themselves. Some would call it Purgatory, The Waiting, or The Gates. But across all cultures the descriptions are often the same. Some would go so far as to call it a holding place. The bridge between life and death. The place souls' dwell before new life is gifted. However, what is less understood by most are the other things that dwell in the dark places of the universe.

In the deepness of the void a resonating sound came through. The vibrations ripped through the darkness like a three-dimensional ripple of water. It grew ever wider, like the last moments of a dying sun. Stretching ever outwards to form a supernova of destruction that

would destroy anything in its path. Forming in the centre a light began to flicker. Glowing dull against the void like a weak star it became brighter and brighter.

Quake

The ancient rock resonated like a bell. The sarsen stone vibrating so much that cracks began to form along the fittings of the old Victorian ladders. Creaking, the wooden steps shattered into a thousand splintered shards. A second supernatural pulse emanated from the core. Much more powerful than the first, it laid waste to all in its path. Trees, rocks and wildlife went hurtling at speed through the air. As if cast by some mighty breath from a vengeful God. At the centre of the chaos stood the Bowder Stone, vibrating so violently that the solid earth where it had stood for so long. Now resembled quicksand as the “rock” cracked further into splinters of razor-sharp sarsen stone. One after the other shooting off, like bullets of prehistoric death in every direction.

In the void the light began to take form. Ever it pulsed like the brightest stars in the sky. As it began to manifest and take form and shape, strong sounds resonated through the void. They sounded like a million sacred voices channelling the same tones over and over. Then suddenly.... Silence

The Bowder Stone suddenly erupted with a flash of brilliant white light. The accompanying shock wave ripped through the remainder of the trees. Those that had survived the first blast did not survive the second. The scene left behind was that of total devastation. One would almost be convinced some great volcano had unleashed a pyroclastic inferno down the side of the mountains. Smoke, dust and fire were scattered among trees that lay now flat and horizontal to the floor. However, the now dead trees lay on their sides fixed on one central position. At the epicentre where once stood the Bowder Stone, now stood...



Abandon Ship

Standing aboard a small pleasure cruiser, Peter Hay couldn't believe his eyes. Gently rocking from side to side on the surface of Derwent Water, he turned the bow of the little motor boat south. The scene facing him was breath taking. It began with a small light he noticed in the woodlands.

Putting down his fishing rod and glow in the dark floats, he called for his son. 'Jacob!' he shouted to the boy, who was occupied in the small cabin picking his fingernails.

'What is it, Daddy?' he enquired. His pudgy little face now poking out of the entrance hatch.

'Here come and look at this, there's something in the trees. Look over towards the south!'

Jacob reached into his Spiderman jacket to produce a small rounded pair of spectacles. 'What, what?' he said excitedly.

'I don't know, son, is it me or is it getting brighter?' Peter said with a puzzled look creeping across his face. 'If I have my bearings right, I think that's where the Bow...'

Suddenly and without warning, a brilliant flash of light emanated from the woods. It was so bright, so intense it illuminated the entire valley. The sky flashed blue for a few seconds. As if a meteor had fell. A fireball of brilliant white light began to race out from one central point. It reminded him of nuclear tests in Arizona he had seen on TV.

'Holy mother of God!' exclaimed Peter. 'Jacob, get back below, now!'

As Peter turned the boat it took just a few seconds for the first blast of energy to hit the side. Like the testing of some new thermostatic smart bomb, the sound wave was delayed behind the initial flash.

As it hit, their little boat almost capsized.

'DADDY!' Jacob screamed. The thought of falling into the icy lake scared him more than anything. He had fell through thin ice with his friends a month before. The stabbing pain of the water still fresh in his mind.

'Stay inside!' But a deafening roar over powered Peter's words as the boat pitched and rolled

Managing to turn North and trying to get as much speed as he could out of the little 5hp motor. Peter and Jacob made for the shore. The boat was full of water. Jacob sat hysterical in the little cabin.

'What was it, Daddy? I'm scared! I don't want to sink, Daddy.'

As Peter looked down at his son, a second flash came from behind. Jacob was fixated on the scene behind his father's shoulder. The look he saw on his son's face, was a look that no father should ever have to bare. Jacob was frozen in a look of complete terror, face twisted and teeth barred. Peter could see a huge fire ball behind. Reflected in the little round glasses Jacob wore. The heat on the back of Peter's neck confirmed to him all he needed to know.

He made the decision instantly to grab Jacob and jump. As they jumped they took flight as the final shock wave hit, thrusting them some fifteen meters into the air. Finally after what felt like an age and with his eyes tightly closed. He hit the icy water.

Voices in the Dark

When Peter became conscious he could hear voices talking.

He woke on the shore of Derwent Water, freezing and caked in earthy smelling mud. Luckily the cheap life preserver he had got at the local Silloth boot sale served him well. The pain in his left shoulder was immense.

‘You are a sweet boy,’ a childlike voice said. Strange it was, however. Like a polyphonic over tone. Two voices speaking in tandem. One lower, one higher.

‘Thank you for saving me.’ Jacob! He is alive, Peter thought through the confusion.

He opened his eyes and squinted as they stung with lake water and mud.

‘Jacob?’ Peter questioned with all his faith.

‘Daddy, you’re okay, look, look!’ He almost sounded excited.

As the blurring in his vision subsided a picture so horrific came into view he almost died there and then. Sat crouching over his son and caressing his hair was a demonic entity, nothing he had ever known could explain what he gazed upon. But it existed. The fear and helplessness was more than he could bare.

‘A sweet child, yes.’ The entity now turned its face towards Peter.

Its eyes were the first terror. Glowing brilliant white they had an eternal glow. Hypnotic yet unnerving. It reminded him of a Balrog from the mines of Moria. But nothing from the Lord of the Rings or any other realm of fantasy could have terrified him the way he was now.

‘Look! I’m dry, dad! It caught me when I fell. I was waiting for you to wake up.’

The entity rose and offered its hand to Jacob.

‘No!’ screamed Peter. ‘Get the fuck away from my son!’ The pain in his shoulder was more than he could bare. He stumbled, ripping the rotor cuff. Excruciating pain shot down his arm and into his fingertips. He realized he could not move.

‘Such a sweet child you have.’ Looking towards Jacob then to Peter.

‘What do you want from us? TELL ME!’ The pain and fear in Peter’s voice cutting through, as he trembled helpless in the mud.

‘Sweet child,’ it repeated

The creature looked Jacob in the eye as Jacob met its glare with a smile. It whispered to him...

‘My child.’

‘NO!’ Peter’s horse command was ignored. The beast began caressing Jacob on the cheek with the tip of a black, claw like finger. The boy seeming hypnotized, began grinning at the creature. Then calmly it commanded...

‘Stay.’

Mine

Like an obedient dog Jacob was rooted to the spot. Smiling up at the entity with all a child’s wonder, fearless and fascinated.

The demon then turned on Peter. Piercing him with those white, hypnotic eyes.

When it addressed him, the differentiation between the voices he heard speaking to his son, compared to the one now addressing him was hideous and grotesque. The child like tone replaced with what can only be described as a deep cracking rumble.

‘Weak mortal. Pathetic and broken you are. Who are you to this child? Its soul would have been surely lost in the waters.’ Gesturing to Derwent Water.

‘He is my son... please.’ Peter writhed in pain. His left arm now shaking uncontrollably.

The creature, approached Peter like smoke being blown across the surface of a pond, its eyes dimming.

‘This one... is mine.’ It grimaced.

He knew, lying helpless, that the next words he would mutter would be the most important of his life. His son, his only son...

‘However,’ the demon continued.

‘With you,’ pointing a cloud like finger at Peter. ‘We will decide your fate soon enough.’ The ground emanated and an aftershock shook the earth.

‘Please... my son. He is innocent,’ pleaded Peter.

‘INNOCENT!’ roared the entity. ‘Innocence you know not! Who hath broken the seal? Who hath bestowed my consciousness upon the world of men?’

‘Please...’ Peter begged. ‘In the name of God let him live!’

The being seemed to grow, rising into the air in a flurry of smoke and mist. Suddenly branching out, as if spreading mass wings of clouded darkness against the moonlit waters of the lake, its glare now piercing and smouldering red.

‘GOD! WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF GOD?’ The exclamation from the creature was so vicious, so loud. It thundered down the valley and bounced, echoing off the mountains. ‘God has left you, mortal. Filthy and manipulative, you cry for God. What has God delivered you?’ The demon gestured for Peter to answer. ‘Speak, mortal.’

Peter could not reply. Shock had begun to take hold. If he did not get to a hospital soon hypothermia would set in. His whole body now shook uncontrollably.

‘To me mortal... God hath delivered you to me.’ The demon now seemed to reform into its former stance. It approached Peter as it continued. ‘My seal is broken. I hath returned to blasphemous sickness. For thou shall know me and my way. I am the darkness in the light. I am the shadow that stalks the meek. I am... the taker of innocence.’ The entity seeming proudly amused as it spoke.

‘Know my name... Abyzou.’

The being lunged towards Peter and extending what could be described as a talon. Dug it into his left cheek. Feeling claw on bone as it snagged on his gums and incisor. It tore away a chunk of flesh exposing the teeth and lower jaw bone. A high pitched scream came from Peter. His eyes bulged from the sockets as he tried feebly to crawl away. His hands slipping in a mixture of earthy smelling mud and warm blood.

He looked up and saw his son standing by the water’s edge. Another guttural sound came as he swallowed, choking on gulps of air and his own blood, hot and copper tasting. Then more pain. Two huge claws thrust into the base of his buttocks simultaneously. Peter knew despite the horrendous pain that the popping sensation meant one had gone through his hip bone. Now protruding through the groin. He was pinned to the floor. The pain he felt was excruciating.

Jacob stood smiling. He looked so serene, staring back at him. A thought came and went. A quick flash of a delivery room at the West Cumberland. A baby boy cradled in loving arms, tears of joy came, then darkness. Peter began to scream uncontrollably, his vision went black as two snake like claws penetrated his eye sockets. Burrowing slowly deeper into him. They broke through the thin bone behind. As they broke through, the splintered bone embedding itself in the frontal cortex. The demon pushed slowly through to the amygdala located at the back of the skull.

Through the pain Peter felt and heard the creaking of it. Then, coiling around the top of Peter’s spine, he could feel unbelievable pain and heavy pressure around the back of his neck. Then with one swift movement it tore off the top of his skull. A loud crack the last thing Peter Hay heard as he fell to the ground. Gushing the contents of his skull into the mud like an overturned cauldron.

The demon turned to Jacob...

Jacob was still in the same place where he was commanded to stay. He willingly extended his hand to the entity. It caressed his palm with the gentleness and tenderness of a mother.

‘Come, child,’ Abyzou spoke softly. ‘I have much to show you.’

THE END

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PUMPKIN SPICE LATTE by GK Murphy

Every Halloween was getting the same as the one before, thus nothing surprised anymore, no shocks, no screams in the night, nothing truly horrible...no blood and guts, the things that made Halloween that one special time of year!

Something had to change. Something needed to happen, some shock, some scare...

Something particularly severe and gory, perhaps...

This Halloween morning before that fabled bewitching evening, June Crispin discovered she was very late for work at the furniture factory on the borders of this curiously small northern town in Cumbria, having stirred in bed a solid half an hour after the alarm clock sounded on her bedside table. The 19 year old realized both her parents were already up, ready and at work, like she frigging ought to have been.

June rushed out the house and dived into the Mini Cooper her father bought her for her eighteenth birthday. However, as she reached the bottom of the road, the attractive raven-haired young woman paused and stopped to consider that none of this rushing about mattered. She was late, but so what? It was a factory, for God's sake. When had she ever been late before? It wasn't like they were about to sack her. This was the first time.

This was the 31st of October, 2019, the day the UK left the European Union, if that shit ever happened at all. She was almost sure this would happen today, as most everyone, yet it didn't seem to matter anymore since the country had fallen into a deep political slumber and given up caring what occurred on this date. It seemed like nobody in the entire world cared anymore—it had gone on so long.

She pulled the car up to the curb outside of Gregg's and went inside to order a bacon and sausage sandwich and a pumpkin spice latte, her favourite, her mum and dad's favourite, and her boyfriend Luke Stevens' favourite, it seemed—yes, this peculiar coffee latte was a popular choice amongst many a mortal!

The shop was rather quiet this morning, except for a tiny girl who stood being served with her back turned away from June.

If June was correct, the girl was eating a slice of icing cake.

Yet, there was nobody serving behind the counter, an empty shop but for June and the girl—the faceless little girl—save for the whistle and bubble of the coffee percolator in the far corner by the bar.

June looked at her watch and cursed.

“Hello?” she said, elevating her voice above the traffic on the street outside the door, “Can somebody serve me? I'm in a hurry. I need to get to work. I'm late to begin with!”

No response...

June sighed heavily, turning her attention now to consider the tiny girl nearby. This girl who, for some reason that seemed quirky, wore a white pattered, floral dress, which was eloquent and quaint-looking and somehow old-fashioned...but also in a way, being thus, it was kind of creepy.

A woman suddenly appeared from the kitchen out back, a woman June didn't recognize.

She had a long witch's beak for a nose, thin unsmiling lips and little black beady eyes, her fringe black as a crow's feathers.

"What can I do for you, miss?" the woman croaked, reminiscent of a pirate (she reminded June of a book she once read called [*Hellish Redcap*](#), about a murderous, sea-ravaged pirate...she never finished it), "Can I tempt you into a hearty breakfast bap, with the full works?"

Her appearance might not have turned many heads but certainly might have turned many stomachs.

June smiled meekly, "Just a pumpkin spice latte, please, not sugar, extra cream...and please hurry, I'm late for work."

The witchy woman recoiled, offended it seemed. This infuriated June Crispin.

The woman said, "I have angina, I'll have you know...my doctor told me not to rush but instead to take things easy and slowly or risk a cardiac arrest...and I must admit, since I acted slower, I felt better in my bones and lungs!"

She even sounded like a pirate...

Suddenly, shockingly, the faceless little girl belched loudly.

Offended it seemed, June said "Disgusting girl," and reached out to heavily slap the back of the girl's head.

"Oh goodness," the witch said behind the counter, "you should never have done that, miss! Especially on Halloween..."

Without turning her body to face June, this didn't stop her head slowly turn on her shoulders and neck, amid cracks and splintering of young bone and gristle, and face the young factory worker. Amid a peculiar mist which seemed to have suddenly formed in the tiny snack shop, the girl's distant eyes appeared void of expression and milky white, her nose small and pink and stubbly, as she opened her mouth to expose a blue and retracting, curling tongue, that of a lizard which extended and lashed her little chin. Clearing her throat, the girl retrieved an apt amount of green, mushy bile when she grinned widely and suddenly spat a globule into June's face, who by this point looked horrified—petrified, in fact, as in her mind-set, she registered this event must surely have had some strange connection to this date and time of year, the fabled Season of the Witch, the 31st, Halloween.

June clutched her breast as she felt a tightening inside her chest, the result of a heart attack. Moaning as everything turned darker around her, she collapsed to her knees on the tiled floor whilst the girl and old witch behind the counter laughed and cackled in horrid fashion.

She could no longer breathe. Her heart had simply ceased to operate. She was about to die here on Halloween.

June Crispin was dead.

The shop fell silent.

Yes, the silence was deafening.

Until, it was here the witch behind the counter spoke as she walked out from behind the serving bar. Lustily, she rubbed the palms of her hands together with verve while she cackled more, a testimony of pure evil and malicious intent. “Little Jenny, do you know what this means?” she said, “Yes, it means we have plenty of sausage meat for the whole of the next two months at least...” The witch said this as she grabbed the dead teenage girl’s feet and legs, whereby she then simply proceeded to take the strain and drag her carcass across the floor, behind the counter and into the kitchen out back.

Little Jenny spoke. Grinning and exposing a full set of distinctively gnarly green teeth, as snot drooled from her mouth and snout, she said, “Mummy, can I have a pumpkin spice latte?”

“Mummy has a ton of work to do. She needs her chopper and knives. Lots of chopping and cutting for the rest of the day...”

“Okay,” the girl said, her head twisting back into place, cracking, splintering, “But can I have a pumpkin spice latte later, then?”

“Of course you can, my sweetie...saying as it is Halloween, after all, and saying as you’re in the festive spirit!”

Silence descended on the shop again whilst the only sound and hum in the distance was that of the traffic outside.

Suddenly, a handsome, youthful-looking man walked into the shop, perhaps twenty years of age. “Hey,” he hollered, “Can I get some service here, I’m in a hurry?”

THE END

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SHOP TIL YOU DROP by Cole Evanek

There's a fountain in the centre of the local mall, a bubble of opalescent pond-water gurgling into a sort of mushroom-jet in the middle. You know the kind, where you can put your hand under and interrupt the whole sheet. The unwritten more of throwing coins for what-have-you has been observed. Maybe it's a foot deep. It's got an esplanade that people sit on.

Giant ceiling decorations loom overhead and throw pale sunlight, streaming lazily in through skylights, against perfectly marbled foot-surfaces and reflective store windows. One comprises a ribbed sphere of aluminium flowers, the other an anachronistic plane and a series of variegated squares hanging at different angles so the corners point up and down. They're vaguely equidistant from each floor's side rails though the western spur of floor three is more proximal.

I'm at the mall. I've been here languishing for a while, and in fact I've been in this mall many times before.

I'll never walk into it again.

I plan to kill myself, today, between the shopping centre's cornices. The methodology is up in the air as of yet. But before the day is up I'll have died here.

I is a concept. No, I'm not fucking up the pronoun here. I mean the idea of I is one hell of a concept. It's so bound up with meta in my head that the I that imagines I cannot imagine ridding itself of I. Because itself is I, I guess. A thing can't just get rid of itself. But I've got the idea, I'm latching onto the idea, that this I's existence will cease. As in, will not carry forth into tomorrow and any thought of it before it ceases to exist will have absolutely no bearing on anything at all after it ceases to exist.

I say it like this I is something separate from the thing doing the thinking; but it's not, like I said. Some post-suicidal conservation-of-energy-idealism kinda percolates in my head like bubbles in the mall fountain.

I've always wanted to die at the mall. I don't mean that, as in, it seems like a nifty place to be a corpse. It's not the witnesses or glory or the anti-capitalistic splat that my body careening toward the ground would initiate that makes me want to kick the bucket here. It's the fact that I don't think I can actually go through with killing myself. But I want to, badly, and the mall is the one place that makes me so existentially nauseous and insecure about the future of humanity that I can barely dispel the corrosive mental fog created by it even hours after departing. I've been in rat-nest dens of pestilential drug abuse and shame, perused needlepoint alleys thick with the scent of impending psychic euthanasia, but nowhere gets to me like this fluorescent cesspool of anomie.

This square of ground, the baptismal fountain of numinous financial wonders, is where I first spawned my own personal resolution to bite the literal bullet. Actually, please allow a retraction of this nary fib; I don't necessarily want to chomp a bullet, it's to plaid and quick (though principle can be subjugated to the necessity of capricious mood).

To be a freshly-minted cadaver in the mall is to trump the borders of corporate nihilism by prostrating a dead and ideologically unassailable object of horror against the market's altar.

But to approach this as some anti-capitalist scourge-trope is all wrong. And anyways, why do I care how it gets along if I'm just going to be vacuumed of consciousness in a few hours? Well, there's some ante-mortem justification for the post-hoc pain and shock and real strife I'm bound to cause people with my public death. There's no great chance people will see this for anything more than it is, a disturbing act of a pariah desperate and unhinged. Except I'm not unhinged, nor a pariah, and I really just want to make sure I go through with this death and the only way to do that is to make sure I off myself here, at the mall. Any sort of ideological romance conjured by others will be subsumed by the swamp of malaise my family and friends will be drowning in. But it's just a fitting way to die, to snap the population of this shopping centre out of the brand-cacophony that tugs at their attention and maybe even leave them with the sort of impression that keeps them from ever coming to the mall again. Which could ostensibly save people of the same cloth and variety as myself from a felo-de-se induced by manufactured loyalty to consumption.

I've got a map in my head of places and methods. Number one is obviously the fountain.

The Fountain: Methodology: Run-of-mill drowning. No frills, possibly construed as accidental by coroners and mall-goers. Societal impact: Small.

Drowning in shallow water is often facilitated by disorientation, with concussion the most usual impetus. As in, get concussed and make sure you're all irremediably wobbly before plunging in. The hard part ought to be getting into the water post-concussion. What I'd have to do then is get into an altercation with someone who would pancake my face and hopefully leave off before security pops in and restrains me, and then wade into the fountain. I'd have already drawn too much attention so someone would likely pull me out of it before I could drown.

Drugs could mollify the obdurate nature of my survival instinct and render a drowning more peaceful. I've in my pocket a big brown clump of totally fuck-your-face grade heroin that is, in all likelihood, cut with fentanyl. I'm not screwing around, I've really pulled out all the stops for this. I don't do drugs but will allow them to hasten me into death on the plush wings of an opiate rush.

Then, though, I'd look like a shit-stain druggee who couldn't even properly OD without falling into the fountain and drowning first. I would be post-mortem relegated to the lowest denominator of human that other normal people low-key think in some snide and sort of shameful way deserve the young, painful and pseudo-accidental death that's befallen them. Wanton consideration of this variety isn't bound to bestow my final moments with any semblance of peace, sure, but there's purpose in it (bound purpose, mind you) nonetheless.

Check this: really mulling how you'll be perceived after death is the manifestation of a certain type of theology that necessitates the ability to die in a metaphysically qualified fashion.

I mean, if I was certain death was just nothingness and oblivion and that even those ideological constructions of a thing (or a not-thing) that is literally the opposite of ideological construction were totally moot against the eternality of certain void then I wouldn't give a damn how I got on with this shit.

I'd unpack my gun (yes of course I brought one) and blow my brains all over the soft-serve machine behind the dairy-queen counter after walking back there and making myself a last meal of cheesecake blizzard while the terrified working girl eyed me and the gun in a way that would absolutely accentuate my resolve to get on with the act as I'd have already been perceived as a different sort of omega denominator whom even in his last moments must herald shock and disappointment and a little bit of contempt from those around him, though he's just trying to go about his own business and die.

But definition-clenching nihilism I guess would allow you to pontificate and ramificate or whatever about post-death justification because that mulling matters just as little as not doing so would. All's equal under the great eye of meaninglessness and that is what truly irks me about the fucking mall. The meaning conjured ala branded cloth and fluorescence and A/C and this involuted social milieu where depression seems to ooze up through the floor among the ornamentation is not only tenuous but completely baffling. As in like what are the connotations you have with your favourite brands and with people who wear them and what archetype of meaning are you trying to fit yourself into by occupying the body-space you afford these clothes and trinkets and shit? That's fashion I guess, like I understand social lubrication and the brain's happy chemicals getting all garbled by shit that doesn't fit into the milieu because of lack of lubrication etc. but that doesn't mean this condition hasn't had a totally polar effect on me by coaxing out the sort of dissonance which whams my mind into its own stew of garbled meaninglessness that is at least part of the justification I use to understand why I want to die so badly.

A good question, I think, that could gain at least a small order of academic cred from meta-analysis of suicide hotline transcriptions is whether the digressions of the inevitably self-eliminated are used to distract from or stall the act (or whether lunacy is some necessary condition and at its (lunacy's) zenith comes these gob-smacked digressions about the lack of meaning and discombobulated mental stew of its, lunacy's, generator, and thus the height of lunacy corresponds perfectly with the height of digression ending logically in the crescendo of a mind plagued by this height, that is, ending, suicide). My own meta-digression would then dovetail nicely into a more thorough analysis of this tenuously ante-mortem mental condition (or state, though I like the burden of connotation I'm unloading w/ 'condition'). Anyways.

Those giant mobile ceiling decorations in the shape of a ball of flowers and airplane w/ accompanying cubes, structural integrity unknown, purposive exposition unimportant? Societal impact: depends on if anyone else gets whacked

So what I was thinking regarding these is a jump from railing to mobile (from floor 3 starboard probably), as the wing of the plane could ostensibly support my weight if I land close enough to the cockpit. I could cross to the giant flower ball thing from there but that'd likely be extraneous and as the petals don't seem congruous to the support of human weight and which would also be unnecessarily painful should they dice up my hands and whatnot.

The point herein is not only make the suicide look like an accident but also to draw the kind of circus and phone-garnering attention that such spectacle attracts before plunging purposely (but tragically, accidentally) onto the marbled tile below. Best-case scenario the mobile topples with me riding it. Then the videos/local news will collude to demonize these pointless arch-bastions of consumption and possibly get someone to say 'maybe these giant scarcely-attached mobile things are actually a bad idea and could coerce any ne're'do'elling child or

social pariah to straddle the off-limits but lofty and totally exclusive area thus causing it to crash with the resounding thunder that only kills the mental fecundity of a symbol if it kills the literal person riding it to the ground’.

Well and good so long as the worse-case scenario doesn’t instead circumvent my guard via kismet requisitions, allowing some person to be under the mobile/me as it coruscates with a million beams of skylight on the way to its physical/symbolic demise. Here I’d be shirking the tentatively safe and generally pitiful armour of suicide in favour of the more combustible possibility of internet-construed sobriquets along the lines of mobile et mobile, crib-envy, etc. attached to various incarnations of nouns denoting mental degradation/heroically idiotic athleticism.

I’ve heard that the only two people to survive jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge immediately regretted it. The jumping, not the surviving. For all the anhedonia and black-hole sulk they’d endured, these people, who had done nothing but fantasize about finally departing the planet on their terms, full-stop regretted having summoned the requisite gall to do so.

This both piques curiosity and disturbs me (as a detached observer of my compartmentalized self whom wishes to finish the job) for a few reasons. One: the testimony of others on death’s precipice, i.e. bedsores in hospitals or rip-tided fissure-ward into the ocean, often talk of how they accept their ‘fate’ not only respectfully but with a touch of serenity. Now this could be rationalized per the usual dichotomy of mentally unstable/stable as applied to anhedoniacs vs. normal folk that splits the type of people who would ever attempt suicide in the first place from those who just let the universe have its way with them. So if we extrapolate the general attitudes of this dichotomy then it’s easy to see how the suicidal folks would in their last moment regret and even condemn themselves and their decision, whereas those who didn’t choose but simply stumbled into death would ‘meh’ out with a shrug and cross peacefully the spectral border.

It’s this Euclidian thought-line that nags me though, as a digressive impetus and justification both. The application here is scientific but mostly detached and impersonal. A whole group of disparate folks stable or not are requisitioned into categories by the laziest of all razors, being Occam’s. By all means it makes sense, because how else could you explain the fact that people who want to kill themselves because they feel desperate and powerless usually end up loathing their power and decision and firmness of resolve which for them accomplishes the ultimate end. You can’t explain it without the antecedent folks who apply to the serenity bank pre-croak unless you appeal to the scientific view, would be the theory.

But peek at this second group, just probe in on them for a second. Their lives are accorded naturally if we’re gonna say that they’re straddling some bell curve’s midpoint. By naturally I mean they don’t struggle against the grain too hard. They spare themselves the scars of that struggle. These modus normalem let the universe guide them into decisions that maybe they’re not in control of but accept the guiding ebb nonetheless because things happen and they’re just present to watch and take limited part among the happening things and maybe succeed which is great but it’s still up to the universe to levy the noumenal rewards and so they construe their own rewards mentally after coming to terms with the universe as a wise but moderately unfeeling bitch whose physical reparations are anything but guaranteed.

The important thing is that they’ve accepted this.

With a sanguine degree of mental sagacity they drift into a peaceful death because they accept ala ebb-drift-sapience that struggling is pointless and that their penultimate thoughts and feelings ought not be afforded to terror or regret because they really don't have time to atone for those (the terror, regret).

Lots of time means lots of room to make mistakes that you're comfortable with atoning for later, yeah?

Anyways, that's a fleshing of justification for the acceptance bit. And it's a non-scientific analysis, something much harder to come by for the previous group. Since my headspace is more closely aligned with the worriers though I'll try parse an assessment, because it'll ease me into the process of tipping the mortality scales.

The natural is inevitable only when life isn't involved.

We can suppose that the bridge-jumpers were almost certainly condemned to not only death but to contemplating death's inevitability on like a seriously shrivelled and certain timeline. I'm also going to stereotype and call these folks a certain breed of not only the depressively suicidal but manically and almost pompously suicidal. What, you think there aren't different breeds? Unlike the Golden-Gaters it's the uncertain, unstable types who are ironically safest from their own hands. Their anomie can usually be scaled back if legitimacy-of-attempt is predicated by uncertainty (more on that in a sec).

But, the bridge-jumpers; They're the ones (when they actually jump) who tout the 'I'd do it right' ethos of aggressive felo-de-se. These types tend to conflate desire with ultimatum. You know, the ones who make sure you know and consequently that they know this act is not for attention, that they don't want help. Erasing your existence in an unequivocal fashion is, and after all ought to be, the coup-de-grace of an anhedonist who through some neuro-alchemy conjures resolve, and so they leave nothing to chance.

Which is exactly why they regret the decision moments (seconds) after making it. I'd say that, for myself personally, nihilistic ambiguity comprises at least the corner nubbins of a depressive package from which suicidal tendencies materialize. With that comes uncertainty about whether death is the best move. This doesn't have much to do with the desire; that's present, but it's about whether ambiguity may among the ebb fit, whether dying is the best move of like a few of them represented on a curve or quantum probability field or whatever (this thought-phenomenon's existence ironically curbing an iota of the variable's uncertainty if that makes any sense at all. Bear with me here).

So it's the half-hearted, cowardly attempts spurned by the bridge-jumping type that often, if they don't cure, at least remove the self-harmer from the pit of their nihilism/despair/anomie. Therapists know this, anyone with an ounce of professional mental health training knows this, that attention is literally what the attention-seeking suicidal person needs. It allows the universe or someone in it to pull you away from the void, whereas below the Golden Gate Bridge there's only the that shimmering plane of gurgling water waiting to smash your bones after affording you the time for regret.

And now we're all left (the pronoun is sound) to wonder which typology I occupy while sitting next to the fountain and absently interrupting its bubble with kismet coinage. Well,

I'm no bridge-jumper outside the mall, but within? I could likely survive the methods previously outlined. One could even posit that I'm only superficially entwined with my personal fate, if I need these externalities to spur it on (the mall, is what I mean). That I'm jiving with the ebb, giving it a chance to bring me back. If it wants, or even like can want. I know the absurdity of this whole 'the universe could save me' jumbo among my gestalt here. But if I try hard to die, and then die, I'll know (well, I won't because I won't be left to know but ya'll know what I mean) it won't have mattered and my reasons for the act will be justified (the perversity here is of course is that that justification will just, without me knowing about it, be hanging in space and since it's actually justification of the nihilism-affirmation brand will be itself meaningless and like not really be occupying space besides the headspace of those who stumble upon these ruminations, and thus not really justification at all).

It's probably laterally obvious that a smidge of attention-garnering exists within my mall idea, but I can say with certainty that it's only peripheral to my genuine intention of spawning an honest-to-God death-wish. Back to it.

The long-drop: Societal impact: large enough to haunt some dreams keep people out of this mall for a while

I've got a defunct old static rope that's coarse with detritus in my bag. I haven't practiced the hangman's knot more than 5 times but have tied it that many and could cord one together now. Sitting in plain view, in full serenity of total concentration, I'd let passers-by ogle my work as I completed it without an upward glance, the machinations of my demise only emerging fully as a truism when the knot has been completed or very near it. Most belt-and-cord suicides are suffocations, and are only tentatively associated with the neck-break hangings of yore. The way to do it painlessly and with gallantry is to tie off at the banisters or stairs that partition levels 2 and 3 from the ground and leap.

The higher the better. You didn't think I'd not try my very hardest after preparing so meticulously? Nah, as it were, nil but a chink in the code will save me from myself, philosophizing aside. I've stretched time, but that only; see how easy it was to hope? There be the perceptual crevasse separating our types, and though roundabout this demonstration will have collapsed the snow bridge. I don't have an iota of shit to give about regret or attention.

Purpose develops within me. Ruminating distracts from the salience of my disdain for this place but I'm rankled by it nonetheless. Children claw at dead-eyed parents whose faces are lurid with the pallor of despair under piercing, lithium fluorescence. Boyfriends slump forward or wait somnolently outside, drawing closer to their phones as their sweethearts wade in oases of fashion among the social desert which the waiting will never understand. Slack-faced, pock-marked young employees shift uncomfortably under collars that chafe against accreting perspiration, thinking only of the next meal or cigarette break as they watch for shoplifters out of a spite spurred by faces that pucker at prices that the employees, as the business end of an artificial interaction they'd never have undertaken of personal volition, had no part in setting.

The farcical exchange of capital, itself accrued in just as dead-eyed and meaningless ways, smarts so effectively on my humanity that my resolve has breached the contemplative and given way to the angry, the real.

In a pocket adjacent to the H is an IMI Desert Eagle handgun. This is a gun renowned for chambering .50 cal slugs, which for those who aren't acquainted to guns are bullets that do serious damage. Through my preoccupation with self-assisted dying I've run across a gamut of suicide-by-gun videos. Occasionally the smaller handguns don't pack requisite punch for propelling the bullet through the top of the skull, though they kill you anyways. Obviously a shotgun is bound to cause the biggest mess, what with your head splaying out like nascent flower buds in different directions and your brain just obliterated, but that's a cumbersome and inefficient way to go about a mall suicide when you're not even sure that shooting yourself is the way you want to go.

So yeah, the desert eagle. It'll do almost as much damage and cause a whole siphon of misted blood to cloud above my head and then rain across the shoppers and windows and immaculate floors. Some of it could even reach the mobile if I stood fountain-edge. More than anything this method would cause immediate aural panic and presage the sort of visual grotesquery that most people can't even process when they see it.

Feeling the gun's weight against my hoodie's mono-pocket brings about a whole spasm of thrill against the malaise welling up in my nerves. I didn't mean for circumstances to play out like this (recall the DQ diatribe of before). It's always been that, if I stop philosophizing long enough to look around, my cognitive schematics turn out as malleable and impure as my reflection would in a dirty puddle. Totally inapplicable to the all the world's shit. Maybe loving all would be cool but I side with Dostoyevsky in only being able to love collectively, like the collective as idea. It's like there's some diaphanous veil threaded with misanthropy that lowers when I stop thinking; perhaps this is what all idealists fight against in the fury of their productive lives. Keeping the worst at bay by imagining the better, like closing your eyes at the edge of some insurmountable cliff to forget the air whistling beneath your feet.

Well, this is exactly what I'd hoped to prompt by kibitzing through this psychic ghetto. The job is nearly done, then, half the battle won (or lost, depending on the sort of universalist bullshit we're buying into here, not that it will matter in fewer than 10 minutes). Let the triumphant, .50 calibre ring announce and annihilate my noble intentions and the smell of sulphur herald my ideas into the unsuspecting heads floating in disembodied market-euphoria.

The flow of consumers is steady and it doesn't seem that it's going to let up anytime soon. It's a busy Saturday, after all (you thought I'd pick sometime quiet and let the news agencies monopolize my story? Witnesses are crucial). My sweat runs unsteadily and I reek of ammonia. My heart flutters in sort of gulping spasms as cortisol works to thicken my blood. Will that have an effect on its flow, I wonder, once the brain silences the heart? Make it look off, incept a different coagulation pattern on the slippery floor?

I'm standing, just scanning the room with my eyes. Some part of me is hyperaware but if anyone's been watching me I haven't noticed. Goddam. This is going to be the end for me, yes, and that's fine, I won't know I'm gone when I'm gone, death and I cannot exist at the same time, I won't be dead because I won't be at all, any application of this conceptual I to the universal ebb of post-mortality is pointless and I shouldn't brood, there ought not be pain. I'd say something like 'it'll be an anhedonia more complete' but that would also be a lie and fiction spurred on by my fruitless rationalizations of imagining nothing, that paradoxical and doomed activity that in the bounds of loneliness and fear we turn to as the abyss stares...

The gun has weight; real, true-to-life physical presence. I pull it out and like some dream figurant whose physicality has been rendered as that of another's, ease it into the open air. There's no mistaking the piece for anything less than purpose, a tool for the destruction of ideas among the people who will stare and gawk, or run, soon, very soon, though I still haven't taken the time to look...

A gunshot rings out.

My breath is blocked off, as if at the crest of my lungs someone had tied off my windpipe with a rubber band. The weapon clunks against the ground. Looking down at it in a wave of red panic I see but don't smell cordite, there has to be discharge because if it's gone off... where have... it doesn't smoke. A metallic scum and the taste of bile fills my sinuses as my body numbs and frays.

My hand wrests from where it'd been clutching my stomach and I see bile-striated blood coalescing on my fingers. What the fuck? I never meant, I couldn't, even in my oneiric terror shoot myself like this...

I sink into genuflection before rocking to a prayerish foetal and going numb all over. There's a man, moustache quivering beneath hungry eyes, angry, full of awe and even reverence, pointing a pistol of much lower calibre toward me. Wondering if he should finish the job. Voices supersede the pounding of blood in my ears via only an edge, a shrillness of urgency. Emaciated though I am someone tears me to the ground, my leaking stomach creating suction against the marble as my cheek skids across blood under the press of a strong hand.

And it hits me like a steamer that I'll never have a chance to redeem this, that I cannot atone for wanting to kill myself vis-à-vis spectacle, that my life will ebb slowly ground-ward and the only reason I wanted to do this here was the mall would make me want to go through with it and maybe justify the act and I'd never have actually gone through with anything had it not been on my terms, under the guise of a justification that wasn't just some ebbing fucking vacuity.

Police secure the weapon first and cut my bag off my shoulders before cuffing. Next comes discovery of drugs, rope. Malformed hypotheses about possible intentions must already be in bloom...

I'm regarded by cold, bureaucratic eyes as radios crackle and reports of an active shooter fire across airwaves. People duck into the sanctuary of what should have been a place tainted by distant memory after this thing had gone off correctly.

Lo, now I'm branded as the most general of angry and contemptible near-stiffs as I leak onto the floor. Medical staff orbit as to in their characteristically stern way gain permission to treat me before arrest. There will be no arrest. I can already feel a release, tension shucking off as neuralgia fades, warm hands going cold at my skin. As I look down I'm not treated by the sight of an oceanic horizon, just nacreous floor reflecting a visage that's sick and horrified, and if I turn my head I'll just see a fucking mobile instead of some man-made wonder of engineering.

Yes there's some sense here... I get it. A totally sentient entrance into the void is without form. There's no entrance, we're misconstrued by semantics. Just you and no-you, sentience and non, the latter taking precedence against this duality idea and smashing it to bits. That's what the ebb does when you accept it, smashes everything to little bits. Interference of sentience or not doesn't mean jack, doesn't change things.

And I can feel my final moments draining, dropping through a bottleneck like little grains of sand alone and striated from the universe that they'd comprised and occupied. My goal will soon be completed. I've hated with numbing lassitude this adage, that the journey was all-important and for keeps, and appreciating it and seeing it for what is was would have taken the lifting of the veil, the certainty that it can be lifted, that it's lowered, that it could have been done. But now it will never be, and it's my own penultimate or ultimate thoughts that'll be wired with a cognitive dissonance supreme enough to render even the stronghold of anhedonia mute against the rush of the ultimate synaptic thrust and ca- ...

...
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THE END

Cole Evanek is an ESL teacher in China who uses his prodigious free time to write fiction and to blog. He's keen on macabre literature but is generally quite cheery. He's always loved writing and has the possibly ridiculous mission to make money remotely, so he prays that these things are complimentary.

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THE ABYSS by Sandro D. Fossemò

Translated by Luca Palantrani

*My remote control points to a dying sky
to halt an aircraft and me satisfy.
The flat light of a lamppost illuminates the crude air
in an unknown street,
which nails down raw people.*

*The chilling embrace of the wind wraps an outcast,
resting in peace
among decrepit walls of a forgotten monastery.
From a phantom tower the clock ticks the time,
within a deadly nausea that leaves no escape.*

*An escalator snatches a passing woman
and devours her flesh through the blind gears.
A monstrous cloud looms over the coast
in the way of a fatal wave,
where a sea of pebbles neglects the tempest.*

THE END

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THE DEVIL WITH YOU by Christopher T Dabrowski
Translation by Monica Olasek

We went to Płock, to visit an old friend of mine—Mathilde. We—that is I, Hubert Crying, accompanied by Hump-back Satan and Vicar. To make things straight, although I am a metal fan, wear leather and army boots and am usually dressed in black, I am not a “Satanist”—as some of my neighbours would call me. Well, this is my fate—if I went to a solarium, they would call me a “spotted terrorist”.

In turn, Vicar is not a priest, and Hump-back Satan is not a curved version of the best known fallen angel. The first one is a cat, and the latter is a good old VW Beetle who accompanied me on my travels across breath-taking and coil spring-braking national roads with their Swiss cheese-like holes. The good thing was that Ukrainian roads were even worse— yet, this didn't make me much happier.

The radio played good old Flak Schabarth, and the seat next to me was taken by a grumpy cat.

‘I'll buy you some cream.’ I wanted to ungrump the grumpy, but I heard only an even grumpier purr:

‘Don't bother.’

Yes, I know, this was strange, but I can really understand his meowing, although I don't know why. Unfortunately, this is the only cat I understand. Other people can't understand Vicar's purring. Another weird thing is that I get involved in strange paranormal stuff time after time. Either way, Eusebia, who lives next door, says this is due to some magical blood in my veins. She claims I have some power that is attracting such things to me. But the lady is seventy six and although I like her as she is the oldest metal fan in the town, she may have dementia or any other elderly thing.

Another option is that I am crazy. Who would like to be a weirdo? Not me, no way, so I accept the fact that the old lady may be right. Well, she was right every time when I had to send a para-mischief into the nether world.

Recently, Vicar was more and more lazy and picky, when it came to eating. Every now and then, he sneaked to the fridge, God only knows how, and ate the best snacks. In contrast, he totally quit hunting mice and wandering about that used to be his favourite activities. I suspected that this laziness for hunting might be related to more and more abundant content of our fridge.

The only thing that could make Vicar stand up and stick his nose through the door, were females. But even here, he found a shortcut. Ever since a crazy cat-lover and her thirty cats moved in to the next apartment house, Vicar, instead of roaming around all day to find a girl-friend for a messy rhumba, simply went outside and had his kitty harem at paw. Who would be surprised that the cat got crocked, fat and lazy? But I decided to fight this and get the catto moving a bit. Hoping that a few days in a new environment would inspire him to more intensive life, I took Vicar for a trip to Płock.

The cat spoke to me when we were almost there. What's more, this was more like a surprising order:

'Stop!' I heard a loud meow and stepped on the breaks so suddenly that iron-made intestines of my Satan jarred in a hopeless protest.

Behind me, the wheels squeaked and loud honking could be heard. It was a close shave, we almost had a fender-bender.

At first, I was sure that the cat wanted to warn me not to hit someone, not to drive onto something or not to cause any other catastrophe. A second later I thought that maybe the cat got cultural. On our right, there was an amphitheatre at the bottom of the bluff we were actually on. With the Vistula flowing behind it, the building looked like a fantastic, giant shell. You just loved to look at it.

But no, it was not the tourist attraction that caught the green eyes of Vicar.

'What happened?' I asked in a voice trembling slightly with emotions, although my heart was pounding quite hard (Vicar would give me a heart attack one day, that's for sure).

'Let me out! Now!'

'Pee? Poo?' I was doing my best to figure out what his problem was. Maybe he ate something unfresh?

'No, you moron!' he purred. 'A super sexy pussy cat will disappear from my radar every second now.'

'You furry idiot,' I shouted at him, as he surely deserved it. 'Do you know that we almost had a fender-bender because of you?'

'Oh, go brush yourself,' he meowed, miffed, and then crossed his paws on his chest and put his nose up. And to demonstrate his disapproval, he turned to the window.

Oh, goody! The cat throwing a hissy fit!

I would teach him a lesson, but a series of horns made me realize that I was a huge traffic obstacle. I started moving.

'The devil with you,' Vicar added after a while, knowing I wouldn't be able to react.

A few minutes later, after getting lost in the beautiful streets of the town, we reached the Pilsudski Bridge. As Mathilde told me, it had beautiful illumination in the evenings. I don't know about Vicar, but I surely wanted to see this with my own eyes. Of course, accompanied by Mathilde, whom I was always very attracted to. And deep down in my soul, I hoped now that despite some additional kilograms and still bigger receding hairline I would be able to charm her and the weekend would be spiced with a bit of sentimental passion.

When we got where we were supposed to get, it turned out that Grandpa Time is a son of a brute. It was not just that Mathilde had kids, but no husband. The problem was that she looked completely different than back in that time when we spent recess together in the primary school.

It was her who made me realized in the first grade what the girls looked like down there. Of course this was an exchange, as I had to show her my sprinkler, because she hadn't seen 'it' too. After mutual presentation of the so-called sexual attributes, we both went silent, blushing strangely. Luckily for us, the bell rung telling everyone it was time for the horrible mathematics. In the classroom, the emotions were so vivid that all our confusion got forgotten in a split second.

In the primary school, I 'platonically' loved this slim, blue-eyed girl. And then, after the end of the 8th class, her parents tore my heart from my chest, threw it to the ground and stepped on it brutally by moving along with my future girlfriend to another town.

Well, life.

Now I was not all ahhh and ohhh!—my chosen one got fat slash dowdy slash simply uglier. Within a split second, my insides got tossed. I realized that from that very moment she would be just my friend. And that nothing would happen, if you asked me.

Oh-what-a-cute-kitty got a bowl of tasty snacks. We were sipping wine and eating a delicious cake that 'I made it myself' as Mathilde stated proudly, putting another piece into my mouth which was a bit surprising. I poured the wine all around me.

'Oh, take it off, quick, it'll be spotty,' and she started taking off my T-shirt with the cover of Acid Drinkers' album 'Are you a werbel?'

'No, no, it's okay. It's black either way,' I protested. 'It won't be visible.'

'So I'll bring a cloth and we'll wipe it off,' she announced standing up.

A moment later, pretending she slipped, she fell on me, pressing me against the sofa with her abundant breasts, which immobilized me quite well. It took my breath away. Unfortunately, not due to delight but due to excess of mass painfully pressing me against the used springs of the sofa.

Mathilde pouted her lips and looking deep into my eyes wetted her lips with her tongue.

'I think she likes you,' Vicar stated, visibly amused.

He was a hell of a witty cat, that Oh-what-a-cute-kitty! I sent him a reproachful look.

Mathilde was lying on me for a moment more, waiting, with her eyes closed and slightly open mouth. After a few seconds she realized this was not going to happen. She slid off me.

‘I’m such a galoot...’

‘It happens,’ I comforted her, feeling deeply relieved. ‘And we really don’t have to wipe the wine off.’

We ate the cake, watching pictures and remembering our youth. And then we went for a walk. Just as I suspected, my wayward cat announced:

‘Well, so I’ll... go for a walk... you know... alone. You know what I mean?’ He winked at me.

‘Yeah, sure, you want some love. Me too...’ And suddenly I realized that Mathilde was standing next to me. My hair stood straight and a cold shiver ran through my back.

Very cold...

I looked at her and saw some very active ‘bitch-sparkles’ in her eyes. A big smile rose at her face. Mathilde threw her arms around my neck and before I could protest, she pressed her lips against mine and started pushing her tongue into my mouth.

Giggling under his whiskers, Vicar discreetly went away.

What could I do? It would be awkward to push Mathilde away by force now. This would be very disappointing for her. So I thought I would survive this one passionate kiss. To make things easier, I closed my eyes and thought about her as beautiful as in the primary school. And I imagined that her beauty hadn’t changed. Within a splash, my internal projector showed me a hot sex-blond in my mind.

Mathilde must have felt that, as she glued away from me and threw at me a passionate:

‘Let’s go back!’ and she started pulling me back towards her house.

Oh my darling Clementine, what have I done!

I didn’t object, as I didn’t know how to do it successfully and delicately, not to hurt my friend at the same time. My panicked mind refused to help me within the scope of creative escaping from problems.

Suddenly, Mathilde’s son helped me. A mobile rang in her bag.

‘Oh no!’ she moaned, disappointed. ‘Not now!’

She started rummaging nervously in the vast intestines of her bag.

‘I have to,’ she explained with an apologizing look. ‘It’s the school. Jerry must have done something again.’

It took her a few seconds to find the phone.

‘Hello?’

A quiet squeak could be heard from the other side.

‘I’m really, really sorry. I’m on my way to pick him up.’

We did some fast calculations and it turned out that I had just half a glass of wine, while Mathilde had five, so eventually we climbed into Hump-back Satan. And that’s how we set off to save Jerry (judging from the meanness of the squeak I deduced that he was in a hell of a trouble. And I was really sorry for his saviour).

Several minutes later, we arrived at Stanislaw Malachowski High School, known for being one of the oldest schools in Poland.

Mathilde shot from my car like an arrow triggered by a freed bowstring. Not giving it a second thought, I raced after her.

When I got to the dictator’s—I mean the principal’s—office, I nearly crashed into him, as he and Mathilde were already leaving the office. I went after them. The principal looked really pissed. This didn’t look too good. We went down, and even lower, to the school locker room, where the rebellious teenager was sitting in the checker’s room.

Jerry was sitting with his legs crossed, with whites of his eyes rolled back into his skull and he was mumbling something under his nose. Behind him, on the wall, there was a pentagram with an incantation written around it.

Here we go again, another paranormal thing—I thought with disdain and it soon turned out I was absolutely right.

‘He drew this here ugliness,’ angry checker narrated. ‘And he wouldn’t let me in! Just you look, give it a try.’

The principal who was listening to her moaning a moment before was now trying to get into the room. He failed, however, as he walked into an invisible wall.

‘Well, the brat had made himself a magic firewall!’ I thought with acclaim. ‘We’ll have some fun, then.’

‘How did it happen?’ I asked a girl who was standing next to me and whose bored grin indicated she was either stoned or she had already seen some paranormal activities and was not impressed at all. As opposed to all the others, of course. Excited youths were crowding with their mobiles in their hands trying to save the event for the YouTube society.

‘Well, you know, I’m interested in this and I know some things, and, you know, when this book in the library just fell to the floor and opened out of the blue, I told him to close it and put it away, but he took it and...’

‘Which book?’ I interrupted her.

‘Well, the one about magic,’ she answered, blowing a balloon of a chewing gum.

‘And what then?’

‘Well, you know, he started reading the magical signs in the figure, and, you know, he went away, though I asked him if he was okay.’

‘Signs like these here?’ I pointed my head towards the sketched pentagram.

‘You know, yeah, just like this.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Yhhh, you know, a tenner for me, I wasn’t talking to you just like that,’ another balloon was blown.

Not to quarrel, I took a crumpled note out of my pocket and stuck it into her hand.

Meanwhile, Jerry blinked his eyes and spoke in a hoarse voice so gurgling that it could be a voice of some mud monster.

‘Me wants.’

This was the moment when the moaning Mathilde fainted. The same thing happened to the checker. Poor principal had both hands full in this circumstances.

‘Woah, he’s talking like Vader from the Star Wars,’ someone was really excited, apparently not aware of the weight of the situation, as the rest of students froze in a silent, anxious wait, turning their eyes from me to Jerry and back.

‘What are you and what do you want?’ I was determined not to let it show I was close to ordering an XXL-sized diaper.

‘Me is Archdosser! Me is a devil of the second grade, sixth ring slash...’

‘What do you want?’ I interrupted his gurgly speech that was slowly changing into an emotional monologue (which I wouldn’t like to allow).

‘Your soul, my precioussssss!’ he hissed like Gollum, which surprised me, as I wasn’t aware that devils watch (or read) the Lord of the Rings.

‘Okay, that’s clear for me,’ I answered, although I didn’t understand a thing. ‘But why? What is the reason?’

‘You was given to me!’ Archdosser gurgled in a loud voice.

‘By whom?’

‘By sir Vicar,’ answered the possessed boy in the devil’s voice, turning his head 360 degrees around and vomiting with a greyish slurry. This was almost like “The Exorcist” and I would really wonder what was first—the egg or the chicken—was the film an inspiration for Archdosser or some devilish show inspired the film makers—but I didn’t have time for it.

‘The devil with you!’ a pissed off catto purred at me. Now everything was clear. My furry friend forgot that I radiate an aura promoting paranormal activity. And now we’ve got this mess!

‘Sorry,’ meowed Vicar, all scared as hell; somehow he knew I was in trouble. ‘I didn’t want this to happen.’

‘A bit too late now, don’t you think?’ I told my cat.

‘B-bu-ut I managed to catch them?’ the poor principal answered, believing I had him on my mind.

‘I was talking to my cat.’

‘But you’re not wearing a hat?’ Well, all signs showed that a visit a laryngologist would do him good.

I didn’t answer—we had a bigger problem now.

‘You may enter,’ Archdosser encouraged me.

‘And then you’ll let the boy go?’ I had to be sure.

‘Well, yes, only then. Your soul was promised to me.’

‘Just give me a moment, okay?’ I wasn’t going to sell my soul that cheap.

‘Okay, I’m in no hurry, man. As the old Azerbaijanis say: we’ve got time,’ the devil laughed demonically and vomited some greenish slurry. Maybe just to make the scene more horrible. As far as I was concerned, it was too much like Hollywood-style. Simply speaking, the devil was exaggerating with the special effects.

I decided to consult Eusebia—after all, granny was an expert in paranormal matters, although not material ones.

‘What now? Who’s calling?’ she welcomed me with manners.

‘It’s me, Hubert.’

‘Oh, Hubi!’ She giggled, pleased.

‘I’ve got a problem.’

‘Oh, I thought you would like to take me into a concert or something.’

‘Unfortunately, not this time... I’ve got here, in Płock...’

‘You’re in Płock? A beautiful town!’ she interrupted me, triggered by some important memories of hers, as her voice suddenly got smoother and somewhat inspirational.

‘A devil possessed a kid and he wants my soul!’ I decided to wake her up from this.

‘Geee, that’s not good. Who’s he?’

‘Some Archdosser.’

‘Oh, that one. I know him, devil’s seed,’ she shouted.

‘He wants my soul in return for the boy.’

‘Don’t agree. Don’t give it to him. There’s a different way to sort this devil out.’

‘What is it?’

‘Archdosser is very, very fond of liquor,’ she giggled. ‘Just pour him up a glass and he’ll get drunk and off your head.’

‘That’s it?’ I was surprised.

‘Yeah, just this.’

‘Thanks. Bye!’ I hung up, happy.

I turned to the students who were watching me and ordered:

‘Fetch me a bottle! I’ll pay with extras.’

‘Woah, are we having a party?’ the Star Wars fan was surprised.

I didn’t answer, but the principal answered me.

‘They can’t. They’re students!’

‘Then you fetch me a bottle.’

‘Right!’ he said and two unconscious women fell to the floor this very moment. ‘I need a drink myself!’

‘It’s not us who’s drinking,’ I cooled him down.

‘A present?’

‘You may put it this way. But I beg you, hurry!’

‘Sometimes a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do’ he answered and went towards the stairs.

He was back faster than I thought.

‘I had one in my office. For the guests.’ he explained, handing me the bottle of Jinnie Trekker with a wide grin.

‘Archdosser, I’ve made up my mind. I’m coming!’ I said.

Vicar stared at me with silent fear and trembled like a leaf. Finally, when I was almost at the invisible barrier, he meowed:

‘Please, don’t go! I’ll worship and love you. Like now, look.’ And he presented worshipping and loving by raising his paws towards the sky and bowing in front of me.

He was really desperate—he must have really loved my fridge.

‘I have to,’ I said and I crossed the barrier. I didn’t even feel it.

But Vicar felt it for sure, as he sprang after me and a second later he was flattened against something in the air and fell to the floor, baffled.

I spilled some liquor at the boy; he hiccupped muddily and shouted:

‘More. Give me more. Now!’

So I gave him more and the devil was more and more drunk.

‘Oookey doookey. And now a kiiiiiiiiiiiiss!’ he gurgled loudly and not waiting for the kiss, he started singing ‘If you don’t driiiiiink with me, may you dooooooooooooooze off uuuunder the taaaaaable!’

I gave him a few more spills and...

Jerry jumped to his feet yelling:

‘Hey, man! What’s wrong with you? Man, stop it!’

Simply speaking, everything was indicating that I sent Archdosser into his hell spheres into the sixth ring or something he was gurgling about.

The rest of the day was beautiful. Everyone thanked and congratulated me. Mathilde was hospitalized with brain contusion—luckily a mild one, but she was no longer a threat for me. And I could visit her without risking being attacked by her passion. I expected some passionate attacks from Jerry’s teacher. Her eyes were so buttery that when she offered some cake at her place, I readily agreed.

She gave me the address and asked me to come at 5 p.m., as she had some more classes to pass. So she was “passing”. Vicar disappeared with some kitty-girl to recover after the horror he’s been through. And I decided to see Płock. There were quite a lot of places to see— The Pilsudski Bridge was beautifully illuminated. The same went for amphitheatre. But I really wanted to see the Castle of Masovia Dukes—although I admit I was rather scared that I would run across some local white lady. With my paranormal luck, this was quite possible.

THE END

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THE LAST TERRAN by Blake Rogers

3 The Intermediary

Lod Jovis gaped in astonishment at his big companion. As he stammered an answer, one of the Sporn gestured with a leaf like hand and they were hurried onwards

He now knew that his mysterious slave was a lunatic. The Galactic Empire, which had ruled the galaxy long generations of Proteans ago, in a time so long gone it was almost a time of myth, was dead and gone, and Kroom, one of the notorious barbarians who had squabbled over its carcass in its dying days, was gone with it, his people had been wiped out, his home planet of Terra was lost, if it had ever existed. Except... no. No, that was crazy. It couldn't be... No, the big slave was mad.

But there had been stories that Kroom had escaped the final battle with the Terran's Centaurian rivals, that he lived on in suspended animation, ready to return one day, one year, the last Terran, destined to save the galaxy in its time of greatest need. Children's stories, of course. It wasn't as if the galaxy was in any time of greatest need, apart from the usual economic recession that seemed to be part of life... But maybe Lod Jovis was.

Within the administration centre they found a largish chamber with log walls and a dirt floor. Standing silently in the middle of this was the willowy green Sporn they had seen earlier, watching the fight from the building's doors. She wore a metallic circlet on her brows.

The other Sporn halted before her. Instinctively Lod Jovis bent his knee before her, humbly abasing himself before what was clearly Queen of Sporn. Glaring up at Kroom, who remained standing, he reached out and tugged at the barbarian's paw. Kroom glanced down, puzzled.

'Kneel!' Lod hissed. 'Kneel, you lummox! This is their leader!'

Kroom shook him off arrogantly. 'An imperial warlord kneels before none but his emperor.'

Lod produced the control unit. 'You're not an imperial warlord,' he spat. 'You're a slave! And you'll be an obedient slave or I'll...'

Please, do not harm him. He does nothing wrong. It is not the barbarian's fault that he is mindless.

Lod was startled. He recognised the soft voice in his head as that of a telepath. He had never realised that the Sporn were telepathic.

Rise, please, Lod Jovis of Proteus, the voice added. Lod looked round to see the Queen of Sporn's circlet was glowing.

'Does the queen speak to you by sorcery?' rumbled Kroom. 'She is a witch!'

The barbarian is wrong, said the Sporn. I am not a witch. Nor am I a queen. I am simply the Intermediary.

‘The Intermediary?’ asked Lod, then he scowled. ‘But what do you mean, my slave is mindless?’

The Sporn shook her head in a strangely human gesture. The circlet glowed again.

I have scanned his mind and I can read no thoughts worth the name, nor can I reach his mind with my own words as I can with you. We Sporn have no leaders. We are united by a root mind that is concealed beneath the earth. We use the telepathic circlet when it is necessary to communicate with off-worlders and those who do not belong to our root mind.

‘Did the pale Sporn belong to a different root mind?’ asked Lod. ‘They seemed to be trying to take over.’

The Intermediary nodded. *Yes. The night siders do indeed come from a different root mind. They come from a different land. They come in successive waves, in ones or twos, small groups that cannot be detected, and they reproduce exponentially. Already parts of the fertile strip have been overrun. You were correct in your tactics, since fire is the only thing that can stop them. And yet it is lethal to us too.*

‘What does she say?’ demanded Kroom. ‘Does she speak of the pale Sporn?’

Lod nodded, and relayed what the Intermediary had said. Kroom snorted. ‘I would take fire and the sword into their own country,’ he said, ‘and take many bloody reprisals until they fear my shadow.’

Does the barbarian not think that we have tried? Throughout our history it has been the same. They make their incursions upon our lands, sent by their root mind to expand their territories; we fight back, we march into their lands—and we die.

‘Are they so strong?’ asked Kroom contemptuously, when Lod repeated her telepathic message. ‘I destroyed them easily enough, despite how hastily their numbers grew. I am but one man.’

‘You’re a galactic warlord, or so you claim, a rim world barbarian,’ Lod said angrily. ‘People on civilised planets aren’t so accustomed to fighting.’

It is not that we lack the ability to fight, the Intermediary explained, reading Lod’s mind, but we cannot thrive or even survive in those lands from which the night side Sporn come. We dwell in the fertile strip, in the light of our star but close enough to the terminator to escape its full glare. Beyond the terminator our lands of light are mirrored by a small strip of the planet that also supports life, life that exists in the cold and darkness. Yet those lands are perilous and inimical to all but their natives. And even the night side Sporn, our relatives who took root in those lands, seek better lands: they seek our lands.

They come over the mountains and out of the dark, eternally urged on by their root mind in a never-ending struggle to achieve control of our lands. And yet we are powerless to strike back. Once, years ago, after another attack by the night side Sporn a vast army marched out of the fertile strip to find the root mind and destroy it with fire. They learnt where it was to be found, in an ancient ruin beside a great glacier. But the cold and the dark was too much for them.

Even before they were attacked they had lost many. And when the night side Sporn attacked, they drove our people before them. The retreat was worse than the advance, and only three Sporn returned to the fertile strip. One of them was my spore father. When he reported the dismal tale to our root mind, it was decided that we would never return to the land of darkness.

‘You can’t bow to them so spinelessly,’ Kroom said, when Lod summarised her words. ‘They are trying to take over your lands. You say they’ve succeeded in some places. Will you let them wipe you out?’

‘This is none of our business,’ said Lod Jovis. He shook his head when Kroom glowered at him. ‘I don’t claim to be a galactic warlord. I’m just a star tramp, a space gypsy, a wanderer. I want to leave this planet. I came here by mistake.’ He turned to the Intermediary. ‘I brought this slave here to sell him. I should think he will fetch a pretty price. Much as I feel for your difficulties, I wish to sell him so I can buy an exit visa.’

The Intermediary shook her head. *We saw how you worked together to fight the night side Sporn. The barbarian is a strong warrior but you are a cunning tactician, the brains behind the brawn. We know that your species can survive without light and heat for longer than our own. The root mind has chosen you both to strike a final blow against the root mind of the night side Sporn. To wipe them out before they infest our lands of light.*

‘I shall fight,’ said Kroom proudly, when this was translated, ‘in return for my freedom. I must sail to Throneworld and gather a new force to fight the Centaurians.’

Lod Jovis sneered. ‘You bloodthirsty maniac. You really think you’re a galactic warlord? You’re out of your mind! The Galactic Empire fell apart millennia ago. The Centaurians now control a small trading alliance in the western spiral arm. The Terrans have all vanished—although some legends claim that all humans in the galaxy are descended from them, there are no people known as Terrans today. Throneworld is a tourist attraction. My father went there once. Very expensive, he said. It’s nothing but ruins.’

Kroom listened darkly. ‘The enchanted sleep lasted too long,’ he said in sombre tones. ‘The lifeboat went astray. Is the empire truly gone, O wizard?’ His brutal face looked sad. ‘Then I am alone in the world.’

The Intermediary’s voice resounded now in Lod’s brain. *All that you wish for may be granted. Lod Jovis, we will give you an exit visa gratis. And tell Warlord Kroom that we will command his emancipation.*

‘What’s the catch?’ asked Lod suspiciously. It was high handed of them to demand the emancipation of his slave. But if it meant that he could leave this planet...

We will grant you all you wish, if you undertake this mission. Journey into the dark side, find the root mind of the night side Sporn—and destroy it. Then you will be free to go where you will.

‘Now just a minute,’ said Lod. ‘I’m not going on any mission. What do you take me for? I’m not a warlord, I’m just a trader, a wanderer. I came here to sell this slave. You can have him!’

Please, take the lummoX off my hands. Send him to the dark side to destroy your enemy. But in return, let me leave this planet.'

We saw that you were instrumental to the victory over the night side Sporn, said the Intermediary. Your slave is strong and mighty, but you are cunning and astute. We doubt that Kroom would succeed without your aid.

'This is very flattering,' said Lod desperately, 'but I...'

'Come, O wizard,' said Kroom, laying a massive paw on his shoulder. 'The Intermediary is correct. You know more about this new galaxy than I. My days are long gone. I will need you to guide me.'

Lod scowled. 'You're going nowhere,' he insisted, 'except to the slave block.' He shrugged off the paw and turned to the Intermediary. 'You can't stop me from trading. This is coercion! I shall report you to the closest representative of the Protean Mercantile Council.'

Very well, came the Intermediary's eerie voice. *You may take ship to Oro, on system's edge, where the Protean Mercantile Council has an embassy...*

'Thank you,' said Lod, turning to go. But the other Sporn did not let him pass. He looked back over his shoulder. 'What's going on?'

...you may take ship, the Intermediary repeated, *and make your complaint—once you complete your mission.*

Lod looked Kroom up and down. 'This lummoX doesn't need me,' he pleaded, changing his tack. 'Look, you can have him for nothing. Send him to fight your enemies, but let me go. I'll only be an encumbrance on the journey. Truly, I will only be in the way. He doesn't need me. I'll keep working until I've got the money to buy an exit visa in the usual way...'

It is no use, the Intermediary told him. *Our root mind has chosen you. You must obey its commands. Journey into the dark side and destroy our foes. Then you will be given your freedom.*

Kroom looked down at him. 'Come, O wizard,' he repeated, folding his arms. 'It is unmanly and futile to fight against the inevitable. We shall go into the lands of darkness and defeat its lord. For generations the tale shall be sung around the council fires of our tribes.'

Lod shook his head and swallowed. 'Very well,' he said at last in a strangled voice. 'I clearly have no alternative. But what are we expected to do? Walk there? My zymoron galloped off during the attack.'

Suitable transport will be provided.

'And where are we going?' Lod added. 'Are we allowed to have any idea of where the root mind might be? Or are we just to ride into the dark side in the hopes of stumbling across the root mind? What does a root mind look like, anyway? Where is yours?'

The latter will remain a mystery to all not of our race. The Intermediary raised a hand and a holographic image appeared in the gloom of the hut. Kroom approached it, rapt with fascination. Lod Jovis regarded the hopelessly outdated visualisation cynically.

It showed the same range of mountains that were visible along the dark side horizon from anywhere in the fertile strip. The image grew larger, as if captured by a flying reptile swooping towards it from above. Lod saw a narrow gorge between two crags, which opened out into another landscape, rocks and boulders and further slopes.

For the first time he saw the famous three moons of Sporn. Snow and ice lay upon the starlit ground. Down in the valley, night side Sporn moved amongst huge lichens and fungal spires of virulent blues and yellows, browsing on some, fertilising others with their secretions.

Lod had wondered how these colourless relatives of the green people of the fertile belt managed to survive beyond the terminator. Now it seemed that they scratched out a miserable living on lichen, although in some ways it was a strange parallel of their dayside cousins' existence. It seemed that the ultimate purpose of both races was to transform vegetable matter into fertilising secretions, in turn to fertilise other plants.

Sooner or later they would expire, Lod thought lugubriously, their mortal remains providing the final fertilising as it rotted into the soil. Their destiny was to become compost. To feed, in death, the plants that had fed them in life. It was so neat a pattern he was almost convinced that it meant something somehow, and yet it was so seemingly futile, so ultimately pointless, as to mean nothing.

And yet the night side Sporn subsisted in conditions far worse than those of the dayside. Despite himself, he felt a kind of sympathy for them. Their living standards were appalling. How they had evolved in these marginal conditions he couldn't guess. No wonder they wanted to fertilise the warmer regions, had already begun to colonise the fertile strip. This realisation gave the whole business a different complexion.

Had Lod possessed more than a rudimentary sense of social responsibility, he would have wondered if perhaps the night side Sporn did not have the moral high ground. But he was in a cleft stick. Ethics seldom troubled him at the best of times. And this was not the best of times.

'Where's the root mind?' he asked. 'Is this visualisation based on your spore father's march into the dark side? How do you know it is up to date?'

A flying reptile was trained and fitted with a holo-camera, the Intermediary explained. We were aided by Alderberanians in this, but they would not provide the military support we require. This is recent information. And look!

In the distance appeared a pillared construction. It was marmoreal, pillared, temple-like, and domed. Lod Jovis had never seen its like before, but Kroom gave a grunt of recognition. He muttered some kind of primitive mumbo-jumbo. 'A Place of Power!'

The home of the root mind of the night side Sporn, said the Intermediary. See!

The image swooped down towards the construction, towards a large pillared arch, then inside. In the middle of the large trilithon at the centre of a marble floor a tangle of ganglion like roots snaked out from a central woody polyp about the size of five Sporn.

‘That’s a root mind?’ asked Lod. ‘Your race has one too? And what do we do, burn it?’

Kroom glared at the image of the woody polyp.

‘We march into the dark land,’ he said, ‘we rush the Place of Power, we destroy the root mind. We return to take up our freedom.’

Lod looked him up and down. ‘Are you sure you were a galactic warlord?’ he asked. ‘I think you’re just deranged. Those are what you call tactics? You expect to win your freedom? You’ll win only the ultimate freedom—death.’

Kroom growled. ‘I was imperial galactic warlord,’ he said, ‘for the dynasty of Emperor Kondakor. I was leader of his Terran guard. I took top place amongst them because I was the savagest fighter.’ His brows furrowed. ‘Battle tactics were not my responsibility.’

‘That would explain a lot.’ Lod Jovis tried to remember his galactic history. ‘Kondakor’s was the last dynasty, wasn’t it? After they were destroyed, the galaxy lapsed into barbarism for millennia.’ He considered Kroom’s plan. ‘No wonder,’ he added. ‘If you were their warlord.’

‘If you have a better plan,’ Kroom rumbled, ‘let us hear it.’

Lod Jovis tapped his long nose. ‘I have a plan,’ he admitted. ‘But I think I’ll keep it to myself for the moment.’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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BURN, WITCH, BURN by A Merritt

IV. — The Thing in Ricori's Car

I RETURNED home with Braile, profoundly depressed. It is difficult to describe the effect the sequence of events I am relating had upon my mind from beginning to end—and beyond the end. It was as though I walked almost constantly under the shadow of an alien world, nerves prickling as if under surveillance of invisible things not of our life... the subconsciousness forcing itself to the threshold of the conscious, battering at the door between and calling out to be on guard... every moment to be on guard. Strange phrases for an orthodox man of medicine? Let them stand.

Braile was pitifully shaken. So much so that I wondered whether there had been more than professional interest between him and the dead girl. If there had been, he did not confide in me.

It was close to four o'clock when we reached my house. I insisted that he remain with me. I called the hospital before retiring, but they had heard nothing of Nurse Robbins. I slept a few hours, very badly. Shortly after nine, Robbins called me on the telephone. She was half hysterical with grief. I bade her come to my office, and when she had done so Braile and I questioned her.

"About three weeks ago," she said, "Harriet brought home to Diana a very pretty doll. The child was enraptured. I asked Harriet where she had gotten it, and she said in a queer little store way downtown.

"Job," she said—my name is Jobina— "There's the queerest woman down there. I'm sort of afraid of her, Job."

"I didn't pay much attention. Besides, Harriet wasn't ever very communicative. I had the idea she was a bit sorry she had said what she had.

"Now I think of it though, Harriet acted rather funny after that. She'd be gay and then she'd be—well, sort of thoughtful. About ten days ago she came home with a bandage around her foot. The right foot? Yes. She said she'd been having tea with the woman she'd gotten Diana's doll from. The teapot upset and the hot tea had poured down on her foot. The woman had put some salve on it right away, and now it didn't hurt a bit.

"But I think I'll put something on it I know something about," she told me. Then she slipped off her stocking and began to strip the bandage. I'd gone into the kitchen and she called to me to come and look at her foot.

"It's queer," she said. "That was a bad scald, Job. Yet it's practically healed. And that salve hasn't been on more than an hour."

"I looked at her foot. There was a big red patch on the instep. But it wasn't sore, and I told her the tea couldn't have been very hot.

"But it was really scalded, Job," she said. "I mean it was blistered."

“She sat looking at the bandage and at her foot for quite a while. The salve was bluish and had a queer shine to it. I never saw anything like it before. No, I couldn’t detect any odour to it. Harriet reached down and took the bandage and said:

“‘Job, throw it in the fire.’

“I threw the bandage in the fire. I remember that it gave a queer sort of flicker. It didn’t seem to burn. It just flickered and then it wasn’t there. Harriet watched it, and turned sort of white. Then she looked at her foot again.

“‘Job,’ she said. ‘I never saw anything heal as quick as that. She, must be a witch.’

“‘What on earth are you talking about, Harriet?’ I asked her.

“‘Oh, nothing,’ she said. ‘Only I wish I had the courage to rip that place on my foot wide open and rub in an antidote for snake-bite!’

“Then she laughed, and I thought she was fooling. But she painted it with iodine and bandaged it with an antiseptic besides. The next morning she woke me up and said:

“‘Look at that foot now. Yesterday a whole pot of scalding tea poured over it. And now it isn’t even tender. And the skin ought to be just smeared off. Job, I wish to the Lord it was!’

“That’s all, Dr. Lowell. She didn’t say any more about it and neither did I. And she just seemed to forget all about it. Yes. I did ask her where the shop was and who the woman was, but she wouldn’t tell me. I don’t know why.

“And after that I never knew her so gay and carefree. Happy, careless... Oh, I don’t know why she should have died... I don’t... I don’t!”

Braile asked:

“Do the numbers 491 mean anything to you, Robbins? Do you associate them with any address Harriet knew?”

She thought, then shook her head. I told her of the measured closing and opening of Walters’ eyes.

“She was clearly attempting to convey some message in which those numbers figured. Think again.”

Suddenly she straightened, and began counting upon her fingers. She nodded.

“Could she have been trying to spell out something? If they were letters they would read d, i and a. They’re the first three letters of Diana’s name.”

“Well, of course that seemed the simple explanation. She might have been trying to ask us to take care of the child.” I suggested this to Braile. He shook his head.

“She knew I’d do that,” he said. “No, it was something else.”

A little after Robbins had gone, Ricori called up. I told him of Walters' death. He was greatly moved. And after that came the melancholy business of the autopsy. The results were precisely the same as in that of Peters. There was nothing whatever to show why the girl had died.

At about four o'clock the next day Ricori again called me on the telephone.

"Will you be at home between six and nine, Dr. Lowell?" There was suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"Certainly, if it is important," I answered, after consulting my appointment book. "Have you found out anything, Ricori?"

He hesitated.

"I do not know. I think perhaps—yes."

"You mean," I did not even try to hide my own eagerness. "You mean—the hypothetical place we discussed?"

"Perhaps. I will know later. I go now, to where it may be."

"Tell me this, Ricori—what do you expect to find?"

"Dolls!" he answered.

And as though to avoid further questions he hung up before I could speak.

Dolls!

I sat thinking. Walters had bought a doll. And in that same unknown place where she had bought it, she had sustained the injury which had so worried her—or rather, whose unorthodox behaviour had so worried her. Nor was there doubt in my mind, after hearing Robbins' story, that it was to that injury she had attributed her seizure, and had tried to tell us so. We had not been mistaken in our interpretation of that first desperate effort of will I have described. She might, of course, have been in error. The scald or, rather, the salve had had nothing whatever to do with her condition. Yet Walters had been strongly interested in a child. Children were the common interest of all who had died as she had. And certainly the one great common interest of children is dolls. What was it that Ricori had discovered?

I called Braile, but could not get him. I called up Robbins and told her to bring the doll to me immediately, which she did.

The doll was a peculiarly beautiful thing. It had been cut from wood, then covered with gesso. It was curiously life-like. A baby doll, with an elfin little face. Its dress was exquisitely embroidered, a folk-dress of some country I could not place. It was, I thought, almost a museum piece, and one whose price Nurse Walters could hardly have afforded. It bore no mark by which either maker or seller could be identified. After I had examined it minutely, I laid it away in a drawer. I waited impatiently to hear from Ricori.

At seven o'clock there was a sustained, peremptory ringing of the doorbell. Opening my study door, I heard McCann's voice in the hall, and called to him to come up. At first glance I knew something was very wrong. His tight-mouthed tanned face was a sallow yellow, his eyes held a dazed look. He spoke from stiff lips:

"Come down to the car. I think the boss is dead."

"Dead!" I exclaimed, and was down the stairs and out beside the car in a breath. The chauffeur was standing beside the door. He opened it, and I saw Ricori huddled in a corner of the rear seat. I could feel no pulse, and when I raised the lids of his eyes they stared at me sightlessly. Yet he was not cold.

"Bring him in," I ordered.

McCann and the chauffeur carried him into the house and placed him on the examination table in my office. I bared his breast and applied the stethoscope. I could detect no sign of the heart functioning. Nor was there, apparently, any respiration. I made a few other rapid tests. To all appearances, Ricori was quite dead. And yet I was not satisfied. I did the things customary in doubtful cases, but without result.

McCann and the chauffeur had been standing close beside me. They read my verdict in my face. I saw a strange glance pass between them; and obviously each of them had a touch of panic, the chauffeur more markedly than McCann. The latter asked in a level, monotonous voice:

"Could it have been poison?"

"Yes, it could—" I stopped.

Poison! And that mysterious errand about which he had telephoned me! And the possibility of poison in the other cases! But this death—and again I felt the doubt—had not been like those others.

"McCann," I said, "when and where did you first notice anything wrong?"

He answered, still in that monotonous voice:

"About six blocks down the street. The boss was sitting close to me. All at once he says 'Jesu!' Like he's scared. He shoves his hands up to his chest. He gives a kind of groan and stiffens out. I says to him: 'What's the matter, boss, you got a pain?' He don't answer me, and then he sort of falls against me and I see his eyes is wide open. He looks dead to me. So I yelps to Paul to stop the car and we both look him over. Then we beat it here like hell."

I went to a cabinet and poured them stiff drinks of brandy. They needed it. I threw a sheet over Ricori.

"Sit down," I said, "and you, McCann, tell me exactly what occurred from the time you started out with Mr. Ricori to wherever it was he went. Don't skip a single detail."

He said:

“About two o’clock the boss goes to Mollie’s—that’s Peters’ sister—stays an hour, comes out, goes home and tells Paul to be back at four-thirty. But he’s doing a lot of ‘phoning so we don’t start till five. He tells Paul where he wants to go, a place over in a little street down off Battery Park. He says to Paul not to go through the street, just park the car over by the Battery. And he says to me, ‘McCann, I’m going in this place myself. I don’t want ‘em to know I ain’t by myself.’ He says, ‘I got reasons. You hang around an’ look in now an’ then, but don’t come in unless I call you.’ I says, ‘Boss, do you think it’s wise?’ An’ he says, ‘I know what I’m doing an’ you do what I tell you.’ So there ain’t any argument to that.

“We get down to this place an’ Paul does like he’s told, an’ the boss walks up the street an’ he stops at a little joint that’s got a lot of dolls in the window. I looks in the place as I go past. There ain’t much light but I see a lot of other dolls inside an’ a thin gal at a counter. She looks white as a fish’s belly to me, an’ after the boss has stood at the window a minute or two he goes in, an’ I go by slow to look at the gal again because she sure looks whiter than I ever saw a gal look who’s on her two feet. The boss is talkin’ to the gal who’s showing him some dolls. The next time I go by there’s a woman in the place. She’s so big, I stand at the window a minute to look at her because I never seen anybody that looks like her. She’s got a brown face an’ it looks sort of like a horse, an’ a little moustache an’ moles, an’ she’s as funny a looking broad as the fish-white gal. Big an’ fat. But I get a peep at her eyes—Geeze, what eyes! Big an’ black an’ bright, an’ somehow I don’t like them any more than the rest of her. The next time I go by, the boss is over in a corner with the big dame. He’s got a wad of bills in his hand and I see the gal watching sort of frightened like. The next time I do my beat, I don’t see either the boss or the woman.

“So I stand looking through the window because I don’t like the boss out of my sight in this joint. An’ the next thing I see is the boss coming out of a door at the back of the shop. He’s madder than hell an’ carrying something an’ the woman is behind him an’ her eyes spitting fire. The boss is jabbering but I can’t hear what he’s saying, an’ the dame is jabbering too an’ making funny passes at him. Funny passes? Why, funny motions with her hands. But the boss heads for the door an’ when he gets to it I see him stick what he’s carrying inside his overcoat an’ button it up round it.

“It’s a doll. I see its legs dangling down before he gets it under his coat. A big one, too, for it makes quite a bulge—”

He paused, began mechanically to roll a cigarette, than glanced at the covered body and threw the cigarette away. He went on:

“I never see the boss so mad before. He’s muttering to himself in Italian an’ saying something over an’ over that sounds like ‘strayga.’ I see it ain’t no time to talk so I just walk along with him. Once he says to me, more as if he’s talking to himself than me, if you get what I mean—he says, ‘The Bible says you shall not suffer a witch to live.’ Then he goes on muttering an’ holding one arm fast over this doll inside his coat.

“We get to the car an’ he tells Paul to beat it straight to you an’ to hell with traffic—that’s right, ain’t it, Paul? Yes. When we get in the car he stops muttering an’ just sits there quiet, not saying anything to me until I hear him say Jesu!’ like I told you. And that’s all, ain’t it, Paul?”

The chauffeur did not answer. He sat staring at McCann with something of entreaty in his gaze. I distinctly saw McCann shake his head. The chauffeur said, in a strongly marked Italian accent, hesitatingly:

“I do not see the shop, but everything else McCann say is truth.”

I got up and walked over to Ricori’s body. I was about to lift the sheet when something caught my eye. A red spot about as big as a dime—a blood stain. Holding it in place with one finger, I carefully lifted the edge of the sheet. The blood spot was directly over Ricori’s heart.

I took one of my strongest glasses and one of my finest probes. Under the glass, I could see on Ricori’s breast a minute puncture, no larger than that made by a hypodermic needle. Carefully I inserted the probe. It slipped easily in and in until it touched the wall of the heart. I went no further.

Some needle-pointed, exceedingly fine instrument had been thrust through Ricori’s breast straight into his heart!

I looked at him, doubtfully; there was no reason why such a minute puncture should cause death. Unless, of course, the weapon which had made it had been poisoned; or there had been some other violent shock which had contributed to that of the wound itself. But such shock or shocks might very well bring about in a person of Ricori’s peculiar temperament some curious mental condition, producing an almost perfect counterfeit of death. I had heard of such cases.

No, despite my tests, I was not sure Ricori was dead. But I did not tell McCann that. Alive or dead, there was one sinister fact that McCann must explain. I turned to the pair, who had been watching me closely.

“You say there were only the three of you in the car?”

Again I saw a glance pass between them.

“There was the doll,” McCann answered, half-defiantly. I brushed the answer aside, impatiently.

“I repeat: there were only the three of you in the car?”

“Three men, yes.”

“Then,” I said grimly, “you two have a lot to explain. Ricori was stabbed. I’ll have to call the police.”

McCann arose and walked over to the body. He picked up the glass and peered through it at the tiny puncture. He looked at the chauffeur. He said:

“I told you the doll done it, Paul!”

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

9: The Land Of Twenty Moons

NOT a quarter of a mile from them a man was running along the snow road toward them—a tall man, and well formed. He ran, or trotted slowly, with head bent, and many a sidewise glance along the borders of the trail.

“Now, I think that here is the owner of the knife come to seek it,” muttered Polaris; and seeing that the stranger bore a spear, he reached his own long weapon from the sledge, and leaned on it as he watched the approach of the runner, the same quiet smile on his face with which he greeted all wonders.

Not until he was within a hundred yards~~of the sledge did the man see them. He came on fearlessly.

He was a swarthy fellow, black of beard, with a strong, high-featured visage, straight nose, and prominent cheek-bones. His hair hung from beneath a pointed cap of coarse, grey cloth, and was cropped at his collar. A tunic of brown material reached to his knees, and was clasped in front with several buckles. His feet were shod with high, furred moccasin-boots, which reached nearly to his knees, and which were bound with cross-strings. Above them were tightfitting breeches of the same material as the tunic.

In a broad leather belt swung a small axe, a pair of large fur gloves, and an empty sheath. Axe-blade and buckles and the tip of his long, straight spear were all of the same iridescent metal as the dagger which Polaris had found in the snow. He was about forty years old.

When within a short spear-throw, he stood gazing at them, his eyes roving from man to girl, and from dogs to sledge, taking note of all. Then he spoke, in a deep and not unpleasant voice. Rose Emer understood a question in his inflection, but the language he spoke was unknown to her.

Polaris laughed and said quickly: “As it is written on the blade of the knife, so does he speak. Lady. It is Greek.”

She looked from him to the stranger, wide-eyed. “What does he say?”

“He says, ‘Whence come you?’ and now I will answer him as best I can manage his tongue.”

He turned to the strange man and lifted his voice. “We come from the north,” he said.

“And who may you be,” he queried the man, “who come down from the white north, through the lands where no man may travel, you who are like a child of the great sun, and who drive strange animals, the like of which were never seen?” and he pointed to the crouching dogs. “And who is she, the woman, who hath the aspect of a princess, and who rideth with thee across the snows?”

“Polaris am I named—Polaris of the Snows and she who is with me is Rose Emer, of America, and I am her servant. Now, who art thou, and how called?”

The man heard him with close attention. "I should judge thee little likely to be servant to any, thou Polaris of the Snows," he answered with a slow smile. "Part of thy words I comprehend not, but I name myself Kard the Smith, of the city of Sardanes."

"If thou art Kard the Smith, I have that which is thine," said Polaris, and he stepped forward and held out the dagger. "It bears thy name."

Kard took the weapon from him with a gesture of pleasure. "Not my name, O stranger of the snows," he said, "but that of my grandsire, Kard the Smith, three times removed, who did forge it. For that reason do I value it so highly that I came alone on the Hunters' Road willing to travel many weary miles and risk much to regain it."

"Is this that thou speakest thine only tongue, Kard the Smith?" pursued Polaris.

Kard nodded, and his eyes opened wide. "Yes, surely. And thou, who speakest it also, yet strangely, hast thou another?"

"Yes," said Polaris, "and thy language, I have been taught, is dead in the great world these many centuries. Who are thy people, and where is the city of Sardanes?"

"The great world!" repeated Kard. "The great world to the north, across the snows! Aye, thy coming thence proves the tales of the priests and historians of Sardanes, which, in truth, many of us had come to doubt. To us, Sardanes and the wastes are all of the world.

"The city lieth yonder," and he pointed over his shoulder toward the smoking mountains. "Know thou, Polaris of the snows, that thou and thy princess are the first of all strangers to come to Sardanes; and now do I, Kard the Smith, bid thee a fair welcome."

He bowed low to Rose Emer and to Polaris, sweeping the snow with his rough cap.

TRANSLATING the outcome of his conversation with the stranger to Rose Emer, Polaris started the team along the trail, and with Kard trotting alongside the sledge, they set out for the mysterious city which he said lay beyond the mountains.

As they went, Polaris gathered from Kard that the people of Sardanes had lived in their land a very great while, indeed; that their population numbered some two thousand souls, and that they were ruled by a hereditary king or prince.

"For the rest, thou shall learn it of the priests, who are more learned than I," said Kard; "and thine own tale of marvels, beside which ours is but a little thing, though I starve from desire to hear it, thou shalt reserve for the ears of the Prince Helicon. It were meet that he hear it first of all in Sardanes."

In an atmosphere that grew momentarily more temperate, they drew near to the green bulk of the mountains.

"What maketh the warmth of this land?" called Polaris to Kard.

The Smith raised his hand and pointed to the summits above them, where the great smoke clouds hung heavily in the quiet air ““Within the bowels of the hills are the undying fires which have burned from the first,” he said. “They have saved the land from the wastes. No matter how the storms rage on the snow plains, it is ever warm in Sardanes. The city lieth in a valley, ringed round by a score of fire mountains, set there by the gods when the world began. And when the season of the great darkness falleth, the flare of the eternal flames lighteth the valley. With the light of twenty moons is Sardanes ever lighted. Wait and thou shalt see.”

Presently they came to the foot of the range. For a short distance above them lay snow in patches on the slopes, and beyond that extended a wide belt of grasses and trees. Still higher, all vegetation ceased, and the earth was bare and brown, and the rocks were naked.

Above all jutted the fire blackened crags of the summits, wild and bleak. Just ahead of them yawned a pass, which some vast upheaval had torn in the base of the range in the long ago.

“Now must the lady walk with us,” said Kard, “for the way is rough, and the lack of snow will make it difficult for the animals to drag on the sledge.”

He spoke truly. So rough was the way in places that Polaris must add his own strength to the pull of the dogs. Kard the Smith would willingly have aided also, but the dogs would not permit him to lay hand on the traces, nor could Polaris prevail on them to be friendly with the man.

Up and up they climbed the many turns of the pass, its seamed walls of rock beetling above them at both sides. So warm was it that Polaris, sweating and pulling with the pack, took off his cloak and inner coat of bearskin, and struggled on in his under garment of seal fur.

They came to the peak of the pass, and again it wound irregularly downward for a space. Its sides were less precipitous. Long grasses and shrubbery grew in the niches of the rocks, and the light of the sun penetrated nearly to the path.

“Ah, see, Polaris,” cried Rose Emer, “there, in the rocks, my namesake is nodding to me. A rose, and in this land!”

In a cleft in the rock wall clung a brier, and on it bloomed a single-magnificent red blossom. After the weeks of hardship and grief and journeying with death, the sight of the flower brought tears to the eyes of the girl.

While Kard stood and smiled, Polaris stopped the team. He clambered up the rocks, clinging with his hands, and brought it down, its delicate perfume thrilling his senses with a something soft and sweet that he could not put into thought. Rose Emer took it from him and set it in her breast. That was a picture Polaris never forgot—the rocky walls of the pass, the sledge and the wild dogs, the strange figure of the Sardanian, the girl and the red rose.

She had removed her heavy coat and cap, and now walked on ahead of them, her long blue sweater clinging to her lissom form, the sunshine glinting in the coiled masses of her chestnut hair. They rounded another turn, and Rose Emer gave a little gasp and stopped, and stood transfixed.

“Oh, here is, indeed, a garden of the gods!” she cried.

There the rock ledges ended, and they stood at the lip of a long green slope of sward, spangled with flowers. A valley lay before them, of which they were at the lower end. Ringed by the smoking mountains, it stretched away, some ten miles in length. From the lower hill slopes at either side it was perhaps a short mile and a half across. Adown its length, nearly in the middle, ran the silvery ribbon of a little river, which bore away to the right at the lower end of the valley, and was lost to sight in the base of the hills.

AT EITHER side of the river the land lay in rolling knolls and lush meadows, with here and there a tangle of giant trees, and here and there geometrical squares of tilled land—the whole spread out, from where the travellers stood, in an immense patchwork pattern, riotous with the colours of nature, and dotted with the white dwellings of men, built of stone.

On the higher slopes of the mountains at each side thick forests of mighty trees grew. Above the line of vegetation, the bare earth gave forth vapour from the inner heat, and farther up the naked rocks jutted to the peaks, half hidden in their perpetual mists and smoke.

There were twenty-one mountains, all of the same general appearance, with one exception. One great hill alone, which towered over to the left of them, was wooded thickly to its summit.

Everywhere in the valley was the sound of life. Birds flashed back and forth among the foliage; goats leaped among the rocks; small ponies grazed in the meadows; men tilled the fields. From the distance up the valley came the hum and splashing of a small waterfall. A couple of miles away, at the right of the river, was a large square of buildings that gleamed white in the sunlight, where many people were moving about.

“Behold, Sardanes!” said Kard the Smith, advancing to the edge of the rock.

Rose Emer caught the word Sardanes and echoed it.

“Sardanes,” she breathed, and turned to Polaris with an awed look in her eyes. “It is as if a page of the ages had been turned back for us, isn’t it?” she asked.

From the wondrous scene he glanced to the face of the girl and smiled quietly, and she remembered that here was one who gazed for the first time on the reality of the world of men of any age.

Kard raised his voice in a long, shrill call. His voice was lost in the angry baying of the dog pack as a small goat leaped from covert close to them and clattered away up the ledges.

At the combined clamour, several men raised their faces wonderingly from their work in a field nearby. For a moment they gazed in amazement at the travellers, and then ran toward them, talking excitedly as they went.

All were clad lightly in sleeveless tunics of cloth that reached the knees. They wore no head coverings, and their faces and bare arms were tanned from exposure to the sun. Their feet were covered with leather sandals, buckled at the ankle. Their limbs were bare from the

sandals to the short, loose legged trousers, which they wore beneath their tunic skirts. The texture of their garments was dyed in several different hues.

Nearly all wore close-cropped beards like that of Kard, and their hair was trimmed at the neck. Armlets and rings and the buckles on their garments, all of the strange, iridescent metal, glittered in the sunlight as they ran.

For a moment there was a babel of astonished queries levelled at Kard the Smith as the men pulled up and drank in the sight of the strangers and their yet stranger beasts, now roused to a frenzy which required all of the authority of Polaris to hold in bounds. "Who?" and "What?" and "Where?" came in breathless succession from the mouths of the Sardanians. "Now, be quiet, all of you, that I may tell you," commanded Kard with a disgusted wave of his hand. They were spoiling his peroration for him.

"These," and he waved his hand again, "be Polaris of the Snows, and Rose Emer of America, come to visit Sardanes. The man with the sunlight hair and eyes of the sky hath lived in the outer snows all his life, he saith. The woman," and Kard bowed low, "is a great princess from the world far to the north, beyond all the snows, the world whereof the priests have sung."

Truly, the imagination of Kard was equal to the effect he wished to produce on his fellows. Their tongues stilled by their wonder, they gazed at the man and the woman, then; as by common impulse, they bowed low, with sweeping gestures of their right hands. A fresh chorus of questions would have broken out, but Kard quickly forestalled it.

"The rest of my tale, also the wonders which the strangers may unfold, wait the ear of the Prince Helicon," he said curtly. Now, haste ye and bring horses to transport the strangers' goods, for their beasts are weary, and we will proceed to the judgment House."

Two of the younger men hurried to one, of the nearer dwellings and returned shortly with two span of the small horses which grazed in the meadows. They were in harness, and it was not difficult to attach them to the sledge in place of the dogs, which Polaris took, out of harness and held in leash. Fearing that Sardanian legs would suffer if he did not, he took the precaution to bind the muzzle of each dog with thongs. A lad mounted the sledge and cracked a long whip, and the stout ponies bent to the work of hauling the sledge.

With Kard leading the way, Polaris and Rose Emer set off in the direction of the square of white buildings up the valley. Their dogs huddled closely around them, a formidable body-guard, and with them marched an escort of Sardanians, momentarily augmented by every new man who set eyes on them.

EVERYTHING that he saw was a marvel to Polaris. And for Rose Emer, who had wandered up and down the world considerably, the ancient valley was spread with wonders. Never had she seen, outside of California, trees of such giant girth and height as some of those which grew at the base of the hills; and they were of no kin to the Californian Sequoia. Birds that she could not name flew among their branches.

Set in the midst of their orderly little farms were houses of a sort not seen in the world to-day. They were constructed for the most part of coloured stone, faced with white, and with high-pillared porticoes. Each brought a memory of a pictured temple of antiquity.

They crossed the river on a small bridge of green stone. As they drew nearer to the square of buildings they could see that it was evidently a public gathering place. Each of its four fronts was a lofty peristyle, inclosing a square of considerable size. Through its arches they caught sight of a raised stage, facing many seats of stone.

News of their coming had preceded them. From all directions people were flocking into the public square and occupying the stone seats.

“All who live in the valley are gathering to bid us welcome, lady,” said Polaris, and added an echo to the thoughts of the girl, “May our leave-taking be as peaceful as our welcome!”

When they had arrived at the square they found that it stood in the centre of a pleasant park, with clumps of trees, stone-curbed pools, and playing fountains. Scattered about on massive pedestals were groups of statuary of no mean artistry, some in white marble and others of coloured stones. For the most part fanciful subjects were represented, but some of the groups evidently were of a historical significance.

One, in particular, of large size, showed a company of men landing on a shore from the decks of a ship. The vessel bore a marked resemblance to an ancient galley, such as Rose Emer often had seen pictured. There were the high decks and the banks of oars.

All these sculptured men wore armour and trappings of patterns as ancient as the ship, heightening the likeness of this place of Sardanian art to an antique Greek statuary. Around the central building lay a paved plaza.

Conducted by their escort, which had grown to nearly a hundred men. Rose Emer and Polaris and their grey comrades entered the building through one of the high arches. The entrance led to one side of the raised stage.

While the members of their Sardanian escort scattered to the seats below, Kard the Smith ushered the man and the girl to a flight of stone steps by which they gained the dais.

On the platform was another raised piece of marble work, of glistening white, a flight of steps leading up to a carved double throne, set between two pillars. Across the tops of the pillars was a scrolled plinth, inscribed with Greek lettering as follows:

ΕΛΙΚΩΝΚΡΕΩΝΤΗΣΣΑΡΔΑΝΗΣΟΨΘ

““Helicon, the ninety-ninth prince of Sardanes,”” Polaris translated for Rose’s benefit. “In the original, ‘Helikon kreon tes Sardanes ho kop-pa-theta.’”

On the space below the throne were a number of other stone seats. Throne and platform were empty, with one exception. A little apart from the other seats was one of black stone, and on it was seated a young man. His garb was similar to that of the other Sardanians, but was of exceedingly fine texture, and all of black, unrelieved by any ornament or touch of colour. When the strangers came upon the platform he turned toward them a long-favoured, highly intellectual countenance. His face was shaven smoothly, and his long black hair was held

back from his temples by a band of black cloth. He reclined rather than sat in his stone chair, with an elbow on its arm and his chin on his hand.

As Polaris and Rose Emer became visible to the people below a subdued hum of excitement arose; but the young man on the black stone seat remained impassive, and regarded them with a steady, searching gaze, with no outward evidence of surprise.

“A greeting to thee, Kalin, priest of Sardanes!” called Kard, throwing out his hand in salutation. The young man replied with a careless movement of the hand that lay in his lap, without disturbing his posture of repose.

Down in the great hall hundreds of Sardanian eyes were centred on the strangers. Momentarily the seats were filling with new arrivals. Nearly half of the gathering were women, and many of them were handsome. They were costumed in kirtles, belted in below the bosom and flowing loosely to below the knee. They wore their hair in plaits, coiled about the tops of their heads. Ornaments of glittering metal bedecked their garments and hair. Their feet were clad in sandals of soft leather, laced above the ankles, and in half stockings of cloth, gartered and bowed below the knees. Rose Emer was quick to note that some of them were striking beauties.

Without exception, they were brunettes. Kard conducted Polaris and the girl to seats at one side and a short distance from the central throne.

“We bide the coming of the Prince Helicon,” he explained, “who cometh shortly.” For a few moments they sat in silence. Then voices were heard from an entrance at the far side of the stage, and with one accord the Sardanians in the hall rose from their seats.

“The prince cometh!” murmured Kard.

Polaris and Rose Emer arose also.

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