



Black Book



DARÓZ

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Editorial

Peter A. Worthy

Welcome to the third issue of *The Black Book*.

Where to start, eh?

I am pleased to present this mix of new and reprinted fiction, especially as some of these pieces mean a lot to me. I am proud to present here William Laughlin and his wonderful tale of the Tindalosi menace. He has some great work and I hope to publish some of it in future issues of the magazine. Certainly an author to keep an eye on. Adam Niswader has kindly excerpted a sub-plot from his 1994 novel, *The Serpent Slayers* from his Shaman-cycle. Mark Francis and Franklyn Searight, verbal Pickman's in the poetic realm of things *Lovecraftian* present us with two new pieces. It seems apt to me to also present here Randall Larson's wonderfully-constructed tribute to Robert Bloch.

In particular, I am very pleased to present "*A Pair of Old Shears*". This is the fifth tale of David Parkes Boynton that originally appeared in the *EOD* but was strangely excised from the reprint version, *Tales of the Lovecraft Collectors*, from Necronomicon Press. Kenneth's skills in both writing fiction and reviews is undoubted and it makes me glad to bring this tale back out into the light!

Lee Clark Zumpe—the new editor of *Dark Legacy*—gives us a tale warning about the dangers of the bookshop. Glenn Rahman and Richard L. Tierney have recently conjured up the excellent novel, *The Gardens of Lucullus*, but allows us to enjoy a shorter adventure with Simon of Gitta. Also, keep your eldritch eyes out for a new novel featuring Simon, *The Path of the Dragon*. In direct counterpoint to the historical antics of Simon, James Chambers—another literary rising star—presents a subtle tale of the future and of the danger of mankind . . . to himself . . .

Ann Schwader in her tale, *The Tulu Jar*, warns us to be more careful with things, or should that be *Things*?

Mark McLaughlin—one of my zaniest correspondents—allows me to reprint his tale, *The Groveler in the Grotto*. I urge you all to go and find his humorous collection, *Shoggoth Cacciatore*. It is out of print at present but will be reprinted in a larger hard-back collection of his fiction, *Hell Is Where the Heart Is*. Pencil it on your shopping lists now!

James William Hjort is represented here by his tale, *Yhagni's Priest*, which first saw light of day in *Ebon Roses, Jeweled Skulls*. However, it has been changed slightly—for its appearance on James' website—and he's allowed me to present it here. Robert Price gives us an excellent cautionary tale, *The Devil's Steps*. With his submission, C. J. Henderson gives us a little spirit of Howard . . . Robert E. Howard that is . . .

Finally, we close out with the supreme *From Darker Heavens* of Stanley C. Sargent and I also have the privilege to present it with its original artwork.

Let me know your comments!

Mind-Pilot

William Laughlin

*"But the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall
will never be quite the same as the man who went out"*

— Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*

Mandelbrot mandalas faded to a rainbow of holo-ghosts as the monitor slowly re-stored light to the room. Shea watched the centrifuge dissipate, pulsing a final few translucent patterns—fractal phantoms that vanished into the grid. Shea sighed. He was dead-dry exhausted.

After three long hours in the chair, the test-run for L-13 was finally over.

"Thank you, Mr. Hoffmann—good shift. See you in three days." Chalmers' voice resonated through the test-room. As he got up, Shea rubbed the nape of his neck and steadied himself on the chair. He spoke to Chalmers through the microbead on his Chalmers-Reardon work-togs:

"I'm having some memory trouble, Doctor, in fact, most of the last two hours are a total blank."

Chalmers chuckled. "A short-term memory loss is a normal side-effect of L-13, I'm afraid—something I hope to alleviate in future refinements. I'll see you on Thursday, Mr. Hoffmann. Good day."

After two green-smocked lab-techs plucked tubes and removed wires from his torso and arms, Shea impatiently shrugged off his togs donned a smock, and headed for the door. He hated working with Chalmers. As he left he glanced at the mirrored rectangle of the monitor room. There was always something in Dr. Winston Chalmers' tone that he didn't trust—! The door slid open and after waving at his ochre reflection in the monitor room window, Shea headed for the main spiral of the Chalmers-Reardon Complex. A late Mozart symphony seeped gently from discreet intercoms as he made his way down the sloped corridor to the elevator and his quarters on the third floor. Once more, Shea Hoffmann rubbed the back on his neck. His scalp felt like a film of putty. Yawning, he passed his card-key through the swipe-slot. As Shea headed for the shower, he dreaded the purge-pattern for the next few days—things tasting too sweet or salty; a few peripheral twitters or peripatetic conversation, then it'd be over—just in time for Thursday—and another dose of the drug. For the first forty-eight hours, he had to remain on the Western Pennsylvania campus of the international pharmaceutical giant, then, after an examination, he was free to go back to his condo in located nearby in the small town of Mullencroft. A reminder blinked on his wall monitor—he wondering what his employers had made the media say, Shea had keyed up a government-sanctioned documentary on the Mind-Pilot Program on the Science Channel this morning. It was bound to be pure propaganda, but he had a morbid curiosity. Maybe because, deep down, he didn't want to believe the truth—

Mind-Pilots weren't heroes. They were shaved Rhesus monkeys.

But just as he stepped into the shower, Shea heard the bell chime—an urgent message. Drying off and yoking the towel around his shoulders, he put on his wall screen and checked his message. It was from Akono Kai, friend and fellow pilot—they had gone through psych-evaluation together. Replaying the message Shea munched a Pro-bar and hastily dressed.

As he buttoned up, the doorbell sounded—Akono was here. Something was wrong—Shea opened the door.

"So how urgent is urgent?" Wiping his eyes, he gasped.

His colleague looked as though he had aged a decade in the last two weeks. His dreadlocks were shot with gray and his expression road-haggard as though he hadn't slept in days. Shea took a breath. Hadn't bathed either. Glancing furtively behind him, Akono pushed past Shea, and collapsed on his sofa.

"Would you like a cup of tea? Water—" Akono waived off his niceties.

"Shea. We've got to get off-campus—I don't feel safe discussing this here."

Hoffmann shook his head, "You know that I've got to be under observation for a day." Akono pulled out his palm-top and plugged it into Shea's entertainment console. His speakers hissed and crackled.

"This will generate white noise." Akono began to pace across the floor frantically gesticulating with his hands as he spoke:

"The L-13 test. Chalmers isn't telling you, us the full truth—"

"What do you mean?"

"We're both testing the same drug, that is, I'm testing L-12, but it's the same strain—" Shea cut him off.

"Listen, Akono, calm down! So what if the drug is the same—?" Akono whirled around and grabbed him by his tee shirt, stretching the corp-logo into a smear.

"No, Shea, this drug, it's synthesized from an eastern plant called Liao. There are strange side effects. Ten 'pilots have gone paranoid-critical at Chalmers-Reardon research plants around the world. One is dead—disappeared! I got this from a rogue site that was shut down on almost as soon as I downloaded the data."

Suddenly, Akono swayed back and forth.

"Oh, no! I'm—I'm losing control—" As his friend staggered, groping for the wall to steady himself, Shea broke Akono's enfeebled grip.

"OK, I believe you—so what do you want to do?" Clutching at his collar, Akono furtively glanced around him again, Lorre-like, showing all of the signs of early para-crit neurosis. Still, he was a friend. If it were anything he learned after all of these years—mind-pilots took care of their own.

"This disc has everything," Akono whispered. "Open it tomorrow, at home, behind a firewall—read it as soon as possible. Then, we can act!" Shea nodded, palming the file, hoping to pacify Akono till he could sort it all out.

The door chime sounded. Shea answered. There were two guards in the video monitor. "Mr. Hoffmann? This is Richards from Security. Have you seen Akono

Kai?"

Shea looked at Kai, gog-eyed, sweating with palpable fear

"He stopped by but I was in the shower—what's up?"

"He attacked a guard—he should be considered dangerous. Please, inform us immediately if you should contact him. Thank you, Mr. Hoffmann." The guard turned and left. Shea shut the door. Shea was surprised—they hadn't even bothered to search his room. From behind him, Akono Kai sighed with relief. Shea cursed under his breath and went to his cooler and poured himself a glass of tea. Kai broke the uneasy silence.

"I, uh, didn't attack that guard, Shea. He tried to stop me. I broke free and ran—" Shea waived off the explanation and sipped his tea.

"I believe you, Akono. You're in no condition to hurt anyone."

"So, what are you going to—*ah!*" Convulsively, Kai clutched his temple, staggering back to the couch. Shea steadied him, dropping his cup. The glass shattered, the raspberry tea spreading a bloody blot on the beige carpeting.

"Akono, what is it?" Kai gaped in terror—pressing deep into the vinyl cushions.

"No—no! I'm still here! I still control. God—they're drilling into my brain!" Kai thrashed in silence.

"Akono—" Shea began to regret sending the guard away. Then, abruptly, Kai seemed to shake off his hallucination, regain his composure and suddenly become perfectly lucid. The effect was eerie, as though his friend had been momentarily "possessed".

"I know you're humoring me. God it's getting worse. Shea, listen to me! Chalmers has found it—something that takes the mind into the deep subconscious, penetrating into the collective memory. But-but we've gone too far. I've seen the shapes *before*, the archetypes, the *sounds* before words! Creatures darting in the corner of my eye!"

"Akono. You've just got to clam down. Drain out."

"No! No doctors! Please, Shea, just scan this disc, I'll meet you at the planetarium in two days—" And with that, Akono whipped out a long nylon rope, swiftly attached it to the balcony, and, after tying off—rappelled down the side of the building. Kai landed safely and, ninja-like, disappeared into the hedges below. Suddenly, Akono was completely his old self. Determined, athletic, logical. Searchlights snaked across the walls Shea ducked below the window.

Minutes later, still-stunned, cleaning up his spilled tea, Shea half-watched the documentary, while trying to figure-out what sort of scandal that he'd stumbled into.

THE SCIENCE CHANNEL PRESENTS
THE MIND-PILOT PROGRAM:
AMERICA'S METAPHYSICAL MANIFEST DESTINY
(Red White and Blue waves watermark of Phrenologist's brain-map)

NARRATOR: THE VAN ALLEN BELT.

(Animated globe-map against starscape. A white highlighted “atmospheric” halo encircling the earth: 360-degree rotation shot.)

LITTLE DID THE MINDS OF NASA SUSPECT THAT THIS WOULD BE THE GRAVEYARD OF AMERICA’S MANNED SPACE PROGRAM.

(Video file footage of numerous shots of missiles being launched from various worldwide locations. Newscasters and World leaders smiling.)

THE FAMOUS “PEACE LAUNCH” OF 2075 WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING. A UNITED NATIONS EFFORT TO RID THE WORLD OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS, BY LAUNCHING THEM INTO THE SUN, WOULD HAVE DISTASTEROUS CONSEQUENCES FOR YEARS TO COME.

(File-footage of launching of nuclear weapons around the globe.)

AFFECTED BY THE NUCLEAR DETONATIONS, PROLONGED SOLAR FLARE ACTIVITY WOULD RAISE THE BACKGROUND RADIATION OF THE BELT TO OVER TEN TIMES THE ORIGINAL AMOUNT—THE RESULT:

(Photo of solar corona before/after shot.)

AN IMPENETRABLE BARRIER TO THE OUTER SOLAR SYSTEM THAT WOULD TAKE DECADES TO ATTENUATE.

(Graphic of new halo around earth representing increased radiation.)

THE CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES SOON LOST INTEREST IN UNMANNED EXPEDITIONS. AND THUS CAME THE END OF JOHN KENNEDY’S NEW FRONTIER.

(NASA base in Florida overgrown and rusted with disuse.)

THEN, IN 2085, “THE NEXT FRONTIER” CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF A NEW GENERATION OF PIONEERS, AND THE MIND-PILOT PROGRAM WAS BORN!

(A montage of chemists with alembics and shots of pharmaceutical plants inter-cut with encephalographic readings and close-ups of computer enhanced schematics of the brain.)

Contents

THE CULMINATION OF A DOZEN HIGH-TECH PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH PROJECTS, UNITED TO FORM A SINGLE GOVERNMENT AGENCY, THE SO-CALLED “PSYCHONAUT” OR “MIND-PILOT” PROGRAM DISCOVERED AND TESTED DRUGS WHICH WOULD LEAD TO INCREDIBLE BREAKTHROUGHS IN MEMORY ENHANCEMENT, ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE, BIPOLAR DISORDERS, AND OTHER NEUROCHEMICAL CHALLENGES.

(Montage of drugs being administered to a series of patients, charts, and close-ups of syringes and pills interspersed with shots of mind-pilots in control rooms.)

HUNDREDS OF BRAVE SOULS, RIGOROUSLY TRAINED TO OBSERVE AND PERFORM COMPLEX MENTAL CALLISTHENICS, HAVE TESTED THOUSANDS OF UNKNOWN CHEMICAL AGENTS FOR THE BENEFIT OF MANKIND AND AMERICA’S “METAPHYSICAL MANIFEST DESTINY”! BASED UPON THE “BERKELEY MODEL” OF A CENTURY AGO, A RESEARCHER OR “CONTROL” WILL INTRODUCE A SERIES OF VISUAL CUES IN THE FORM OF GEOMETRIC PATTERNS DISPLAYED UPON A WALL-SIZED MONITOR.

(Series of resmers displayed on video; basic shapes cones, swirls, and rods.)

THESE PATTERNS OFTEN ACHIEVE A HYPNOTIC EFFECT UPON THE “MIND-PILOT”, AND PROVIDE THE RESEARCHER WITH A MEANS OF ESTABLISHING A PATTERN OF “BASE READINGS” TO USE AS WAY OF “MIRRORING” OR “AMPLIFYING” THE VARYING MENTAL STATES THAT WILL ACCOMPANY THE TESTING OF A PSYCHOACTIVE AGENT. WE INTERVIEWED—

Flipping off the monitor with disgust, Shea shook his head and stretched out on the floor trying to unclench the taut muscles in his lower back. America’s metaphysical manifest destiny! What a joke!

Shea smirked to himself—the Mind-Pilot initiative had as many secret casualties as the Russian Space Program! Hidden, top security files with the real stories—madness, suicides, irreparable brain damage, strokes, hundreds of tales of psychic collisions and incompetent overdoses. The real stories were considered too demoralizing to the nation, and only passed as oral tradition from m-pilot to m-pilot through the years. Now *that* would make a good special—*Secrets of the Paranoid—Critical!* Men forgotten by official history: men like Akono Kai.

Suddenly exhausted, Shea went back to his bedroom and, dialing a slow hypno-spin on his wall monitor, stretched out on his fluid-form cloud-couch. His head whirled with questions as he dropped into sleep—

* * * * *

Four o’clock in the morning—

Shea woke bleary-eyed to darting vermin-like shadows creeping at the edge of his living room—a crouched shadow at his side—the disc!

With a snarl, he leapt upon the figures—kicking out at one intruder, but the silent enemies just stunned him with a shock-gun and Shea lost consciousness with the bitter knowledge that he had so easily and carelessly lost the precious data that Akono Kai had risked his life to deliver.

* * * * *

The Stellarium sat on a hillside overlooking Mullencroft. Designed to be a library, the domed building had been converted into a planetarium in the latter half of the previous century—and now was almost abandoned. Shea's friend, ex-mind pilot, Rob Rostack, had assumed the custodianship as a pay-off from a para-crit incident caused by pharmacological negligence. The work involved was minimal, a few school planetarium shows and tours, and Rostack's livelihood was secured, another mind-pilot put quietly out to pasture in a remote, controlled location, to limit his exposure to others. Given a small vocation to calm his nerves, ease his bitterness.

This tactic of course hadn't worked with Rostack.

Rostack hated the mind-pilot initiative, hated what it had done to him, and collected all the subversive, hidden history of the program—he was also connected to the underground network of para-crit vets.

But Robert Rostack wasn't all hatred and bile—far from it.

Shea met Rob while taking a summer Observational Astronomy course—with Rostack as instructor. A complete astro-nut, Rostack really believed in the stars. And Shea had been rapidly infected by Rostack's quixotic dream, sitting with his new friend in the vast expanding starscapes of the Stellarium. He marveled at Rostack's patience—measuring the radiation levels in the Van Allen Belt for the slightest incremental decline, examining the data from the last few unmanned probes, dreaming of future "safe-levels" which would be decades past his own life-span.

As Shea climbed up the hillside, still aching from the previous night's assault and battery. It had to have been M-R security. No wonder they didn't search his apartment. Now he was implicated. He needed some advice.

Sliding his card-key into the slot, Shea entered the domed neo-gothic structure, searching for his friend in its curved expanse.

A voice came from behind him. Shea jumped.

"You're early."

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Rob." Shea swore at him. Rostack laughed.

"Sorry. You know that the outer walls are seamed with passages. After all of these years with so few visitors, it's really second nature. You're awfully jumpy. Anyway, what's going on?"

"Akono Kai's gone para-crit. He says there's a problem with the new drug we're testing: L-13. Kai gave me this disc with the back story—but security broke in and took it from me."

"Interesting. Surprised that you haven't been detained for questioning. They really must be up to something with that drug. They obviously don't want to jeopardize losing you for research—otherwise they'd detain you. This is clearly something the Feds don't know about. Who's the control on the project?"

"Chalmers."

Rostack nodded. "Why did I have to ask? C'mon let's go into the booth, and talk this over." Shea nodded, following his friend into a secret hatchway in the sidewall connected to a room in the domed building that housed the circuit board and controls for the planetarium and doubled as a workshop. On the walls were four neo-psychedelic holo-portraits of Galileo, Hawking, Kepler and Copernicus made to look like Richard Avedon's Beatles photos. As they entered Rostack sighed.

"So, Kai is on the loose—another para-crit. You know, it took them twelve hours to find me and strap me to a stretcher."

Shea nodded. "Bad time to remind me. What I'd like to know is what was on that file that Akono was trying to give me." Scratching his chin. Rostack sat at his workstation.

"Let's see if I can find it through another rogue site. What was the drug?"

"L-13. Synthesized from an opiate called *Liao*." Rostack grunted.

"I've heard of it. That is one strong hallucinogen." Rostack typed a few commands, and then gasped. "Look. Here we go—there's this group called the Biblioweb Guild, some of my psych-vet friends get filtered info through them." Shea looked at the downloaded data.

Scrolling on the twin screens came the data from the hidden shadow-site. Shea recognized from the diagrams and chemistry that *Liao* was some sort of psychoactive agent that worked naturally at the molecular level.

"Hey, look this stuff is highly illegal. Six para-crit incidents, and the Feds discontinued testing." Rostack turned to look at Shea, creased features blue and grim in the half-light. "Chalmers is in deep here; this isn't a sanctioned R&D project."

Suddenly a gunshot sounded, and at the east fire exit, the double doors flew open—it was Akono Kai. Immediately, he slammed the doors shut as best as he could then leaned back against them.

Kai was screaming. "They're coming! Dear god!"

Shea and Rob Rostack looked at one another. Akono fired a shot into the floor.

"Get back!!! All of you—"

"Yup." said Rob, with the weary voice of a man who had expected this insanity. Shea bit his lower lip. Kai was barricading the door with folding chairs and a table.

"Security must be on the way." Said Shea, Rob snorted.

"What makes you think so? He could be hallucinating—" Rob began to flip switches. Gradually, rotating the planetarium.

"That'll disorient him a bit. He can't see us, but this wall isn't bulletproof. I think we ought to do something Shea."

"Like what? He's freakin' nuts!"

"Like maybe disarm him—you're a lot younger than I am!"

Shea stared at Rostack in disbelief. "So, I attack armed with what, a telescope? Christ, Rob!"

"Look!" Rob pointed at Akono, who had slumped down on a heap by the double door, pistol dangling in his right hand. Shea instantly ran for the door

Akono Kai fell onto the ground clutching his head, then curled into a fetal position—convulsing with spasms of pure agony. Crouching low, Shea raced down into the rows of seats in the silent planetarium. Above them the projected stars whirled and spun, constellations outlined like glowing paper dolls. As he drew closer, Shea heard Kai muttering—his wan, unshaven face blank with panic

"Th—They can't get in, they can't break the circle—the circle by and by, Lord, by and by—they're still trying though, howling behind my eyes! They want to swallow my self—my soul!"

Gently, Shea grabbed the gun from his hand. Kai didn't seem to care—eyes fixed on the barricaded door, staring as if in expectation of a cataclysm. Suddenly, Shea heard Rob's voice through the PA system:

"Shea, we've got company. Security. They've crashed the gate."

Kai reacted as though he'd been hit with a cattle-prod and with a shriek he fell to the floor. "No! The Hounds! They'll break the circle—"

"Akono—wait!" But as the security guards forced through his flimsy barrier. Shea paused. Something shimmered in the air above them. At first Shea thought that it was a leftover mirage from L-13, but then he saw something solidify above Kai—as if the air itself had become gelatinous.

Kai crab-crawled back against the curved wall like a trapped insect as the strange opaque shape hovered sinuously toward him. Shea froze—unable to act.

Kai pointed at the sundered entranceway. "Shea—the circle—!"

And that was the last thing that Akono Kai ever said to him.

The amoebic wraith swallowed him as though he were suddenly immersed in churning water, there was no escape from it—Kai's flailing body was permeated with the clear plasma.

Then, with eyes rollback white, mouth foaming, Kai began to croak—to *bark*—

It was a hoarse guttural sound, deathly, like a man choking—and the sound had a horrifying effect on Shea. Because it wasn't as if it were Kai's voice at all, but as if Kai's vocal chords were now simply a vehicle, a marionette for another creature trying vainly to approximate its own voice through a hopelessly inadequate and alien instrument.

"Shea, what's going on down there?" Rob's concerned, half-hysterical voice carried through the planetarium speakers. The security guards shouted inane warnings, to him. But everything, all of the actions in the room had been rendered arbitrary by the sight before them.

Akono Kai was floating.

Suspended in mid-air, Kai's levitating body was jerking spastically, as though

electric shocks were running through his veins, then a thick bluish fluid began to form around him, and Kai's clothing began to melt away into the jellied mass.

Shea sank to his knees as the first wave of the nauseating scent stung his nostrils.

It was an acrid, sulfurous gas that seemed to permeate the room, as though the air itself were being changed by the process taking place before them. In the corner of his eye, Shea vaguely noticed more guards queuing up at the entranceway. It didn't matter. Akono Kai was dead. But whatever had seized him had yet to finish what it had started.

Kai's skin began to roil and undulate, bubbling—stretching till it burst, then the horrible sounds of breaking bone—and Shea understood.

Whatever it was that had seized Akono Kai, was trying to alter him into some kind of form that would serve as a suitable host or atmosphere for itself.

But Kai's poor violated flesh had reached its breaking point.

With a sickening burst of stretched tendons, Kai's head fell from his shoulders, and Kai's corpse fell unceremoniously to the ground, the cloud dispersing into the immaterial air, leaving only the shredded husk of his friend, and the foul stench permeating the room. Overcome with nausea, Shea buried his head in his hands.

And that was all that M-R security needed. The intercom barked.

"Shea—" Then, two gunshots rang out. From above him, the speakers gave a *brap* of static. Now two of his friends were dead. Shea heard heavy footfalls behind him.

And that was all Shea Hoffmann heard or saw.

* * * *

Floating deepblack in cold numb untime . . .

"**u *r* *n a* a**u***n*e"

A spike of light, ghost voices calling—

"*ou *re *n a* a**ul***n*e"

Louder now, urging, wakeupwakeupWAKEUP—

"—*you are on an ambulance!*"

Shea blinked blurred gray shadows, straining against restraints, unable to move.

"OK, he's responsive. Give him the sedative—"

"But he's a mind-pilot—it could kill him!"

"Chalmers gave us a special mix—look, he said to get him conscious, then hit him."

"He's the boss."

Shea heard cloth tearing, the sound of traffic, ambulance banshee, horns—the sight of the Chalmers-Reardon Complex swimming up at him.

And then, he disappeared from himself awhile . . .

* * * *

Echoes of echoes, his name came from the end of a twenty-mile tunnel, repeated like a mantra.

Shea rubbed his eyes. It was Dr. Winston Chalmers.

"Mr. Hoffmann. Good. We have much to discuss—"

Shea pulled against Mylar restraints. He was on a gurney in the control room. His neck was collared. A sickening feeling of fear bled ice in the pit of his stomach.

"You killed my friends, you fucker—"

"I'm sorry. It was completely unintentional—"

"How can you *unintentionally* murder someone? You're insane Chalmers." The pale, short man with the black monk-cut hair leaned over him, grinning.

"Oh, the old 'mad scientist' canard! As Einstein was, or Hawking or Newton?" Chalmers walked swiftly across the room then returned into his restricted sight, waving a handful of brown, stained, burned papers and printouts.

"This, Mr. Hoffmann—*this* is what we have been working for—a breakthrough! One which philosophers, physicists—alchemists and scientists have been trying to make for thousands of years—"

"And what would that be, O, tragically misunderstood genius—?"

"Spare me your sarcasm Hoffmann, you can't deny it—you've seen them!"

"Seen who?"

"The inner demons—the eternal creations of Jung's collective unconscious, creatures which are palpable manifestations of every-man's fears, desires, hatreds."

Shea watched Chalmers raving, and was terrified. He'd never seen the controlled, dispassionate researcher behaving in this erratic manner. Unable to contain himself, Hoffmann exploded.

"You idiot! Those are not *inner* demons. They are *outer* ones, Chalmers! They are some kind of creatures. I mean, what moves as fast as the speed of light—the speed of thought! And what makes the speed of thought reach the velocity of these conceptual boundaries? L-13! Chalmers, these things are some kind of . . . aliens!"

Chalmers chuckled. "Well, that is why you are my ace mind-pilot—you are the most imaginative. However, you are wrong. They are just deep psychological constructs. Chimeras, nothing more."

"Look at the tape, man. Didn't you see Akono?" Hoffmann pleaded.

"A seizure after an over-aggressive assault."

"They didn't touch him. No one did! Chalmers, please listen to me—"

"Nonsense. Mr. Hoffmann, you have been chosen. You are my Balboa, my Armstrong. You will make contact with these imaginary creatures in their realm in your deep subconscious and bring back a report, a catalog of their properties and characteristics."

"Chalmers, these aren't psychological constructs—look at the two EKG's for Chrissakes!"

"Schizophrenics can produce two sets of brainwaves upon occasion, Hoffmann, you know that!"

"They ripped his goddamn head off! Everyone who takes your damn drug dies at the hands of these things—!" Shea screamed.

Contents

"No, no—that is merely a dosage problem, I've made further refinements. You'll see."

"A dosage problem? This is only a dosage problem?" Shea laughed tonelessly.

"Trust me. It won't be like that this time. The dosage must be exact and the setting must be perfect. L-14 only creates seconds of precise attunement so that you cannot succumb to these figments, these shadows." Chalmers held his syringe to the light.

Shea sickened. "Chalmers, don't do this—I'm warning you. This is insanity"

"Yes. Yes it is, Mr. Hoffmann. By definition, I believe it *has* to be. Good luck."

And blithely Chalmers plunged the needle in—

Shea before	Another than
the gray walls	itself, it smells
of logic then bent	in the outer edges
and folded between	trembling thoughts
sanity's sorted piles	float though the sharp
his finitude shattered	cornered angels of night
an eternal second caught	sundered into fragments
in the gridded intersecting	intersecting in the gridded
nexus of merged consciousness	each touch
the barriers of the other's self	reaches
every limit of I-ego then passes	
far across a cross across a	
cross across a cross	
crossing across	
a crossed x	
across	
x crossed a	
crossing across	
cross across a cross	
across a cross across far	
reaches of this other-self passes	
limits and I-ego barriers moves out of	
touch of the nexus consciousness unmerge	
out of the gridded intersecting	out of the gridded
fragments and hungers	seconds caught in eternal
back in night's corner	infinitely re-assembled in
sharp with desire for	sorted piles of sanity
fearful thoughts	folded unevenly
in the outer edges	logic fractured
it can smell	back in walls
the Other	of Shea

The creature had brushed against his consciousness —

"Hoffmann! Mr. Hoffmann, respond!"

Shea heard Chalmers through the intercom. His arms ached. His throat hurt—he'd been screaming. Shea looked up to see Chalmers standing over him—Shea realized that he was on the floor—he'd pulled off the restraints, and in the process probably had dislocated a shoulder. Chalmers kneeled beside him. Shea blinked.

Then, without hesitation, he flung himself onto his captor.

Chalmers was stunned by the suddenness of the attack and fell almost immediately—his head colliding with the wall as he fell. With his mind working with preternatural speed, Shea noticed the room, his surroundings, and the syringe of L-14.

Grabbing the needle, Shea pinned the sprawled researcher to the ground and swiftly injected him with the drug.

Then, Shea Hoffmann bundled up the concussed scientist and his thumb-worn documents, and fled for the Stellarium, hearing the alien creatures scrabbling in his back-brain.

Then, listening to Chalmers screams as the L-14 took hold, Shea felt the abject, all-consuming fear of Akono Kai ripple in the walls as the beings approached

* * * * *

(Six months later . . .)

"More plaster! Where is the architect, you idiots—these rooms must be completely *round*!" Shea cringed behind his palmtop as Chalmers shrieked at the contractors through his telecom bead. The Stellarium, as usual, was in perpetual transformation around him. Modified and altered with a series of circular passages—it has become a building without corners, without angles, a bizarre edifice that has been compared by the local reporters to the old Winchester Mystery House, built by the mad moneyed American heiress fearful of a thousand murdered ghosts. Chalmers in one of his more lucid ravings, had theorized that the circles and tunnels somehow confuse these beings and erects crenellated walls with religious fervor.

Hoffmann shivered, his hand bleached white leaning against the wet plaster in the hall.

Shea prayed it was a good theory; Hoffmann could feel the mind-hunters again, the Hounds drawing nearer each day, squirming behind his eyes.

Chalmers had missed the point—these beings were explorers too. They traversed space-time looking for new homes, new frontiers—the minds, the bodies of men were only terra incognita, blank slates to be reformed into habitable hosts, as casually as we might plow a field or build a fence.

Manifest destiny.

Though the animosity remained, he and Chalmers were now allies of necessity. The vast fortune of Chalmers' company at their disposal, the Stellarium was rapidly being transformed into a permanent base of operations—a fortress, but already there were questions. The media was comparing Chalmers to a latter-day Howard

Hughes. The Board of Directors was demanding the heir explain himself. Shea sighed, staring up at the artificial stars, the pages of Chalmers' latest research coffee stained, spread open on his lap.

They were training a squadron of Mind-Pilots now, adepts, aces—psychic-warriors primed for mental combat against these new invaders. Chalmers was designing an arsenal of psychotropic weapons, brain-warpers, mind-bombs for a new, unknown realm of warfare.

The first salvo had been fired. The doorway had been blown open by the Liao tests. It was only a matter of time—

Now caged in a widening gyre, their brains chewed and bitten by L-14, licked by the slaving, outer dark—how long would it be before those creatures poked through the veil once more, found them, penetrated the tissue of their minds, and worse—

After all of this, could either of them still be safely called: “human”?

The Sad Saga of Mad Jake Roberts **Adam Niswander**

Excerpted from the 1994 novel THE SERPENT SLAYERS

The seedy-looking ranch slouched on level ground eight miles from town. As dwellings go, it appeared to be a poor excuse for disturbing the landscape. The main house, comprised of three badly wrecked single-wide trailers propped up on blocks, formed a drunken horseshoe of living space.

Numerous derelict vehicles littered a yard set off by a makeshift fence. Repairs had been made everywhere with rolled tarpaper, bailing wire and cardboard in a random, wandering skirmish line that reeled illogically from wall to post—as if some hapless hobos had stumbled on a junk yard and decided to call it home.

The owner, Jake Roberts, looked neither tidy nor pretty. His face, ravaged in youth by acne and chicken pox, had matured into a lumpy, cratered, road map of scars and burst blood vessels. Only his eyes gave a hint of the craft and wile that resided within the hulking six foot frame.

He wore a ragged glove on what remained of his right hand. Within the stained black leather resided the only single item he had paid more than two hundred dollars for in his entire life—a prosthesis made of stainless steel and rubber, a mechanical hand. Years of practice had made him expert in its use.

All that remained of the meaty paw he had been born with was the stub of a thumb, half a palm and the little finger. The rest had been lost twenty-three years before.

Jake did not regret it, though. The loss of his hand and fingers had constituted a right of passage of sorts. It had not only marked his physical disfigurement, but twisted his mind to a new view of the world. It had signaled his loss of innocence and divorced him from humanity.

Mostly, it had shown him what was to be his life's work—work he could take pleasure in, work that demanded all the meanness and skill he possessed.

At seventeen, he enlisted in the Marine Corps—a big, healthy, gangly Arizona farm boy eager to see the world. He had been cycled through the meat grinder they called Vietnam and dumped back out—an expert rifleman, a bronze star winner, a survivor.

After his discharge, he returned home to find his mother and father six months dead after a fire leveled the house in which he had grown up. No one had been able to notify him because he had been shifted through seven different hospitals in the five months of his recovery from the wounds that won him his medal.

The old ranch house had survived drought and flash floods but succumbed at last to a grease fire on the new electric stove. The log structure constructed out of California Redwood on a cinderblock skirt had burned to ashes.

No one stumbled across the ruins until after. Isolated in a barren section of the countryside, the house had burned on a fog shrouded morning while his parents slept. Only the rock skirt and the flagstone chimney he had helped his father build when he was eleven remained. Its blackened and baked pillar rose up between the trailers. The cinderblocks served as a platform for the wheelless hulks that were his present home.

Roberts' hand had been lost the day after his return home.

He had been cleaning up debris from the fire and, while trying to pull a charred fencepost from the hard and unforgiving ground, snagged his jacket sleeve on barbed wire. The noise resulting from his attempt to free the garment without slashing his arm had disturbed a rattlesnake unseen in the stark desert shadows.

When it struck without warning, Jake stared in stupid horror, still unable to free his arm from the tangle. Twice the fangs sank into his hand. Twice the venom flowed. By the time he had delivered himself to the hospital in town two hours later, the flesh had already turned necrotic and started to slough away, exposing bone.

It had been a near thing, but he lived. Despite the days of delirium, the agony, the subsequent surgeries—all at the expense of a grateful if impersonal government—he had new purpose in his life.

With his hand freshly bitten, his arm still trapped by the wire, he had looked into the dark eyes of the snake. It had not fled—even after the second strike. It coiled again and stared at him, its tongue flicking in and out.

In that moment, Jake had seen—or imagined that he had seen—the snake smile. It was a smile of pure, gratified evil.

The war, his wounds, his parents deaths, the blackened cinders that had been his home, and now the snake leering at him caused something inside to snap. His mind received a single, clear, devastating thought, a single emotion etched indelibly into his brain, never to fade.

Frustration, grief, loss, pain, fear, horror—all focused into one emotional outlet

and became cold, deadly hate. And the object of that hatred was the snake that sat coiled in front of him, smiling.

When he ripped his arm out of the wire, opening the wound and shredding his flesh—and, incidentally saving his life—he had grabbed the rattler with his mangled hand and broken it again and again. Long after it was a pile of lifeless mush in the sand, his booted feet continued to smash, crush, batter and pound it.

From that time on, snakes had been Jake's life's work. At first, it had been personal hatred that drove him. The satisfaction of finding and killing the vipers had been a tonic that satisfied his desire to strike back at a world which he viewed as insane. Eventually, however, the modest inheritance left by his parents dwindled and the pressure of real world economics forced him to modify his pursuit.

He killed many. He took pleasure in it. His methodical extermination of the crawling reptiles around Springerville ended when he was contacted by a clinic that wanted rattler's for production of antivenin and experiment.

Roberts visited the clinic. The herpetologist showed him the operation. Snakes were kept alive—even well treated—as long as they produced the desirable quantities of venom required.

Once their usefulness as pseudo-cattle for milking came to an end, they were transferred to another lab where they served as subjects for dissection, testing of extermination chemicals and even ground up and added as a protein filler in feed.

They paid a fair amount of money for the stock and Jake found he could make enough supplying them with rattlesnakes to pay his bills and fill the larder.

There were times when the rage inside took control and then there would be no delivery to the clinic.

After the killing, Roberts would wander, his thoughts numbed by the indulgence in slaughter, his body an automaton that moved stupidly without conscious direction. It took hours for his brain to kick back in and function normally.

He knew no sense of shame. The vipers to him were the essence of evil—cold, intelligent, deadly and emotionless. They had to be exterminated, had to be crushed into the earth they polluted.

On this particular day, he traveled northwest of Snowflake into the area south of Winslow and Holbrook. He had just passed Dry Lake and was heading up the Pink Cliffs toward Porter Tank Draw when he stumbled upon a nest of rattlesnakes and lost control. It was hours before rational thought returned and he found himself at an unfamiliar place.

From where he stood on the slope of a small rocky hill, he saw a peculiar formation of rocks, almost pyramidal in shape, yet separated into two distinct halves. Sunlight glinted off a shiny surface.

Moving down slope, Jake saw a truck backed up into the cleft between the rocks. Crouching behind the uneven boulders and keeping to the shadows, he crept nearer. Nothing moved around the truck and no sound could be heard other than the whisper of a gentle wind.

He dashed quickly across the open ground and knelt by the grill on the front of the truck. Flattening his body to the ground, he looked under the vehicle.

He muttered under his breath, "What the hell?"

A body lay on the sand in plain view.

Roberts crawled carefully around the front left wheel and along the side of the truck. He listened intently for any noise, any sign of life, but the desert stayed quiet. Despite the afternoon heat, he felt chilled.

Reaching the rear of the van, he peered across the open expanse. The body on the sand had not moved. With every nerve screaming alert, Jake inched slowly on his stomach out from the cover of the truck and approached. Two more bodies lay nearby.

The closest man lay on his side, turned slightly away. He wore a denim shirt and blue jeans. His feet were curiously tangled together, as if he had fallen while trying to turn. As Jake watched, the body shuddered, but the movement seemed mechanical, not at all reminiscent of life.

Roberts stopped his forward progress. He looked around carefully, but saw nothing move. He rose into a crouch and started silently toward the figure. He had taken only a few steps, however, before he heard the warning rattle. Checking the ground behind him, he backed away, but continued to circle the prone figure.

The area in front of the body writhed with snakes—all sizes. Coiled up within the comma formed by the dead man sat a huge rattlesnake, fully five feet long and four inches across. Around it were others, worrying at the necrotic goo that had once been a human being.

Jake stared in fascination. He felt no shock, nor was he repelled. Instead, he watched with professional detachment. The flesh that had once cloaked the body was sloughing away as if melting. It dripped globules of tissue. The snakes fed on it. Underneath what remained of the clothing, he could see movement. Even as he watched, a small rattler slithered out of the corpse's mouth, its scales coated with blood and bits of tissue, its bright black eyes intent as it turned and struck at the remnants of the man's nose.

The large snake curled up at the corpse's midsection did not move, but focused its dark and penetrating stare at Roberts, almost daring him to interfere. Jake met that gaze and felt, for the first time since his accident years before, afraid. The level of intelligence apparent in those reptilian eyes chilled his heart.

Suddenly, three other snakes, which had been busy feeding, turned and looked at Roberts as if noticing him for the first time. Jake saw the three look toward the big rattler. They held each other's eyes for a long moment and then the larger snake opened its mouth and hissed, as if issuing a command. Without any further hesitation, the other three turned deliberately and began moving toward Jake.

The serpent slayer wasted no time. He turned and fled back the way he had come, toward the hillside.

As he ran, he looked over his shoulder. The snakes still followed, their progress

swift and steady in the sand. Roberts felt immediately better as he left them behind. No snake in the US could match his fleetness of foot.

He passed the point where he had become aware of himself earlier and found his equipment only a few yards further on. Looking at it, he had an idea.

He had snake handling gear in his bag. He took out the telescoping aluminum rod with the hook on the end and a rugged burlap sack. He also took his forty-five caliber service revolver. He turned around and started to backtrack his own trail. Twenty-five yards to the rear, the three snakes continued toward him.

He waited until they were close. They never slowed. Like programmed machines, they moved straight at him. With a laugh of glee, he shot two—both of them through the head. The third paused for a second, as if the loud reports and the sudden silence that followed had snapped it out of its mindless pursuit. That second was enough. He slipped the noose over its head and brought it to a halt. He lifted it wriggling on the end of the rod and put it in the sack, releasing the noose from the handle and trapping the rattler within.

Whether the laughter released his fear or represented an indulgence in sadistic joy, it verged on the edge of hysteria

Then Jake had another idea. Taking his bowie knife from his bag, he doubled back toward the site. He would send the specimen to Myers. He would also send a little surprise.

* * * *

The wooden box containing the specimen sent by Jake Roberts had been transferred to Jeremy's lab and now sat next to the new cage set up by Rachel. The creature inside it was apparently unhappy. The box made thumping sounds.

Dr. Myers didn't like the sound of it. Normally, a specimen transported from the Roberts Company was quiet and sedate, usually close to death. Everyone knew Jake wasn't gentle with snakes. In the past, Jeremy had to nurse them back to health and vigor before they could be of any real service. All the previously shipped vipers had arrived in a kind of stupor after the courier truck ride from Springerville.

This one was different.

As was his practice, Jake had put the catch in a custom wooden box of his own design and then wrapped it with brown butcher paper. The labeling on the outside read "Live Specimen—Poisonous—Handle with Care." When Jeremy removed the brown paper, however, there was a further label on the wood itself. It had been finger painted on the light blond pine in something that looked disturbingly like blood. In large letters, it said, "Mankiller."

The air holes were very fine, drilled through the three quarter inch thick wood in a haphazard pattern at irregular intervals, but obviously too small to allow the specimen to escape. They were also too small to permit looking in. Dr. Myers had tried to explain this to Jake several times, but it had been no use. Roberts did it his way.

Jeremy shook his head.

"Reminds me of Robert Shaw in Jaws," he muttered to himself. "What the hell was the character's name? Queeg? Queeg-queeg? No, that was Moby Dick. Queen? Quint?" He smiled in satisfaction. That was it. The crusty old sharkhunter in Jaws had been Quint. A tough and weird character that one. Well, Jake Roberts was even more eccentric and dangerous.

"Something about his eyes," he said in a low voice. "It's like he's looked at hell."

"Are you and the specimen having a chat?"

The question startled him for a second before he realized Rachel had come up behind.

"No," he replied. "If this is a snake, it seems to be pretty active considering what it's been through."

"Be careful, Jeremy," cautioned the girl. "Roberts may have hurt it."

"The box says it's a mankiller," he replied as he indicated the scrawled warning. "I'd say you've understated your case."

Rachel scowled.

"Why do we accept shipments from that awful man?" she asked. "He's sick. He shouldn't be loose."

The doctor looked up from his perusal of the case and smiled at her.

"Why, Rachel. Anyone overhearing a comment like that would think you didn't like our main supplier of specimens. He has delivered everything he said he would and more." He shook his head. "In the last twelve months, he has sent us at least a dozen of each of the major species in Northern Arizona. We haven't had to go out and catch our own snakes for over a year. This guy is a natural at it."

"But when they get here," she replied defensively, "we have to nurse them back from the brink of death. The mortality rate is inexcusably high."

Myers sat back and ran a weary hand through his sandy hair.

"They're snakes, Rachel. Poisonous snakes at that. We don't seem to be experiencing any shortage."

"If not," she retorted, "it's no thanks to Jake Roberts. If he had his way, they'd be extinct."

Jeremy paused. "Has he ever shown you his hand?" he asked.

"What?"

The doctor shrugged. "When he first came here, I interviewed him. I was curious, so I asked him about his hand." He slouched in his chair as he remembered. "I asked him what happened and he looked at me with a strange fixed stare that, quite frankly, made me nervous."

"And?" she urged.

"So he took off his glove," answered Jeremy. "His hand is prosthetic, of course, but under the glove is what remains of the original. Not much really. He still has a rudimentary thumb but you can see the bone. His palm is half gone. Only the little finger remains of the digits."

"Snakebite?" It wasn't really a question, more a request for confirmation.

"Yes," he said in a quiet voice. "He told me about it."

"About what?"

"About being bitten." He stared into the distance, remembering. "He was the most rational at that moment that I've ever seen him. Jake Roberts was persuasive and logical as he explained to me how the snake struck twice." He shuddered. "It must have been incredibly terrifying."

"And then he killed it?"

The doctor laughed. "Killed it? No, he trashed it. He acted it out for me. He pulled his hand from the barbed wire and grabbed it. He broke it. He stomped on it. He . . ." Jeremy looked intent, searching for the words. "He went insane and became a killing machine." He looked at Rachel again. "Jake Roberts became the personification of vengeance in that moment. He was retribution. He punished that poor rattlesnake. I'll bet there wasn't enough left when he was through to identify the species."

"So?" Rachel obviously thought this made her point.

"So then he turned and walked all the way to the hospital in town. Took him hours to do it. He checked himself in and then collapsed. They almost didn't save him."

"It might have been kinder if they hadn't," said Rachel.

"No, that's just it," insisted Myers. "Don't you see? He was hospitalized for weeks. He lost his hand. He had already lost so much." He shook his head. "Instead of giving up, he got out of the hospital and went out to learn about rattlers. He made himself an expert on their habits, their location preferences, their mating habits. He turned his pain into something else. He turned the ruin of his life into a mission."

"To kill snakes?" Rachel looked angry. "Are you lauding what he does?"

"No," answered Jeremy quietly, still seeing Roberts in his mind's eye. "But he chose to do something, Rachel. He acted on what he believed. Oh, I know he's not a well-balanced man, but he elected to do something. He doesn't just study these creatures." The doctor indicated the box before them. "He pursues them and conquers them. He changes the desert and protects those who might stumble into their world. I imagine that, if rodents could speak, they'd proclaim him their patron saint. He sends these specimens to us and contributes something tangible to science."

"I find him disgusting," said Rachel quietly.

"I find him quite remarkable," replied Jeremy. "I admire him for his involvement and his unwillingness to surrender."

"But he's a killer," protested the girl.

"Are we better?" asked the doctor. "Old Long Tom, there. Is he going to live free again in the wild? No. He'll end up as filler in dog food once we've milked him dry." He shrugged. "I really don't know that what we do makes us better than Jake."

Rachel was, for once, at a loss for words. She had never seen Jeremy like this. It frightened her. "What we do is important, Dr. Myers," she said at last. "The anti-venom saves lives. Without us, people would die."

Jeremy sighed. "You're right, of course, Rachel. We, too, contribute to the world around us. I just wish it was something as vital and alive as what Jake does."

The box on the table thumped again. The doctor laughed.

"I think our specimen is getting impatient, my dear. I'd better see about getting it into its new home.

The process of transferring the snake to the cage took five minutes. As Jeremy removed the screws from the lid, he proceeded with caution. When he was able to move the lid aside and shake the occupant into the cage, he used heavy canvas gloves.

When the snake finally fell free, it tried to strike. The doctor's quickness and the glove averted disaster.

It was then, however, that another object fell from the box into the cage. It took a moment for the sight to register in Jeremy's mind. Rachel let out a choked cry.

On the floor of the cage lay a human hand and forearm—a right hand, the flesh already sloughing away from the action of repeated strikes by the rattlesnake.

"Call DPS," ordered the doctor. "Get Dr. Sarno at ASU on the line."

His assistant was already moving to the phone.

* * * * *

It had been five days since Jake caught the specimen and sent it along with his special gift to the herpetologist. He laughed as he pictured Jeremy's face when the shipping crate was unpacked.

"Bet Doc pissed his pants," he cackled.

He had known, of course, that the law would come looking for him. What else could they do when he sent Myers the hand? With nearly a week to prepare, they could not have surprised him.

It was child's play to hide and watch the black cars drive up and disgorge their cargo of dark-suited men. His vantage point was in sight of the house but absolutely undetectable.

"Fuckin' FBI," he muttered under his breath in disgust.

They looked funny, all with their sunglasses and suits, entering his home like an assault team.

Jake chuckled as they kicked in the door. They would find some surprises awaiting them in there.

Gunfire and the yells of startled agents erupted and he grunted in satisfaction. They would be roiling about like a disturbed anthill out there. It was time to proceed with step two.

He raised the trap and climbed down the narrow wooden ladder, closing the lid over him and banishing the light. The surface above would look like what it used to be, an old well cover properly secured, surrounded by junk and likely unused for a hundred years.

He descended into the darkness and stepped lightly to the floor of the shelter. He

and Dad had built it in the late fifties when the world seemed even crazier than today and the cold war was raging.

He turned on the light switch and five battery powered ceiling lamps came on, illuminating even the farthest recesses of the chamber.

Jake liked it bright when he was under the surface. A small and enclosed space like this was too likely to harbor one of the serpents he spent his time hunting. As was his habit, he did a quick tour of the facility to be sure.

Everything ran off batteries. The beauty of it was that in addition to the solid bank of stored charge just behind the north wall, he had sixty more batteries hooked up and sitting in a pile amidst the chaos above. Who would look twice at a pile of old car batteries in a junk pile?

He had all the conveniences. In many ways, the shelter was nicer than his trailers. The big freezer was almost new, bought from a private party and trucked in at night. The fridge was stocked with beer and water was stacked in the first storage locker next to the batteries.

The furniture was handmade. The bed, table and chairs were well crafted, and cases of reference books lined one wall. Jake was proud of what he had accomplished.

A small door at the far end opened up on an underground stream that emptied itself into a wash two miles away. His sanitary facilities were built right over it, eliminating the need for piping in water or handling usual plumbing. The water was a little too alkaline for drinking, but it served for bathing and cleaning.

As had been revealed by the discovery of Casa Malpais, the entire area around Springerville was honeycombed with caverns and volcanic flumes. Tests had revealed that the network of faults, caves and tunnels extended for miles in all directions. The Mogollons had merely enlarged the spaces provided by nature.

Even Jake would have admitted that he was probably crazy. It took no education in psychology or psychiatry to see that his behavior was different than the norm. His actions sometimes went out of control, his ability to consciously direct himself being swept away by rages that took over and ran their course before reality returned. Jake didn't care.

He chuckled. "Sonsabitches entered my house without knocking," he muttered to himself. "Shouldn't have done that. It was rattler exercising time."

He sat in the padded easy chair and put his feet up. "Guess it would be wise to stay down here a few days," he said as laughter bubbled forth again. "Bet there's some pissed off law up there."

He busied himself with the usual solitary activities, reading, preparing a simple meal, napping. In that way, the day passed swiftly into evening and finally darkness came.

Moving back up the ladder after extinguishing the lights, he silently opened the trap and crawled out. The desert sky was like black velvet studded with silver sequins.

Even Jake was awed by the desert night sky. Springerville was not Phoenix. There were no blazing city lights to disturb the awesome splendor of stars, planets and moon. It was cloudless and warm, with a gentle breeze.

He crawled noiselessly along a pre-planned route toward the house. He was extremely careful because he expected it to be watched. What Jake wanted to know was how many watchers and where they were concealed.

As his night vision adjusted, the clear starry sky made the desert look bright. The shadows were a warm familiarity, friendly and welcoming.

Reaching a point just yards away from the trailer, he propped himself comfortably up against a concrete filled oil barrel and watched.

The vehicles were all gone now and the place looked deserted. He knew better than that.

When in possession of his faculties, Jake was a skilled tracker and observer. He knew how to look at a landscape. He didn't search the shadows for figures. Imagination would have provided dozens in moments. He only faced toward the building and waited for something to catch his attention.

Thirty minutes passed before he saw the glow of a cigarette off to the left of the house, in a stack of crates that somehow looked different to his practiced eye than they had before.

One man, then.

Jake waited, not moving, his body disciplined through years of such enforced immobility.

Ten minutes later, he heard a cough from the right. It came from the old tool shed.

Two men.

Still, he waited. Only after two hours, did he turn and moved back along the route, returning at last to the trap. It opened noiselessly and he entered, closing it behind.

His mind was wrestling with possibilities. Two men. That seemed about right. Chances were good that they believed he had fled the state.

How long would they keep two men on site? If he laid low, Jake would be assumed to have skipped and the observation of his house would become periodic.

How long should he stay below? He decided that three days ought to do it. By then, the men would be needed elsewhere. There was little to be gained by stationing two agents in an empty desert. Besides, they couldn't be sure what had killed the man whose hand had been found with the specimen. They might suspect that Jake had something to do with it, but it had obviously been removed after death. Bitten and chewed as it was, there was probably little they could determine of what happened without interviewing the man who sent it.

Whether others had died or been hurt in the assault on his home was another question. If they had rushed in and encountered all twelve loose rattlers in the trailer, there might have been some deaths. In that case, there might be more moti-

vation for the bureau and they might be more dedicated about their search for him.

"Better make it five days," he mumbled as he switched on the light. He glanced around. Nothing had been disturbed.

He sniffed. There was a trace of something in the air, a musty smell, but it was faint.

Jake felt tired. Taking a bottle of whiskey off the shelf, he went to the bed, undressed and climbed in. He drank a third of the booze, feeling it burn his throat as it went down, then put it carefully on the floor and turned out the lights.

Sleep came swiftly.

* * * * *

The time passed slowly for Mad Jake Roberts. He felt the walls of the shelter closing in, that crushing, suffocating feeling, and it grew in intensity as his third day under the surface dragged by. He climbed the ladder four times during the afternoon, but didn't dare to open the trap.

The watchers were still there. He had ventured forth the night before and verified it, taking the same route through the junk piles. He had prowled much of the night, a silent shadow blending into the darkness, even approaching within feet of the agents.

In the night, it seemed like a game. He knew the ground, they did not. He could have killed both men had he chosen to, but that would only have brought more and probably started a thorough search of the area. It was unlikely they would be able to locate his hidden entrance, but the risk was still too great. Confined as he was during the day, the nights brought freedom of sorts. Why chance it?

So he chaffed and fretted under the ground in his shelter as the hours passed, waiting for the sun to go and set him free.

Because he had been awake much of the night, he slept most of the morning, but from noon until sunset was difficult at best. He read and drank and ate and lay in his bed and planned what he would do once the surveillance was lifted and he could go back to his normal—if anything about Jake could be considered normal—life.

Then, with two hours yet to go before the dark would arrive, he had an idea. He could kill at least one of the agents and get away with it. He could strike in the darkness and never be suspected. He would use a snake.

All he had to do was catch a rattler and throw it into the agent's lap. With luck, the bite would be fatal, but even if it wasn't, the watcher would go to the other for help and both would probably leave in search of medical assistance. That would give him time to get back into his house, something he had wanted but didn't quite have courage enough to try.

He chuckled to himself.

"Perfect," he muttered. "I'll get a couple of the scaly little bastards so I have something to amuse myself with down here tomorrow during the day."

The next two hours were filled with things to do.

He gathered his telescoping rod and hook, two muslin bags for the specimens, packed a sandwich and changed into his hunting gear. He made a list of things he would like to have from the house in anticipation of the departure of the agents. He prepared a cage and dissection table for the specimen he planned to keep. All the while, he hummed little songs to himself, his spirits high now that he had a plan of action.

Just before dark, he opened the door in the rear of the shelter and crawled through the opening in the rock, intending to follow the course of the spring out into the wash. The way ran narrow and twisted, but no observer could spot him using.

When he had made it part way through, however, he couldn't get over the feeling that the passage was larger somehow. Using his flashlight, he illuminated the rock walls. They looked different. There was considerable dust and crumbled stone along the edges of the watercourse. The natural tunnel was wider.

"Must be my imagination," he said to himself. "I've got to lay off the booze a little, it's distorting my sense of perspective."

He shrugged and continued on his way, with the result that his anticipated difficult journey went swiftly and smoothly. The walls did seem farther apart, the rock roof higher.

"Memory loss," he whispered in the dark. "I just didn't remember it right."

Eventually, he came out of the hillside into the wash. It was dark at last and he moved quickly into the night in search of the specimens.

His job was made more difficult by virtue of the fact that he had hunted this area so thoroughly in the past that most of the reptiles were gone. In addition, hunting snakes by flashlight was not an optimum method.

He checked crevasses and fissures that had once supported a large population of rattlers but now were empty under the harsh beam of his lamp.

"Shit!" He cursed to himself as he was forced to range further and further from the spring outlet. It was still early but there was a great deal to do this night. He didn't want to have to postpone his plans. Anything might happen to change them. The agents might move their observation posts, the weather might turn sour.

The desert at night is a place of great beauty and mystery. The night sky out in the country is not occluded by light from the cities and the stars and planets show with a clarity that can be breathtaking.

Even though it was too early for moon rise, Jake's night vision revealed the desert in all its glory. He scuttled quietly up and down the hillside, searching for the specimens, looking like a strangely shaped black crab against the starlit ground.

He had been hunting for over two hours when he was finally rewarded by a warning rattle. When he turned the light on the crevasse, he saw a group of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes, two adults and three babies.

Perfect!

Using the hook, Jake lifted the male and bagged it quickly. The other adult, obviously the female, was coiled protectively around her young, rattling viciously. He pulled out his machete and cut off its head. Why waste time?

The remaining vipers were barely mature and he quickly scooped them up and into the second bag.

He took a few moments to hack up the body of the female. It was good to hear the satisfactory chunking sound as the machete sliced through the meat, severing bones and dicing the snake into pieces. His face wore a wide smile and his eyes got glassy as he pursued the task. God, he loved his work.

Finally, he retrieved his specimen bags and started back. It was not yet midnight so he could proceed as planned. He circled the ranch and returned to the trap by crawling through the junk tunnel.

When he went to open it, however, it was secured from inside.

"Fuck," he muttered. He had forgotten to release the catch. Since he exited through the spring tunnel, he hadn't remembered to open the door.

Well, there was nothing else he could do. He piled his equipment and the second bag next to the entrance, took the adult diamondback in it's sack and crawled toward the house. He would deal with the agent, then double back to the wash and return through the tunnel to the shelter. Then all he had to do was release the trap, reach out and drag his equipment and remaining specimens back inside.

The agent in the tool shed provided the best opportunity. There was plenty of cover and Jake made his way patiently to the back of the structure. Once there, he sat quietly and listened.

The scrape of movement alerted him and he watched as the man walked out into the open, just four yards away.

It was a muggy night, in the middle of monsoon season, and the air was moist. The agent was uncomfortable. He had shed his jacket, loosened his tie, and still looked miserable. His face was covered with perspiration.

The man moved back inside and then opened the window. Jake held his breath but the agent didn't see him couched just outside and below the sill.

Further scraping indicated the movement of furniture or something and then there was silence.

After a minute had passed, Jake rose up without a sound and peered within.

The agent sat in a chair, one leg propped up on a crate, and looked as if he were trying to sleep. Best of all, his back was to the window and he had tilted the chair against the wall. The man couldn't have been more cooperative. Jake could hardly believe his luck.

Fortunate or not, however, he wasted no time. He felt through the muslin until he had identified the business end of his diamondback. Trapping the head, he slowly removed the bag from the rest of the snake. When it was out, he changed his grip, firmly held the serpent just behind the head letting the bag fall away.

Jake wanted to call to the man, to taunt him and then throw the shake at him, but

he knew better. Even if bitten, chances were good that the agent would get help and be saved. It would not do for him to remember seeing Roberts. No, it had to be a blind throw and a hasty retreat without being observed.

So he held the snake out at arm's length and dropped it over the man's neck, then turned and moved quickly out of sight.

Even as he moved away from the shed, he heard the snake hiss and the agent scream. It was hard to laugh without sound.

* * * *

Jake moved quietly and quickly away from the trap and headed toward the ravine that led to the wash. He could hear commotion behind him as the agent in the shed called out for help.

Scuttling over the edge, the snake hunter lost his balance and half slid, half fell down the side. He landed with a muffled thud that knocked the wind out of him for several moments.

When he could rise again, he moved with a lurching gait up the wash until he came to the spring outlet.

The opening looked even larger than before, as if the rocks that formed it had been literally ripped away.

Winded, dizzy, hurting from his fall, the man entered the darkness and began making his way through the passage, gasping for air.

He had gone twenty paces or so when the stench hit him.

Then he heard a noise, a buzzing and rustling sound that came from all quarters at once—almost like singing.

He stopped and turned. In the half light of the tunnel behind him, he saw movement.

The buzzing was the sound of rattles, hundreds, maybe thousands of them. The starlit desert offered just enough illumination as he peered back toward the entrance for him to see that the walls and floor of the tunnel behind were undulating.

He let out a sobbing cry of fear and turned, plunging deeper into the rocks, frantically making his way toward the solid comfort of his shelter. If he could get there, he could secure it and then, fuck 'em, he'd be safe.

The buzzing and rattling and rustling continued behind, echoing all around in the narrow rock passage. He wanted to light his lamp, but some inner warning cautioned against this action. Part of him was afraid to attract attention, but a greater part was almost gibbering in fear of what light might reveal.

In his haste, he stepped and felt a serpentine form under his boot, wriggling and lashing at him. The almost knee high boots protected him from the strike and, though he stumbled momentarily, he regained his balance without falling and continued headlong up the passage.

The smell continued to grow and became even more oppressive, a foul, dank and nauseous odor that continually threatened to choke him as he gasped and ran.

The song of the snakes grew in volume, louder with each yard gained, and it rang like nothing Jake had ever heard before.

"Must be millions of 'em," he muttered as he ran.

The din increased until it was an ear-splitting whine and buzz, a cacophony of movement and rustling.

Finally, however, he made the final turn and found the entrance to his shelter. The door remained closed, but opened when he turned the knob, admitting him to the dark safety of his hideout. Crying with relief, he squeezed in and slammed the door behind him, throwing the safety bolts into place with a satisfactory thunk.

Inside, it was quiet. He moved over and reached for the light switch, turning it on and breathing a deep sigh as the darkness gave way to the sure and steady glow of his battery powered lamps.

He inspected the interior of the shelter as always. If the damned vipers had come in through the spring outlet, they might have found a way into the room, but, no. His sanctum retained integrity. He felt secure.

Jake went quickly to the ladder and climbed to the trap, turning off the lights again. He opened the hatch and reached out, finding the specimen bag and his equipment just where he had left them, dragging them into the opening. After securing the trap, he climbed back down and turned on the light again.

"I'm safe," he said to himself. "I'm safe now."

He moved again to the rear entrance and put his ear to the door. He could still hear the singing buzz that told him the vipers remained locked outside.

His next thought was of the cupboard where he kept the whiskey. Taking down a fresh bottle, he took off the cap and drank deeply, feeling the fiery blend burn his throat as it went down. Holding the bottle under his nose, he inhaled deeply, banishing the lingering stench of the passage outside.

He was sweaty and stinky from his panicked flight so he removed his shirt and grabbed a towel to dry off. Flinging the soiled garment across the room, he heard a rustling sound and turned quickly in his fear. It was the specimen bag with the three young rattlers.

"Ah," he said to himself. "I'm forgetting my guests."

He reached for the bag and grabbed it in a firm grip but did not notice that the closure at the neck had come loose. One of the young snakes, no more than a foot long, got its head out and bit his finger.

It was his good hand and he felt it right away.

With a cry of rage, he grabbed the snake's head in his prosthetic hand and crushed it to a pulp.

Tying off the bag again, he hurled it against the wall and it hit with a satisfactory whack, then fell right onto the dissection table. He noted that and grunted his approval even as he bent to examine the wound on his index finger.

Small, but he could see that venom already reddened the area. He pulled out his knife and made two cross cuts, one over each bite mark and expressed the sides of

the wound. It bled cleanly.

He poured whiskey from the bottle directly onto the area, gritting his teeth as the pain lanced through his hand.

Not too bad, he thought, reexamining the bites.

A wave of dizziness came over him.

"Small wonder," he said aloud. "Running from the FBI, pursued by half the rattle-snakes in the world, bitten by a little bitty bastard. No question. I'm allowed to be little shaky."

He took another deep swig of the whiskey and sat heavily on the edge of his bed. "I'll just lie back and rest a spell," he said. Then he saw that the lights were still on. "Ought to turn 'em off and save the batteries," he muttered, but he could not rise.

Jake Roberts closed his eyes and slept.

* * * *

He awakened to complete darkness. He lay there for a long moment trying to discover what had brought him out of his slumber. Then he heard the buzzing humming, singing sound of the serpents.

"The lights," he whispered. "How long have I been asleep?" He reached out toward the bedside table only to discover that his hand was secured somehow.

"What the fuck?"

As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he discovered a faint source of illumination behind his head. He tried to rise and turn but could not. He had been bound to the bed.

He struggled, but to no avail.

He lifted his head. His eyes searched the dark and the faint luminescence either got brighter or his eyes adjusted.

The room around him seemed a speckled, wriggling sea of snakes. They writhed and slithered over everything, a carpet of undulant horror that hissed and sang in a shrill buzz that hurt his ears.

Every variety imaginable, in uncountable hundreds, moved in the small shelter, rattling and singing as if they were some kind of reptile chorus.

Eyes nearly popping from their sockets as he realized he was hopelessly trapped, Jake screamed—he screamed until his voice was ragged and his sanity a fugitive perched on the edge of a knife blade.

At any second, he expected them to swarm up over the bedside and smother him beneath their disgusting, wriggling bodies. He saw their eyes reflected in the glow, gleaming in the dark like pinpoints of hatred. He heard their hissing, a steady whooshing sound like a rain squall. Above all, the very air trembled with their rattling.

The moments passed and he remained unharmed.

Just as he was starting to hope, when some little part of his mind had latched onto the possibility of escape, the glow behind him grew brighter yet and he saw a

nightmare moving into his range of vision.

It walked as a man and glowed a hazy red, black eyes glinting like obsidian. It was anthropomorphic and huge, having to half-crouch to fit into the room. It hissed and the voices of all the serpents answered, almost as if they were singing to their god.

Jake watched as the huge head moved closer, a snake's head but imbued with horrible intelligence. The man struggled frantically with his bonds, burning the flesh from his ankles and wrists as he lunged and twisted trying to get free.

The great reptile face above him split into a wide smile.

The creature leaned forward and spat onto Jake's shoulder. When it hit his flesh, it burned and frothed and ate the tissue like acid, but—like cauterizing heat—it sealed the wound as well.

The pain was excruciating, like red hot coals. It did not abate.

The monster reached behind it and brought forth it's scaled hand holding a shiny sliver of metal, Jake's dissection knife dwarfed and surrounded by long scaled fingers. It held the knife where the man could see it, seemed to reconsider, then shook its head. The blade dropped to the floor.

Using one razor sharp claw, it made an incision on Jake's shoulder.

The smile broadened as Jake's eyes widened.

He screamed. He tore his throat raw with shrill screaming. His ragged voice ranged and filled the night for endless hours as the giant creature worked. Jake's voice reached levels of agony unknown to human ears and ripped through the buzzing song of the snakes like explosions on a battlefield. He screamed until his larynx burst, and even after that the tortured, bubbling moaning sounds continued.

* * * * *

Agent Matt Pierce of the FBI wanted nothing more than to locate the bastard Roberts. He and the others had gone so far as to establish a betting pool to reward the lucky man that found him. They all hoped fervently that he would resist arrest.

Glen Thomas, the unfortunate agent in the shed, had died despite the heroic efforts of his fellows, but not before he reported clearly that the snake appeared to have been thrown at him. The conclusion was inescapable. Jake Roberts was still hiding close by . . . and now he was definitely a murderer.

The ranch was teeming with suits. Working in groups of three, they had started from the house and were combing every square inch of the grounds. The piles of junk, up until now considered harmless, were being systematically dismantled and nothing larger than a machine screw went uninventoried. Still, it took a while for them to find the battery hook-ups.

"Hey Matt," called agent Farah when he discovered the wiring, "come look at this!"

"What is it?" Pierce's weapon found its way hopefully into his hand as he ran over, joined by several other agents as well.

"He's got a whole fuckin' series of batteries hooked up here," said Farah. "Must be emergency power for the house."

"Is that all?" Matt frowned. He looked at the cables wound together like thick snakes and felt his temper rising again. There were too many snakes out here in the desert. The only good thing about Roberts was that he killed the bastards.

Still, he knelt down and tugged on the insulated pack and was surprised when it pulled part way out of the sand and led off in a totally unexpected direction.

"Wait a minute," he said. "This leads away from the house, not toward it."

He stood there for a long moment, then exchanged a look of pure pleasure with Farah.

Matt rose and spoke to one of the others. "Go back up and order us several sets of insulated gloves and get them dropped in here ASAP. The rest of you stand by. Don't touch those batteries or the cables. We wouldn't want to tip him off if this is what I think it is."

Waiting an hour and a half for the gloves was one of the hardest things Pierce had ever done. His fingers itched to find their way around Roberts' throat. He took out his weapon three times, checked the loads, even cleaned it once to make sure it wouldn't misfire at a crucial moment. Finally, the chopper arrived.

A team of five agents donned gloves and began walking the length of the cable. Five more used shovels and picks to clear the debris. All were careful not to use any excessive force and thus break it. They spoke little. All were intent on following the wire as it led off from the pile of batteries. They began to look eager as it took them toward a last major pile of junk at the edge of a ravine.

"Careful now," said Matt in a low voice to the others. "No loud talking. We don't want to alert him."

The cable disappeared into the ground next to a secured lid on what was an apparently abandoned well.

"Power for a pump?" Farah spoke sotto voce' and scratched his head.

"No," whispered Matt. "This has to be it."

He reached down carefully and tried to lift the well-cap. It didn't budge.

"Who has the pry bars?"

Three men stepped forward, each one carrying a large, long-handled metal bar — like a giant crowbar.

"Careful, now," cautioned Pierce. "He's probably armed and we're about to let him know we're at the door."

The rest of the team drew their weapons and clicked off the safeties.

At Matt's signal, the men with the large pry bars attacked the outer edge of the cap. It was resistant, but they were determined. Most of them had been friends of Thomas.

With a wrenching of metal and wood, the lid popped up and lifted on hinges.

"Bingo," said Farah.

That was when the stench reached them.

It was a terrible odor, foul, gut-wrenching, stomach emptying, like the smell of gangrenous flesh. More than one agent lost his lunch.

"Christ! What the hell is that?" asked Farah, covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief.

"He'd better not have gone and died down there," said Matt, gritting his teeth. Covering his own face with another hanky, he peered down into the dark. "There's a ladder," he said, his voice muffled. "I'm going down."

"I'll be right behind you, buddy," said Farah. "The rest of you cover us."

It took considerable courage for him to lead the way down into the dark, but Pierce wanted to be the one to find Roberts just about as much as he had ever wanted anything in his life.

He broke out his flash just after he got inside and went down the ladder as quickly as safety would allow. At the bottom, he found the light switch.

Just as his fingers touched it, he heard a hiss and a low keening sound, mixed with a curious thumping and sliding. He snatched his fingers back and held onto the ladder, suddenly unwilling to step down the final foot and a half to the floor.

"Did you hear that?" Matt whispered to Farah.

"Yes," answered the other, "and I don't like the sound of it."

The horrible odor was even stronger here, making both agent's eyes water and forcing them to break the silence by clearing their throats again and again.

Pierce played his flash around the area but the entrance at the foot of the ladder was a narrow box and most of the room beyond was concealed. The light explored every inch visible before Matt took the final step to the floor.

"Ready?" he asked as he crouched at the base of the ladder.

"Whenever you are, buddy," replied his companion.

He rose silently and hit the switch.

The room was flooded by light.

Matt moved around that final wall, gun at the ready, hammer back. Farah dropped to the floor behind him. On a silent three count, both men entered the chamber and moved to opposite sides of the door.

At first, they thought the room was empty, but soon discovered that they were mistaken—horribly, indescribably mistaken.

The room itself was chaos, furniture upended, cabinets overturned, doors ripped off their hinges. Supplies meant to last for years were scattered about and torn open so that everything was covered with a lumpy layer of debris.

That is why they didn't see it at first.

It had burrowed into a junk filled corner of the room and was madly trying to butt through the wall.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Farah.

"Holy Mother," said Matt, backing away and crossing himself. "What the fuck is that?"

It made a mewling sound as it found it could no longer hide. With much thump-

ing and sliding it managed to turn so the men could see it clearly. It hissed.

The squirming thing was vaguely reminiscent of a human body, but horribly altered.

It was naked and covered with bubbling sores that wept serum and glistened remarkably like scales. The hide—it did not look like skin—was blackened in places and seemed to form a speckled pattern, not unlike the markings of a rattlesnake.

It had no arms, but what remained of shoulders tapered down unnaturally to a long body, and the bones of two legs were barely visible under a single sheath of flesh, as if they had been melted together by some powerful acid and then shaped anew by an inhuman sculptor.

The head was bare and curiously flattened. There was nothing where ears should have been and a wide crushed bump that might once have been a nose now was composed of two sucking apertures that must have been nostrils. A wide lipless mouth leered toothlessly as it used what had apparently been its chin to start the crawling, wriggling progress that brought it toward them.

Worst were the eyes—blood red windows into hell that were nonetheless undeniably human and reflected the creature's total loss of reason. It hissed and mewed and crawled toward the two agents, a look of insane hope on its sickening face.

Both of the agents gasped and exchanged a glance in which was mixed equal parts of loathing and compassion.

They emptied their revolvers into it but it still did not die. They had to reload and fire several times before it was finally out of its misery.

Later, they found the arms and feet, neatly stacked on the dissection table. Fingerprints identified it as Roberts.

Farah and Pierce split the pool.

Dying for Dagon **Mark Francis**

Like lost souls skirting their own tombs in shock,
with slow, dazed oar strokes round the risen rock
they drift, too mute to magnify by words
the stricken forms, the stench, the filthy birds.
Hard men when faced by storm or weaponed foes,
they shiver at the sight of birthing ooze,
knead hand to mouth at every shrunken crust.
These loathe yet love the fragile link to dust
that, longing life eternal, all must lose.
Our destiny is weaned from mortal woes;
transmuting orphan dreams by sea-soaked lore,
the dry mind's panic become ancestor.
"Oh, Black-Gilled Father, take these earthen clods—
in Thy most honest Image, make them gods!"

The Thing That Collected Bloch

Randall D. Larson

A fictionalized tribute for serious Blochophiles

It all started on a golden afternoon. The old house was standing high on a hill behind the motel, amid thin wisps of fog that settled about it like a ghostly cowl. From a distance, the building looked quite normal—it was only when one trudged farther up the hill that the ruin became apparent.

The house was charred black; its frame stood boldly as it had for many years, but the structure was weakened by the flames that had recently consumed its strength. Windows were gone, as was the detail from the wooden walls. Flies buzzed about the ruins, and there seemed something devilish about that, as though Beelzebub itself once visited here. Beetles swarmed out the mouth of a shambled window.

Norman turned his eyes from the house, and looked back at the trail behind him. Alfred's large form was just now appearing through the dew-covered underbrush, and he stopped next to Norman and gazed at the old building. The early morning stillness clung about it protectively, and the mist lent a cool dampness to the air.

"We finally made it!" Alfred wheezed, his eyes opened wide as he looked up at the old house on the hill. "There it is," he sighed in wonderment. "The infamous House That Dripped Mud."

"So named," Norman added, as if reciting from an ancient and wonderful legend, "because of the sod roof which, in heavy rains, would occasionally trickle the water-soaked dirt onto the ground below."

"At least, that's what Clayton said . . ." Alfred added, noticeable skeptical.

"Don't be too quick to doubt Richard's work, Alfred," Norman said. "He'd had a strange fright when he visited this house, before it burned; one which eventually led to his madness, that big binge, and his awful death. The things he told me fit perfectly with the legends."

"You could be wrong," Alfred shrugged, and the two of them looked again toward the burned house.

"In any case," Norman said as he began walking up the final rise of the hill, "we'll find out up there."

Within, the house was a shambles. The staircase was caved in, and most of the second floor to which it led had also fallen through to the ground level. Stilled ashes rested upon the ground, flaking from charred and burnt walls, furniture, banisters. The harsh stench of the burnt wood drifted through the skeletal corridors, mingling with the scent of the cool mist.

Norman and Alfred made their way through the ruins, stepping through mud and ashes, kicking broken timbers out of the way. The morning sun shone through the roof where the second floor had caved in, making the black portions of walls stand out like the monolithic stones of some ancient druid temple; a hint of warmth

came with it as the sun slowly drove away the fog.

"This is all ruined," Alfred noticed, the sun shining off his thinning scalp, making him resemble a baldheaded mirage. "We won't find anything here . . ."

"Are you mad?" Norman sharply snapped. "What's up here isn't important! Remember what Richard said about the basement? That is where we'll find the manuscripts! "

"If it's true . . . Richard did have a good imagination, you know," Alfred said, remaining the portly skeptic.

"Richard gave us his word of honor," Norman frowned, shuffling through the ruins. "Get rid of your case of stubbornness, Alfred. It has to be true." A darker tone colored his voice as he stepped through shadows. "Humankind has known it for years, but chooses to ignore it as folly. But there are those who know. Don't you remember? The head abbot who served us that memorable feast in the Abbey, he knew the truth of the Old Ones, how it had been a veritable Hell on Earth in those days, strange eons ago, when the Old Ones walked the Earth. It was a frightful time, then—Earth was a Fear Planet until the Old Ones made their final performance and were banished to distant realms."

"I know that," Alfred nodded impatiently. "I am aware that they continue to exist, striving to regain their stronghold here. As a constant reader, I've come across enough evidence in the writings and supposed fantasy of Lovecraft, Howard, Derleth, Collier, Young and more straightforward occultists. What I cannot believe is that the creature you suggest, that Richard suggested—this thing that is even more formidable than Nyarlathotep itself—could exist in the guise of a human mortal. What an unspeakable betrothal that would be!"

"Everything else has proven to be true," Norman shrugged. "So far all that we have found backs this up as well." He spied a blackened door, partially hidden in the corner by fallen timber and piled ashes. "But enough of this talk. I know the manuscripts are here—Richard said they were. If you won't believe it, then the devil with you!"

Norman walked over to the door and cleared away the debris, coughing as a cloud of black soot swirled up into his face.

The door was locked, but it had been weakened enough by the flames so that Norman was able to give it the big kick, after which it crumbled inward. The sunlight streaming in through the torn roof revealed a staircase beyond the door; its steps leading deep into darkness. Norman reached into his coat pocket and produced a small flashlight—its beam revealed nothing but further blackness. He glanced at Alfred, who was starting to become interested again. "That's the proper spirit!" He grinned.

Norman crouched and stepped through the cracked wood of the door, and proceeded down the steps, the small flashlight barely lighting the way. He heard Alfred's footsteps following him, though there was a greater rustle of clothing-against-wall than when he had passed through. After about ten steps, the descending hall-

way made a sharp turn to the right, and Norman's flashlight discovered a small room that had been spared the damage of the fire.

There was a kerosene lamp extending from one wall, and upon lighting it, Norman could make out the room much better. It was in quite good order, only the upper timbers of the walls and ceiling were scorched, and some watermarks stained a far corner. The room appeared to be a storehouse of some vast collection of particularly esoteric materials: books crowded walls of shelves, a small typewriter sat on a well-organized desk next to a telephone book and a box of pins, and an old, extremely and bizarrely detailed rug lay on the floor.

Alfred arrived around the corner and was the first to spy the armchair in the corner; he promptly sat in it and gazed about the room with hungry eyes.

On all four sides were built a series of shelves, rising above a large floor panel, which were inset into the walls. On the same side as the armchair were two ornately carved cabinets, one on either end.

Norman stared at the bookshelves. Here were volumes upon volumes of rare and fantastic writings. Alfred opened one of the paneled cabinets and discovered stacks of aged magazines within.

"Norman!" he cried, carefully removing an old but plastic-sealed volume. "An early edition of *Teared Whales*, one of the whispered dream-cycles of the mad Chicagoan, Worthright Farns! These are almost unheard of!"

"Weird!" Norman said in amazement, and then fumed to one of the bookshelves. "And here. These are all Bloch books!"

Alfred looked at them hesitantly, with a worrisome expression. "Just as Clayton hinted . . ."

"No wonder Richard aged so rapidly," Norman mused as he examined the Bloch collection. "If the rest of what he suggested is true . . ."

"Norman, here!" Alfred exclaimed as he opened the second glass-paneled cabinet. "Good Lord, here are the tomes . . ."

Norman looked into the cabinet: a stack of dusty and brittle manuscripts lay within, covered with a scent of catnip that made his tongue itch. Norman muttered an excited gasp as he lifted out one of the loosely bound volumes and carefully thumbed through it.

"Dear Mother!" Norman exclaimed. "Alfred, this is a hand-copied version of Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis* . . ." He handled the collection of worm-eaten pages gingerly.

The two of them were astounded by the age and rarity of the legendary book, for this was one of the most infamous of the legend-haunted tomes that spoke of the fearsome Old Ones. Nor did their astonishment end there, for as they inspected the other books and manuscripts that lay within the cabinet they discovered more items of untold age and priceless rarity.

They found books such as Feery's *Notes on the Necronomicon*, Dagur's jewel-encrusted *Book of Tchem-Lam*, young Osborne's *Deserted House Notebook*, the persua-

sive *Mesmerisms of Gustav Marcks*, Subotsky's edition of *Garden Tortures* (rumored to be a forgery), worn editions of works by Edgar Gordon and Barnaby Codd, hand-scribbled notebooks filled with passages taken from other antiquated books. A number of roughly-stapled and poorly printed periodicals (with crude names like *F'hapa* and *Unusually Marvelous Tales for The Fantasy Fan*) were also found, some in many pieces—these appeared to be products of some sort of organization or collection of individuals and they, too, were devoted to the same dark subjects as the older manuscripts.

At last they had emptied out the cabinet of its wealth of ancient material. Norman looked at the small stacks and marveled.

"Hold on, what's this?" Alfred indicated the bottom shelf within the old cabinet. It was an unusually thick shelf and as Norman looked closer he found it to be hollow; a thin slat of wood along the outer edge was pried off and within the small space Alfred withdrew yet another manuscript, this one a stack of hand-written pages held together by two loosely-elastic rubber bands.

"My God, Norman! I've heard rumors of this for years but I never dreamed I'd ever—"

"*Ointments From the Land of Blue Sky*," Norman read, and his wide eyes darted toward Alfred. His voice wavered excitedly as he spoke. "I don't believe there are more than two copies of this in existence!"

"This is fantastic!" Alfred wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "Richard hinted at an incredible find of ancient books, but this is more than I'd ever thought possible. And especially this, one of the most brutal of all secret tomes! "

"What fearsome secrets did the owner of this ruined house know, and what black bargain did he commit?" Norman gazed about the room. "And what became of him?"

"Reading all of these books probably drove him mad," Alfred suggested with a smirk.

"We all go a little mad sometimes," Norman replied, shaking his head. "I believe this collection was more than the hobby of an eccentric kook, and more than the study of some passive occult researcher."

"You mean he wasn't just a man with a hobby?" Alfred inquired.

"No. More likely he may have been the man who murdered tomorrow, if what Richard said is true."

"He looked like Napoleon, didn't he?" Alfred mused. "That's what Richard said about the resident of this house. And he said something about his taste for Hawaiian food . . ."

"The Man Who Collected Poi, I think he said."

"Yes, very poignant, but it doesn't make any sense, other than suggesting that Richard was a candidate for the Funny farm." Alfred fumed to Norman "So what do you make of it?"

"Whoever—or *whatever*, as Richard ventured—amassed such a collection of spe-

cifically esoteric materials must have been searching for one certain answer. He must have been on the verge of some diabolical discovery involving the Old Ones just before his untimely death. I think he was put out of the way on purpose."

"Ah, The Dead Don't Defy, is that it?" Alfred wobbled.

"Yes, exactly." Norman stared at the bookshelves, concern bulging the veins in his forehead. "Richard had almost learned what that discovery was, but he could only hint of such things, as if he were afraid to reveal everything too plainly. He alluded to Nyarlathotep, a Dark Isle, and spoke of a strange sign of the Skull."

"What a most unusual hoarder," Alfred frowned. "I wonder what he meant."

"These books puzzle me; they're almost all by Bloch." Norman stood for a moment, contemplating, before he went on. "Why Bloch, of all writers? Little of his work dealt directly with Cthulhian concepts."

Quietly, while they spoke and contemplated, a slight breeze swirled a wisp of ashes down the stairway and into the room, as if aroused by their talking. Alfred sneezed abruptly, but Norman was not distracted from the pages of the *Ointments* that he held in his hands.

"Why, this book deals greatly with what Richard had spoken of! The same whispered legends, and one terrible being . . ." Norman's eyes widened as the eldritch and agelessly evil name came to his lips as he read: "Rbrr'blog . . ."

Alfred's gasp caused Norman's eyes to dart away from the book, and they grew wide in terror as they focused on the strange, undulating black cloud that was forming at the bottom of the stairs, sending thin wispy tendrils wavering toward Alfred who sat, dumbfounded in the armchair. He tried to squeeze as far into the dusty cushions as he could, but the murky, silent shape crept closer. The cloud was like something alive, something purposeful, and something familiar. . .

Norman's eyes quickly resumed to the book, recalling a section he had noticed earlier. He read aloud, seeking the section: ". . . the guardian and minion . . . preparer of the way . . . death is an elephant . . . doom to interferers . . . again the Sign of the Skull . . ."

"What are you reading?" Alfred whined, the cloud pulsing and quivering, a chilling coldness enveloping the room.

"This section from *Ointments*—it speaks of a demigod called Sc't-Merdigh who prepares the way for the Cunning One!" Norman's eyes turned to Alfred's and his too became wide with apprehension.

"Alfred. I believe what we're seeing is Sc't-Merdigh!"

"Well if that isn't the devil's ticket!" Alfred moaned and sank deeper into the armchair.

The black shape continued to quiver and pulse, roiling with increasing vibration as it slowly moved closer, filling the doorway completely and spilling its grey wisps along the floor. The room began to darken, as if the throbbing cloud were draining the light as well as the heat from the room. Alfred whimpered and took a paperback book from the shelf, throwing it into the darkening mass, causing it to throb even

more spastically.

"Don't bait him!" Norman said, shrugging off the cold chills. It will only enrage this king of terrors!" His eyes resumed to the *Ointments*. "There must be an incantation to return him to his night world!" In the dim light his eyes raced through the *Ointments* as he tried to learn more about the being that was drawing dangerously closer.

And then the cloud was no longer a cloud, but a quivering mass of charcoal blackness like the fluid in an old inkwell suddenly come to sentient life, bubbling and juggling itself like spilled mercury in the air in front of them. Two dark appendages slithered their way past the bookshelves toward the two men. A frigid tendril fingered Alfred's nose, causing him to cry out and flatten himself into the armchair.

"Ah, here it is!" Norman cried, triumphantly. Without any further explanation, he stood up, holding the book in both hands, and loudly read from the passage he had found.

"Sc't Merdigh! Ia! Ia! Bie'dha Awtttr Usiy-kho!"

Norman repeated the chant loudly as the black mass wriggled back and began to dissipate, clinging to the roof of the stairway and slowly withdrawing up the stairs. Wisps of cold darkness slithered away from the ceiling, and in a moment they were gone.

Then Norman dropped the book, and the two of them rapidly departed the House That Dripped Mud.

Daybroke with harsh sunlight, and the sweet chirping of his neighbor's imported Mandarin Canaries woke Norman from his Pleasant Dreams. He blinked the fog from his eyes and lay, still weary, in bed. He felt like a mannequin and it took him several moments to rouse his exhausted body and sit on the edge of the mattress. His thoughts were still cluttered by yesterday's occurrence the—discovery in the burnt house, the black shapeless presence that had threatened them, the long and tiresome drive back to Weyauwega's Lodge, and a fitful night of dream-haunted sleep. And Norman was still puzzled about what had lived in that dwelling and had amassed such a collection and why. He knew he had to find out, for the sake of his research, and for the sake of poor Richard.

Eventually, Norman took a quick shower, dressed, and after a pleasant telephone conversation with his mother in Fairvale, walked down the hallway to Alfred's room. The shades were still drawn and the door ignored his repeated knocks. Puzzled, for surely Alfred would not have gone out without leaving some communication, Norman tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. He hesitated, wondering if he should enter or keep on knocking until he was answered. It was, after all, a question of etiquette.

Shrugging, Norman walked in. He called out for his friend, but stopped calling when he looked at the bed and saw the frozen fear on Alfred's face and his mouth grinning like a ghoul and his eyes withered like a mummy's and his skin as lifeless

as the box mattress on which he lay.

Norman stood for a moment in the doorway, staring at Alfred's body and his wildly contorted, fear-struck face. Then he glanced about, curiously. He noticed that there were four things open in the room: the bedroom door, the adjoining bathroom window, a box of crackers on the end-table, and the book to which Alfred's lifeless hands still clung. A book Alfred had never owned before.

In a moment there were two other things open in the room—Norman's gasping mouth and the front door as he wheeled and dashed out of the room and down the hall.

For he had noticed the book was Bloch's *The Skull*.

Egghead's home was a small and quaint one, set back behind some trees next to the Hungry House coffee shop. Norman, now calm, slowly walked up the front steps. He was a bit hesitant about visiting the Professor, for the man was quite eccentric, though his knowledge of things Cthulhian was quite invaluable. So Norman cast from his thoughts such things as how the Professor rarely slept and was known to his friends as a Night-Walker, and how his lack of sleep once sent him into a hallucinatory fit, confinement in a straitjacket and a stay at Castle's Sanatorium. Such ideas were surely All In His Mind, but some folks did fear that the man may be a psychopath.

But the Professor never walked that path; instead the doctors had corrected his somnambulism and saw that he took a Sabbatical and everything had seemed to work out all right after that. There were still those who thought he was out of his skull for collecting such a wealth of material and knowledge on the dark subjects, but it was in fact this very knowledge which drew Norman to his door in the hopes that Egghead could help answer his questions of the past few days, or at least point him in the right direction.

A tall man opened the door to his knocks, and Norman recognized him instantly as the Professor. Egghead, playing it square, gave a toothy smile when he recognized his visitor. Music could be heard in the background, and Norman recognized it as the Hungarian Rhapsody, yet it sounded darkly dismal, as though it was coming from Satan's Phonograph itself. Egghead wore a strangely colored suit, and Norman wondered what kind of a weird tailor might have made such a garment.

"Good afternoon, Professor," Norman said as the man showed him in.

"You needn't be so formal, Norman. Just call me . . . Jack," his host replied with a friendly gleam in his eye.

Jack led Norman down a hallway to the living room. Along the way Norman stumbled against a pair of roller skates and nearly fell. "Talent . . ." he muttered apologetically.

"Damn that child!" Jack spat, as he picked up the skates and put them on a shelf. "My daughter can never put things away," he explained as they proceeded down the hall. "Always leaves her toys out. Practically murder myself on them every day.

Sometimes I'm sorry I even bought those toys for Juliette."

Norman chuckled to himself. The Professor always was a stickler for organization—after all, he owned many shares in the local organ bank. "She really needs her mother Betsy for that, though, but she passed on years ago," the professor continued. "I always thought Betsy would live forever. What a model wife she was . . ." Egghead's ramblings continued as they progressed down the long hallway. "I do have a tutor for her, named Lucy, but she never stays around."

When they reached the living room and sat down on the couch, Norman decided to cut the small talk. "Jack, I need to know whatever I can about Sc't-Merdigh."

"Mother of Serpents!" the Professor exclaimed, using an unfamiliar oath. "Where did you hear that name?"

Norman, pacing the floor, told the Professor of the letter which had been given to him after Richard's quiet funeral, the letter from Richard which hinted at his findings in the burnt house and which led Norman to contact Alfred and inspect the ruins personally. He told the professor of what they found there, and of Alfred's death and the Bloch book he'd held in his hands.

"First Clayton, then Alfred." Norman bemoaned. "What a double tragedy this has become."

"Or a double-whammy," Egghead remarked.

"What?"

"There is a sinister purpose at work here. I, too, have heard of Richard's work in the field. It was a shame that he had to ride that hell-bound train so suddenly." The Professor nodded sympathetically. "But that sounds like an amazing find, complete with *Ointments* and *Tearred Whales*. The former is actually a forerunner of the cycle of insane myth, *Revelations L 'Feep*, found in the time-wounded *Tanned Plastic Indentures*. All of these tomes are virtual histories of one of the most fearsome of the Old Ones: the cunning Rbrr'blog, He Who Keeps Heart of Small Boy in Jar!"

Norman's heart thudded against his chest and the sound of the name filled him with an icy dread, just as it had when he first read it the previous day in the burnt house.

"Sc't-Merdigh is merely his minion, paving the way for his ghoulish appearances!" The Professor stood up as he continued, Norman listening intently. "Rbrr'blog is more deadly to humankind than the grinning ghouls who open the way to star shamblers, than the undersea throat-cutting Cove Creatures who dwell among complex edifices, the shambling crypt-creepers of brooding Bubastis or the soul-sucking Barsac beasts who herald the druidic doom, more awesome than the hordes of Satan's Servants, more mysteriously terrible than the meager dragons that nurse nightmares or the ghostly legions of dog-faced zander!" "

An apprehension hounded at Norman, a dogged feeling he couldn't define or ignore. "But what does it have to do with the Bloch books?" he asked.

"I'm not really sure." The Professor scratched his cheek. "I'm a Robert E. Howard reader myself; something about his tales of iron-thawed sword-thrusts in the land of

Dyme-Novell-Bolonia especially appeal to me. You may think I'm a Cluck for saying so, however.

"But as far as the Bloch material goes, I think it may have something to do with the fact that, of all writers who have occasionally dabbled in Cthulhian material, Bloch's almost exclusively dwelt with Nyarlathotep."

"I don't follow you . . ." Norman interjected quizzically.

"Nyarlathotep, you know, is the powerful and dreaded messenger of the Old Ones, and he has many avatars, many incarnations. Each one is different in its role, each terrible to behold, and all horrible sinister in their purpose. Rbrr'blog is one of these avatars, as is Sc't-Merdigh."

"What black barter does he seek to perform in this guise?"

"His ability to incarnate himself in a variety of guises makes him among the most powerful of the Old One's minions. Something about the Skull—the sign of the Skull, whatever that may be, is thought to attract him." The Professor stood up and walked to a nearby cabinet, from which he withdrew a bottle of scotch and hastily poured two glasses. Handing one to Norman, he continued.

"Certainly you recall the black winged manifestation which was evoked from the Shining Trapezohedron in New England? That was Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, the Howler in the Night, the Haunter of the Dark, Father of the Million Favored Ones, the Dweller in Darkness, Bringer of Strange Joy to Yuggoth, the Black Messenger of Karneter, the Star Timer, The Past Stalker, the World Master, the Shadow from the Peep-hole! He was known as the Dark Demon of medieval Europe's witch covens, the Faceless God of Egyptian myth, whose ferocity surpassed even the fame of the Black Pharaoh, the Head Man of Nazi occultism, the modern-day Closer of the Way Who Devours Shrunken Heads as spoken of in Freudian myth . . ."

"Quite a freak show, but what's in a name?" Norman said, wiping the spittle off his face (the Professor had gotten a little excited in his monologue).

"Each of these names refers to a unique avatar of the great Nyarlathotep. I believe that Rbrr'blog may be his greatest incarnation, for as subtle as it may be, his power is greater because of that very subtlety. Like the old cliché, the devil is all the more powerful when no one believes in him." The Professor took a gulp of scotch, and then sat back in the armchair.

"What an unpardonable crime." Norman rubbed his chin. "If this Rbrr'blog is so cunning, why hasn't he been more written of in occult legend?"

"Apparently his purpose is more suited to being unknown. Most people will scoff at the existence of Nyarlathotep, Cthulhu, Azathoth and the others, saying they are merely the inventions of writers like Lovecraft and the rest. But the gods are not mocked, they won't bear it. There are those who have *seen*, who *know* in their hearts that these Old Ones exist and that their purpose is terrible." The Professor seemed to shudder for a moment. He lit up a filter tip, and then continued. "But the being known as Rbrr'blog is different. I don't know his purpose in the scheme of the Old

Ones, but from what I've discovered in perusing certain ancient manuscripts—and there are not many in which he is mentioned—is that he does not want his presence made known. Those who threaten him in that way must be destroyed. I believe that is what happened to the owner of the burnt house." He set the scotch glass down on a cabinet and stood up, gazing at Norman in a peculiar way. "And I fear I, too, am in danger for what I know about him." The Professor seemed to shudder involuntarily. "And, now that I've told you . . ."

"What!" Norman sat bolt upright.

The Professor chuckled. "Looks like we both may be at the end of our rope . . ." Norman looked henpecked and felt he might catch hell at any moment. He gulped and soon thereafter bid the Professor a warm farewell and then took his leave.

Two nights later Norman returned to the House That Dripped Mud, shaken and upset. He'd learned earlier that night of the death of Professor Egghead, crushed beneath a great mass that left his entire home shattered like an eggshell, as if something had broken through from below and burst out the House of the Hatched, the mystified newspapers were quipping. No one really knew.

Except Norman. The Professor had suspected he was in danger, and he was correct. "His purpose is served best by his being unknown," he had said. "Those who threaten his exposure must be destroyed." Rbrr'blog, avatar of Nyarlathotep, Skulker of Skull-Signs, he had paid Egghead a visit. And now that Norman had shared this learning maze of unholy information, he was likely to meet Rbrr'blog's fangs of vengeance as well and likewise pay the fiddler's fee.

The answer had to be at the burnt house. He felt there must be something there that would tie it all together and equip him with knowledge to not only escape the fearsome Old One but to warn others as well. He arrived shortly after nightfall. Weary from a long drive but anxious to again peruse the library, he made his way up the hill past the old run-down motel, through the charred ruins and down the stairway into the small room. It remained just as he and Alfred had left it, and Norman was relieved to find the *Ointments* on the floor where he had dropped it. He'd brought a battery-operated light with him and he switched it on in order to inspect the collection in further detail. He left the ancient manuscripts in a stack before the cabinet, intending to get to them later, and stepped to the bookshelves. His eyes scanned the rows of books, reading the titles of the Bloch editions. He pulled a number of books off the shelves and sat in the armchair, looking through them.

He scarfed through novels like *Strange Ions* and *American Gossip*, story collections such as *Blood Runs Moldy*, smaller pamphlets like *Vocabulary for S.F. Critics*, a terrific scientific journal for the average writer which seemed to make a lot of sense. Norman thumbed through hardback collections, skimmed over stories like "The Girl Who Turned Into a Drugstore" and scholarly articles such as "Chiselers and Hacks—A Study Of Editors and Writers In Prehistory."

Hours passed but Norman wasn't aware of time, he was only aware of what he

was reading. He was no longer an aloof observer, moving his eyes across the printed page; rather he was drawn into each story, captivated. He shared the horrors encountered by the protagonists; he gasped in real surprise at the grasping arm, the groping tentacle, the slashing knife; he groaned in enjoyable loathing at frequent puns and beat the armrest with his fist. Norman read, with bated breath, stories of killers and lunatic criminals and their justified ends; tales of weird, otherworldly terrors; punful stories of noodnick inventors; far-off adventures in space; down-home occurrences with the neighbor next-door.

And it wasn't long before everything became crystal clear. He didn't know how he came upon it, but it suddenly hit him; and he knew he had found the answer.

These stories, though only a very few concerned the Cthulhian themes themselves, did have very definite and very deadly connections with the Old Ones. Norman recalled the Professor's statements of the many avatars of Nyarlathotep, and the implication shocked him. For no matter how different the Bloch stories were, no matter how many different styles and genres they covered, and despite the pen-name, the writings could be nothing else but the writings of Rbrr'blog itself! Through the image and writings of Robert Bloch, the fearsome Old One was . . . almost human!

Norman swallowed hard and set the books aside. He had found half the answer—what he needed now was the reason, the sinister purpose for this grim charade.

He found that in the *Ointments*.

Norman read how Rbrr'blog dwells in the hidden world of Tl'fiske, driven there strange eons ago by the Mysterious Other Worm, and there he laughs like a ghoul as he skillfully construes his writings. Norman read how he waits for the day when he, and all the other Old Ones, their minions and servants, shall return from Tl'fiske, from sunken R'lyeh, from far-off Yuggoth, from the Cavern Worlds of N'kai and Yoth and K'n-yan, from the sunset crests of the unspoken Gloating Place, from the secret observatories of the sea-kissed Screaming People of Water's Edge, from all the dwelling places at the rim of space and time, and shall again take hold over the Earth. And Norman read how Rbrr'blog is aiding in that goal, and how the owner of the burnt house was only one of many who figured in his plan.

For the owner of the burnt house did not collect Bloch. It was Bloch, or Rbrr'blog, who collected *him*!

Norman felt a pang of sharp horror jolt through him, from his thinking cap all the way down to his creeping underwear, as he thought of the many other Bloch fans and collectors he'd met over the years. These stories they so innocently read and collected were veritable sneak previews of the true horror of Rbrr'blog!

The revelation gave Norman a change of heart over the whole matter, and he gazed wearily about the room, looking at the books written by Bloch; those sorcerous writings which thrill and amaze—and then, unbeknownst to the reader, ensnare and entrap until there is no escape. There was an awesome power in those words, and Norman could almost see it glowing now that he knew the truth. An awesome

power which feeds on all those who have read the words. Even now Norman could feel the involuntary urge to reach for a Bloch novel and read it unceasingly, blabbering in delight, captivated by its brilliant design and hidden spell, unable to put it down. His stomach knotted with worry and amok terror as he thought of all the other unsuspecting Bloch readers becoming entangled in the cunning spider web of Rbrr'blog's sinister will to kill. Norman realized it wouldn't be long before the legion of possessed Bloch fans, overcome by More Nightmares, would rise up with Rbrr'blog becoming the Opener Of The Way for the return of the Living Demons.

Suddenly Norman felt a desire to escape, a desire to warn others and perhaps save some of them, if not this whole Crowded Earth. He could at least give it the old college try—there must be a Cure! He pushed aside the ancient manuscripts and ran up the stairs, out of the ruined house and down the hill away from the motel. He ran down the street until, exhaustedly, he came to a stop, clutching at a lamppost.

As he panted, a pang of hopelessness gripped his heart like a living bracelet. How could he ever hope to escape the wrath of an Old One, consignor of the Deadliest Art, He Who Clutches At End Of Rope, He Who Keeps Heart Of Small Boy In Jar? Norman wiped the sweat from his forehead with his backhand, and his eyes darted about the street. A feeling inside of him urged him to remember something, but he wasn't sure what it was. A quotation from *Ointments*? Something the Professor had said? What was it? Norman clung to the lamp post as he exhaled loudly, looking about without actually seeing, his mind whirling in thought and terror, as the light gradually began to *darken*.

Something about the Sign of the Skull . . .

Then it dawned on him—the book Alfred had been reading, the book that probably even now lay grasped in his lifeless hands. Bloch's *The Skull*!

What was it that attracted Rbrr'blog?

Norman threw himself away from the lamppost and darted madly down the street. He stumbled off the curb and fell headlong into the deserted street. Lurching to his feet, he ran on. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks; eyes opened wide, his mouth wet and panting. He glared at the theatre marquee that glowed across the street, the grinning skeleton advertised on it burning its way into Norman's mind.

"The Skull of the Marquee" he said. "The Sign of the Skull!"

Norman fell to the ground and the darkness became darker and he tried to scream as the black wisps fingered out, slithering toward him.

A Pair of Old Shears
Kenneth W. Faig, Jr.

December 3, 1926
Fall River, Mass.

I've just returned from a most interesting interview with James Newell Arnold, dean of Rhode Island genealogists since the death of John Osborne Austin in 1918.

The old man is as sharp as ever but it is painfully evident that his health has begun to fail. He remains adamant in his break with the Historical Society and the latest codicil to his will specifies that his genealogical records go to the Providence Public Library, which I understand has agreed to maintain them in their own room at the Knight Memorial in Elmwood. It is indeed an irreplaceable collection—only partially published in the *Vital Record* in 1891-1912—and it is good, at least, to know that it will not be dispersed.

I'll be honest enough to say that HPL has irritated me considerably with his paternal genealogical fantasies based on the published lines of virtually every surname his own records link up to. On the subject of his maternal ancestry he's always been more circumspect, at least in conversation with me, perhaps because he's aware I have more than a beginner's knowledge in this field. For many years, HP maintained, based on information from Dr. Clark, that his Phillipses came to western RI from England in the late seventeenth century. But in recent years he's apparently decided that he descends from Michael Phillips of Newport, through his son James, who died in Smithfield. That, combined with a somewhat confused assertion that James and his son lie buried far to the south of the section of western RI where the Phillipses flourished in the eighteenth century (Scituate, later Foster), determined me to broach the subject of HP's Phillipses with Mr. Arnold. I hardly expected a narrative as extensive as that which I received from Mr. Arnold. I shall set it down here from memory before the memory fades.

"Oh, yes, I recall meeting Lovecraft," Arnold began. "In those days, John Austin, Frank Clark, Sid Rider, and I would meet infrequently to trade genealogical notes. I had completed the *Vital Record*—or as far as it was practical to complete it in print—but we, the wizened sages of the Rhode Island genealogical scene—would meet every other month or so, at our residences, to trade stories. Many a one we could tell of town records rescued from the latrine or family burial grounds from the farmer's plow. But that's neither here nor there. I remember well meeting young Lovecraft at one of our meetings held at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Clark on Barnes Street. It must have been 1912 or 1913. Dr. Clark was failing badly. All of us could see it, though none of us could tell him so. We could see that his wife, Lillie Phillips, whom he married late in life, was worried about him. By the way, Boynton, is Lillie still living?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "she lives in a rooming house on Barnes Street with her nephew Lovecraft on the floor below. She has arthritis rather bad and doesn't get out much anymore. Her nephew cares for her quite tenderly."

"I should think he ought," replied Arnold. "Many a time Frank and Lillie welcomed that young fellow into their home and introduced him to their friends. I saw Howard at a lecture at Brown University this past year and was pleasantly surprised that he nodded in greeting. He was a highly nervous young man when I first met him in 1912 or 1913 at Dr. Clark's home. But he did sit attentively through our meeting and even offered some intelligent observations. Dr. Clark had some

thought of obtaining a library post for his nephew. But it came out that he hadn't even a high school diploma and that was the end of the matter. I was surprised to see him at the Brown University lecture, for I had heard that he had married and removed to New York City."

"He has only returned this spring," I replied. "The marriage failed and Lillie and Annie invited Howard back to Providence. He has, I ought to note, for several years supported himself independently on his writing."

"Well and good," said Arnold, "for I should hate to think of him as a burden on the small fortunes which Whipple Phillips was able to leave his daughters. Lovecraft's mother, I know, is deceased, but Lillie and Annie need no burdens."

"No," I replied, "Annie has been separated from her husband for over a decade and both of their children died in childhood. I suspect Lillie's means must be very narrow."

"Regrettably," replied Arnold, "Frank Clark left her no great estate. He was always too generous with his work, too willing to accept a promise to pay in lieu of actual payment. His knowledge of Rhode Island history and Rhode Island families was profound and it is without reason that I acknowledged his help in the very first of volume of *Vital Records*. In the 80's and 90's we often shared expeditions in search of forgotten family records and burial grounds. Let me be honest—without Frank's horse and buggy, there are many places I should never have been able to visit, particularly considering my game leg. No, Frank left Lillie no great competence, but he gave her all his love, which was the greatest thing that he could do."

"I think she has found a happy setting in the Barnes Street rooming house, with her nephew Howard nearby to look after her. I understand she spends most evenings reading in Howard's rooms."

"Frank would be proud of him," Arnold replied. "In my Clark file I have a cutting of the memorial poem dedicated to his uncle which Lovecraft published in the *News* just after Frank's death. A very fine work of its kind. But I am glad to learn Lillie and Howard prosper, after their way."

"Which brings me to the point of my inquiry," I said. "Howard has the most grandiose notions about his paternal ancestry, based on some notes supposedly left by a great-aunt and any surname he had hooked them up to in the published genealogies at the Historical Society. He always seemed more realistic about his maternal, Rhode Island forbears. For years he let it out, on the authority of Dr. Clark, that his Phillipses came to western Rhode Island, Scituate, later Foster, from Lincolnshire in the second half of the seventeenth century. But of late he's been claiming descent from Michael and Barbara Phillips of Newport, through their son James. I wondered if you had any thoughts on the matter."

"Now that you mention it," replied Arnold, "I believe we must have touched on that matter at the meeting of our little society which Howard attended at Dr. Clark's house on Barnes Street in 1912 or 1913. I seem to remember his interjecting Dr. Clark's opinion and asking the assembled elders what they thought of it. An inter-

esting topic, for I knew more than a little about the background of Dr. Clark's opinion. And I was in possession of a distinguished dissenting opinion as well. I must have laid it out, at least in summary fashion, at our meeting. I remember Austin's commenting that the Phillipses were one of the most difficult families with branches of the Michael and Barbara Phillips descent scattered all over Rhode Island. And of course branches from entirely different trees invading from across the borders. Sid Rider usually spoke not unless he had a definitive utterance and he had none on this subject. By that time he'd gotten more interested in the Indians than in the colonists. But perhaps his long political conflicts—over clean water and the like—had wearied him. He was the elder of our group and we lost him next after Dr. Clark, in 1916. Old Austin's going in 1918 has left me alone with my records.

"But to return to Lovecraft's Phillipses. Well, of course, there is no difficulty up through Asa or Aseph, his great-grandfather. He went to the Foster town clerk's office and recorded all the vital statistics concerning his family in 1811, motivated, perhaps, by the marriage of his daughter Waite to Richard Fry. Asa and his wife Esther Whipple—a fine old line—had a family of four boys and four girls, all of whom lived to adulthood, an unusual feat for that time. He farmed on a small scale on Howard Hill in Foster. The old homestead, I understand, burned a few years ago, but the pear tree planted by Asa still bears and stands along the road. You can't miss it. It makes a lovely walk on a summer's day, with well-maintained family cemeteries all along the way. Asa and Esther lie in the Phillips-Cole plot just to the South off Briggs Road. Several sons and their wives—I believe Benoni and Captain Jeremiah—lie there as well. Asa's and Esther's daughter Esther married a Cole—Israel I believe—and brought in that connection.

"Asa was a classic Rhode Island hill farmer and perhaps just barely prosperous enough to leave a will. His widow Esther survived him for many a year. Their sons and daughters led diverse lives—I am familiar with only some of them—one of them, James, had early marital problems, served under Simon Bolivar in South America, and amassed a fortune in land and cattle in Illinois late in life. Captain Jeremiah, the youngest son, inherited Asa's farm upon his death and purchased, a few years later, the Blanchard grist mill on the Moosup River. He lost his wife Roby Rathbun in the summer of 1848 and was himself killed in the race of his mill that same fall. The farm and mill had to be sold to pay his debts and that was the end of that branch of the Phillipses as yeoman farmers in Rhode Island. Well, one son James did farm on a small scale on the Johnson Road through the end of the century, but the other son Whipple was interested in real estate, lumber, and other businesses. I hear tell he made and lost fortunes several times over, the last one in irrigation interests in the west. That left his daughters with a very modest inheritance. Whipple's son Edwin never really had a head for business except on a very small scale.

"Now, these are the Phillipses you mean? An old man can go astray from time to time. Well there is no doubt that Asa was of James, but of whom came this James, there's the rub. I don't believe he is either James Sr. or James Jr. of the Middletown

vital records although Lovecraft may have confused him with the latter."

"He's taken lately to giving his descent as Howard of Whipple, of Jeremiah, of Asa, of James, of James, of Michael. He and his younger aunt Annie paid a visit to the Moosup Valley region earlier this fall and hope to visit Howard Hill before too long."

"I am sure they'd be very welcome," Arnold replied. "They must be sure to call at the home of the new proprietor of the Asa Phillips homestead. He's erected a fine new home in the colonial mold and is quite cordial. If Howard and Annie call during the bearing season, I am sure they will go away with some pears from Asa's tree. And the Phillips-Cole lot is an easy, scenic walk south."

"I'll pass the information along to Howard," I replied. "But what do you think of his lineage as he gives it?"

"I think he's right back through to James but dead wrong thereafter," replied Arnold. "I can give you quite a bit of background on Dr. Clark's position. But let me first tell you the opposing side. Do you know Henry Byron Phillips of San Francisco? Born right here in the South Country, but out west for many years now. The Michael and Barbara Phillips family tree is his own and he's interested in all its branches. He wrote me about Asa many years ago, it's in my vertical correspondence file. I wrote to tell him that Pardon T. Howard was and is the authority on the Foster families of Asa's era. A substantial man of business as well as a school-teacher. His son Isaac Howard published the standard Howard genealogy, which you've probably seen. Well, Pardon would have it that Asa's father James of Gloucester's "Great Jeremiah" (d. 1779), himself of Joseph (d. 1719) of Michael (d. ca. 1686). James, who apparently died between 1800 and 1810, married, according to Pardon, Anne Phillips of John of Richard of the selfsame Michael, so you can see how these lines get tangled. "Great Jeremiah" himself married a first cousin. That "Great Jeremiah" had a son James the Gloucester records leave no doubt but it's the identification of that son with Asa's father James that is the point in question. He needs a will or other document linking "Great Jeremiah" to his reputed grandson "Asa" (or for that matter, Asa's sisters Alice, Nancy, and Frelove, who married respectively, a Smith, a Rathbun, and a Battey, if my memory does not fail me).

"As I recall our conversation in 1912 or 1913 Mr. Austin opined that there was much to be said for the lineage as given by Howard, although Asa's father James remained the vital unproven link. You wouldn't expect it, but the late eighteenth century, at least up until the federal census of 1790 but even after, is a very difficult time for family history. It was still the exception, rather than the rule, to register births, deaths, and marriages in the town hall. Some even considered it irreligious. And of course everyone was suspicious of taxation. One can still find one's way around the families of seventeenth and even early eighteenth century Rhode Island and make correct inferences almost without fail. But the population was grown more numerous in the wake of the Revolution. The late eighteenth century and even the early nineteenth century are very difficult.

"But let me tell my story. I don't recall how much of it I told, in how much detail, that evening in 1912-1913 in the Clark home, but I doubt not that Dr. Clark imparted it several times over to Lovecraft. It all took place many years ago. Because of my disability, you know, I could not fight in the War of the Rebellion. So I formed the habit of tracing our old Rhode Island family lines while so many of our finest men were away at the front. I shouldn't admit it, but many were kind to me because of my disability. I was admitted to view records and to visit private family burial grounds that I probably wouldn't otherwise have seen. Between gentlemen I can admit that I even had a few offers from lonely wives and widows to relieve their loneliness, but I never accepted. Many's the time I slept in the open after a long trudge in search of forgotten records and burials and breakfasted on the humble loaf in my knapsack. Sid Rider would appreciate the fact that I could drink clear water from the rural brooks back then. Many have since been fouled. An issue he cared deeply about. A lot of city children nowadays have no idea what it is to drink cool water from a sylvan brook. Or even what a rural landscape is like in summer. I don't know how they can read poetry. Perhaps they don't.

"I began my habits as a very young man with the indulgence of my parents. By 1880 I had formed a fulltime enterprise to record the vital record of my beloved state, but in the 1860's and 1870's it was still a hobby although one over which I spent many laborious hours. My tramps in search of forgotten burials with trowel and shears and sketchpad and compass became famous all over Rhode Island and I was usually welcome wherever I went. I had birdshot in my posterior only once in a long career long about 1877—I was always careful to ask permission to enter private property and thought I had the necessary permission which the tenant believed I had not. Records were another matter—a minority of town clerks considered me an unwelcome pest—but they were mainly the minority who mistreated and neglected their records.

"My daybook would give the exact date, but I can place it to 1872 or thereabouts without any problem. It was midsummer and I had started out my day in Exeter if I recall correctly—this is, the tiny hamlet which is the town center. Heavily wooded, wild country then—still is largely so. I wanted to explore the back roads bearing westward toward the New London Turnpike which had been cut in the second decade of the century. The old Ten Rod Road was the principal route, but I didn't spend much of my time on it. I can recall I lunched along the Pardon Joslin Road, a beautiful idyllic scene—I hope not changed much from when I saw it last. Thereafter I plunged south of the Ten Rod Road into unmarked rural lanes with only the help of my survey map and compass. I got myself rather lost, but I don't believe I was more than a mile from the Turnpike by late afternoon. I later discovered that I ended on an unmarked lane which debouched into what is today called Gardner Road.

"I noted many burials along the way and recorded them all on my survey map without undertaking the effort to take any detailed censuses of the occupants. I re-

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gretted these habits later, when in the 1880's I took up my hobby in earnest and found that many of the family burial grounds which I had recorded earlier had vanished entirely in the face of advancing development. In any case, I was weary from the heat and my long tramp by late afternoon. A hillside cottage shaded by ancient trees offered an attractive well and I strode up to the door to ask permission to partake of its water.

"The most sprightly little old lady came to the door and I knew instantly that I must be in the presence of the local sibyl, one Susan M. Rounds, a spinster of some ninety-two years who, I had been assured by all the neighbors, knew everyone and anyone who had lived thereabouts for the last couple of centuries or so. At one time, every Rhode Island village had such a sibyl, and one could learn a lot by listening devoutly to her orations.

"Miss Rounds didn't miss a beat and knew all about who I was. After inquiring about my relations—including some distant ones I was surprised she knew about—she insisted that I come into her parlor and enjoy the root beer her great-nephew, then doing chores about the place, had put up that spring. Mr. Boynton, I can still recall that as the most refreshing, most delicious drink I ever drank. I even accepted seconds and several cuts from Miss Rounds' loaf. Before I knew it, I had accepted the offer of the hayloft in the barn behind her home for the night and an invitation for johnnycakes and coffee the next morning. They were good, too.

"I have always had a greater propensity for talking to old ladies than to young ladies. Perhaps that is why I have always remained unmarried although I was not without offers through the years. Miss Rounds did indeed know the locale for the last century, having been born in the year of our lord 1870 in the very farmhouse she still occupied. Her memory of the century prior to that was admittedly based on verbal tradition. 'If I had my legs of but ten years ago' I remember her telling me, 'there is many a burial lot I could show you where no man or woman has been for a half a century and the markers are crumbling into ruin.' Sad words, but truer words never said, for a man in my line of work, vital records.

"We must have talked for hours and hours, well beyond the setting of the mid-summer sun. There wasn't a family whose members had inhabited the locality that we probably didn't cover. She got out her spectacles and marked for me places where I might find hidden burials on my survey maps. 'Mind that was nearly covered with ivy and overgrowth twenty-five ago' she would say; or 'You'll need to ask Farmer Brown if he has plowed the Porters under.' And suchlike until my hand grew weary from taking notes.

"I had a standard list of difficult family names—in terms of Rhode Island names—that I always went over with well-versed informants—and Phillips was high among them. It must have been under flickering candlelight, however, that Miss Rounds and I reached the topic of this family.

'A numerous family,' she said.

'Aye,' I replied, 'but I'd be interested in any local branches, whether descended

from Michael and Barbara of Newport or not.'

'Many likes to claim it, but not all is,' she said succinctly.

'Many up north in Scituate and Foster and Gloucester speak of southern Rhode Island roots, albeit,' I added.

'Some true, some tain't,' she said. 'Not eight hundred feet from here, north side of the hill, lived a family Phillips I could tell you all about. Son moved north and from what I hear they now trace down to Michael and Barbara of Newport. But 'twasn't so when I was a young woman, if you believe I was ever such.'

I could well believe it, but deferred any observation.

Miss Rounds began her narration without further prompting. 'It was Othniel Phillips and his wife Rebecca Moore who occupied that homestead which is now but a cellar hole. It was one of the oldest homes hereabouts and was erected by Othniel Phillips and his wife when they came here longabouts 1725 or so. He lived a long life, Othniel Phillips, born 1696 somewheres in western Massachusetts, and didn't die until 1778, aged ninety-two, my own age now. I can just recall him and his wife Rebecca, who herself lived from 1703 until 1786. An aged and well-loved couple, although in considerable poverty in their later years. After their deaths the homestead went out of the family and wasn't lived in properly after 1825 or so. So many of our lovely hill farms went to ruin in that era. In the height of the harvest season, some of our hands would sleep there in the 1830's but by 1850 the house was falling into its cellar. Must have fallen in entire sometime that decade. The little burial plot was just above the house near the brow of the hill—the markers are now totally obliterated though you can still see the stone footings around the tiny plot. As far as I know, only Othniel Phillips, his wife Rebecca Moore, and their son James and his wife Anna were ever buried there. If my legs are up to it, I'll show it to you tomorrow morning before you go.

'But I think I promised a story about the Phillipses. Their only son James—I think there may have been a daughter but I never heard of her—was an ambitious man and sought his own fortunes up north, Scituate way. I was told he married an Anna Phillips of the real Michael Phillips line. Story was told here he was confused with a son James Phillip of Great Jeremiah Phillips of Gloucester and didn't deny the attribution. James and Anna had a son Asa and three daughters, Alice, Nancy, and Free-love. A beautiful name, that last, so sadly neglected now. I won't tell you what a gentleman told me the name now connotes. In another era one would not even have entertained any such thought. Of those daughters I knew Alice best; it was she and her husband Daniel Smith who wound up the affairs the Phillips family hereabouts after Othniel and his wife died. But I remember James Phillips, his wife Anna, and their son Asa at the funeral of old Othniel Phillips as well. He had been a freethinker all his life and never affiliated proper with any local church. Nevertheless, the Baptist preacher rode all the way from Nooseneck to say some words over him. He was well thought of hereabouts. I can just barely remember the funeral supper—served by James' daughters, with the help of the local women.

‘Sad to think how one loses track of folk. I think I saw two of James’ daughters at a harvest home in Coventry sometime in the 1820’s. They told me Asa was still farming on Howard Hill at that time although his health was beginning to give way. I read in the paper that Asa died in 1829 of a stroke. In the 1830’s—you won’t remember but I do well—there was an upsurge of revivalism hereabouts and I attended revivals preached by Baptist preachers several times in Hopkins Hollow. It was long about 1840 that I met Esther Phillips, Asa’s widow, there. She was then an old woman, near her end. She told me of Asa’s final years, of his sisters, and of their own eight children, four boys and four girls. All eight of them were then living and many may still be for all that I know. Only one I ever knew was Benoni, the first son, who married Lucy Fry. Benoni was a blacksmith in Providence for most of his life but had a lot of filial piety and returned home whenever he could. He and his wife Lucy had eleven children of their own, one of whom was a boy named Asa in honor of his grandfather who also became a blacksmith. Powerful men, those. I remember Benoni and Lucy well, for they had accompanied their mother Esther to that revival at Hopkins Hollow. It was summertime and warm as it is now. Esther—she was a Whipple you know of the same line as old Commodore Abraham Whipple—told me of the beautiful family lot where her husband Asa was buried and I told her of the burial lot just behind my home where his grandfather Othniel and his father James and their wives were buried. I can remember well how Esther’s son Benoni asked me for directions and promised that he would bring his family to see this family burial ground as soon as he could manage.

‘In fact, he was as good as his word, although I waited nearly another decade to see him. One fall day of 1849 a wizened figure strode up to my door and announced himself as Benoni Phillips. I recognized him right away and saw that he had his wife Lucy and nine or ten of his children—all adults or teenagers—in the wagon down the hillside a bit. I invited them all in, but Benoni and Lucy insisted that the children remain outside and refresh themselves at the well. They had brought their own refreshments, he said.

‘Well, I led them all across the hill to where the Phillips home of 1725 was in the final stages of falling into its cellar. Two of the hale and hearty boys removed a few planks as souvenirs, but we didn’t venture inside for fear of falling into the cellar. Benoni kept his composure until I led the family group to the small burial ground near the brow of the hill. Here only field stones remained, but I could identify for Benoni which belonged to Othniel and his wife Rebecca, and which to their son James and his wife Anna. It surprised me to see that big brawny man of sixty years shed copious tears but he did, unashamedly. He lectured the boys especially and enjoined them to remember from whence they came. He asked about the land and I could tell him it now belonged to the neighboring farmer. That was then Nathan Evans and he later told me that Benoni had stopped at his farm on the way home and asked that the burial ground be protected.

‘I never see any of the family again. Benoni, I was told, died the next year in

Providence, at his forge, and the children scattered to the winds soon after that. I still have his memorial card, which his widow Lucy Fry Phillips sent me. I wonder whether she is still living. She would be a woman nearly as old as I by now. As I said, I'll be happy to show you the field stones in the morning. I am afraid there is less and less to see. As far as I can recall, you'll be the first to be shown it by me since Benoni Phillips and his family visited me in 1849 or thereabouts.'

At this, Miss Rounds rose, and I thought our interview was at an end, for that evening. 'Now be patient for a minute,' she said, however, as she rustled through a nearby drawer. 'There, I have it. I was a bit interested in your hobby even as a young woman, allowing that young women seldom have much time for such hobbies. Perhaps it was a bit of filial piety. But I would like record bits and pieces from old family bibles and the like. Well, when the body of James Phillips was returned here for burial, I asked Freelove Battey if there any family record. She had with her an extremely ragged Bible which she said had been her father's. She let me examine it and copy a few family entries. James Phillips, born 1741, married Anna Phillips, born 1738, A. D. 1762. Children, Asa, Alice, Nancy, Freelove. Anna died 1805, which must put the death of James himself a few years later; her death entry is in a shaky hand of old age. Othniel Phillips, born 1696, died 1788, married Rebecca Moore, born 1703, died 1786. I gathered that their marriage occurred before they left Massachusetts for Rhode Island longabouts 1725. All the entries were in one hand, I suspect that of James. They showed no other children of Othniel and his wife Rebecca than James. What went before got even sketchier: Jeroboam Phillips 1671-1718 married Faith Milsap 1675-1713; Eleazar Phillips 1645-1710 married Dorcas Mowry 1643-1724; Absalom Phillips 1608-1673 married Tabitha Sampson 1611-1647; Jeremiah Phillips (Lincoln, England) 1564-1630 married Hope Cocroft.

'I can remember Freelove Battey—she was a lovely woman, befitting her name—telling me just a bit more after her father was buried here. Her Phillipses were non-conformists and Absalom Phillips had to flee England after the restoration of King Charles in 1660. Imagine having to pull up stakes at his age! His wife Tabitha had died in childbirth during the time of troubles. His son Eleazar Phillips was a yeoman farmer in western Massachusetts; if Freelove Battey told me where I have now forgotten. Perhaps it is in your power to find out where. Jeroboam Phillips was the last of the Massachusetts line and according to common repute his wife Faith Milsap was a "praying Indian" who took the name of a local family. According to Freelove Battey, Jeroboam Phillips had been hanged for horse theft in 1718, an event which spelled the end of the Phillips connection with western Massachusetts. Jeroboam's son Othniel came to Exeter, Rhode Island as a young man with his bride.

'Now, James, for all I heard, was an ambitious man, and I saw him only occasionally during his lifetime, the last time when his wife Anna was buried here in 1805. According to his daughter Freelove, he was a tender-sensitive on the subject of his lineage and especially with respect to what had happened to his grandfather Jeroboam Phillips. So when he married a Phillips girl up north it was perhaps only

natural he “adopted” her lineage. Right enough, however, he came back to his roots to be buried. I don’t know that his children ever returned here after he was laid to rest. I got the feeling he was a troubled soul in many ways although I heard he was a Revolutionary soldier with a good record and some success as a farmer up north in Scituate. A man of roots who never had himself to his own. When I saw her in the 1820’s Freeloze asked about the old homestead but told me her father James had told his son Asa and daughters Alice, Nancy and Freeloze to be buried near their adopted homes. As they were.’

“But it was truly getting late, and Miss Rounds asked to adjourn our discussions to the next day. I had an excellent rest in the hayloft, and true to her word, Miss Rounds cooked johnnycakes and coffee for me the following morning. She allowed as she felt rather well that morning and after breakfast she took hold of her gnarled cane and told me that it was time to visit the Phillips homestead and family burial lot.

“In truth, it was but a brief walk from her home. An old oak shaded the brow of the hill, and just below it, one could make out the border stones of an old family lot. It was all overgrown and despite some handy work with my shears I could not discover any of the fieldstones. ‘Like as not, this will be forgotten a few years to come,’ I remember Miss Rounds opining. She took me down the hill just a little bit to the homesite, where indeed the remains of the house had long ago fallen completely into the cellar. ‘There cellar holes pose a danger according to some hereabout,’ my guide said. ‘I suspect they are also a reminder of better times some would like to forget.’ I’ve not forgotten her words over these many years. She showed me a bit more local scenery, pointed across the hills to where she believed another family burial ground lay, and then led me with firm step back to her own household, where at her insistence I again partook of the hand’s fine spring root beer before bidding her adieu. What I’ll do is find my notes from 1872 and lend them to you so you can correct the errors of my memory to protect the innocent.

“There is not much more to tell. I suspect I first told the story of Othniel Phillips and his son to Frank Clark sometime during the 1890’s; he was interested in all Rhode Island families. Well, when he married into the family of Whipple Phillips (Captain Jeremiah Phillip’s son) in 1902, the matter became one of familial urgency. It must have been that very summer—I can recall attending Frank’s and Lillie’s beautiful wedding in April of that year—that Frank, Lillie, and I set out in Frank’s buggy to find what might remain of the homestead of Othniel Phillips and his wife. We would have blundered quite a bit, but I had the forethought to stop in Exeter town, where the local antiquary John E. Munro knew all about Miss Susan Rounds, who it turned out had died in 1878 at the matriarchal age of 98. Her home, dating to 1775 or so, was still well-kept by local folk, and it would not do until we accepted Mr. Munro’s kind offer to accompany us there—for I knew it would be the key to finding the remains of the Phillips homestead and burial ground.

“The occupant, a local tenant farmer, was good enough to let us see the parlor

where Miss Rounds received me in 1872. She is buried in the Rounds family lot at several miles' distance. Neither he nor his wife knew of any local Phillips plot or homesite, but he said that Mr. Luther Cobb, the landowner, who lived just up Gardner Road, would have no objection to our seeking for them. So I strode out with Frank and Lillie and Mr. Munro to try and recall the lay of the land from my visit some thirty years ago. A line of fence that I didn't remember passed just behind the barn whose hayloft I remembered so well. Beyond, if you will believe it, was a field of berries, in nice, neat rows extending all the way to the brow of the hill. When we reached the brow of the hill, we saw that the berry plantings extended all the way down the other side of the hill. We walked carefully, for fear of disturbing the plantings of the delicate fruit. We saw Mr. Cobb working in a nearby pasture and he motioned us to a meeting at the picket fence which divided berry plantings and pasture.

'Kin I help you folk?' I recall him asking when we met. We introduced ourselves and Mr. Cobb acknowledged hearing of me and of Mr. Munro. 'If I kin help you I will,' he said. 'I come of old Rhode Island stock myself.' We explained our errand and Mr. Cobb look chagrined. 'I never knew of any such thing,' he said, with some concern. 'I bought this berry field from the Nathan Evans estate in 1888, soon after I bought my first land hereabouts. He had it in beans but I thought it would be just the thing for berries, which the nurseries and seed merchants were promoting heavily for local farmers at the time. Nate had left an old dead oak near the brow of the hill amid wild grass but I didn't want to lose it for my berries so I and my boys cut down the old dead tree—it must have been a hundred years old—burned out the stump, and plowed over the land. I don't recall even hitting rock. If I had known, it was a lot, I can assure you, Mr. Arnold, I would never have disturbed it.'

"I put the man's mind at rest. He said he had never seen a cellar hole in the vicinity, and Mr. Evans himself must have filled it in, just as Miss Rounds had predicted. 'I wish I could help you more,' he bemoaned. I reminded him then of the very fine root beer I had sampled at Miss Rounds' home. 'Oh, that was the brew of old James Hutchinson, who helped Miss Rounds with her "farm" toward the end of her life. He also worked for me, but he retired to Windsors Falls across the state line some ten years ago. Perhaps they're yet enjoying his brew over there.' But Farmer Cobb did direct us to an excellent lunchroom in tiny Austin, where Frank, and Lillie, and I mulled over our discovery.

"For the life of me, I don't remember just how much of this detail Frank and I got into in the course of that meeting at his house in 1912-1913 when his nephew Lovecraft attended. I think it must have been a pretty, professional objective discussion. I don't think I would have gone into the more "colorful" aspects of Miss Rounds' tale—Jeroboam Phillips' execution or Indian wife, for instance. Perhaps James Phillips would be pleased with what Lovecraft had abstracted from that conversation. It's pleasant to think that the family, as represented in him, retains some memory of a familial farmhouse crumbling to ruin far to the south of the western Rhode Island

region where James Phillips and his son Asa settled. Of course, the Plainfield Pike is an error for the New London Pike, but Lovecraft will know that if he ever undertakes to investigate the matter. Perhaps it is just as well that he believes James and his putative father James of Michael sleep in that unknown spot. Actually, James of Michael probably sleeps somewhere near the Smithfield homestead where he died in advanced old age during the winter of 1746-1747. As for finding the grave of Michael himself, I can assure you the matter is hopeless. But I am an old man. I don't want to quench a younger man's family ambitions. I think Lovecraft's heart is in the right place. There is a tension between what Frank and Lillie have told him and what he wants to believe about his descent from Michael Phillips."

"He has said to me once or twice that Michael is a youngest son of George Phillips of Watertown," I added.

"I have heard other Rhode Island Phillipses claim that," Arnold replied. "That, however, he has not had from Frank Clark. There is nothing to support that. Tradition, according to Henry Byron Phillips, has it that Michael Phillips was one of three Welsh brothers who emigrated during the Great Emigration. But in truth his ancestry is unknown. He was certainly no son of George Phillips of Watertown."

"Maybe Howard ought to know of Othniel Phillips and his ancestors," I ventured.

"Oh, I leave that to you," replied Arnold. "As I said, I will loan you my daybook from 1872 with my notes based on Miss Rounds' narration. You be the judge. For years, to be frank, I've been on the lookout for that Phillips Bible, and I have even hunted among Phillipses and Smiths and Rathbuns and Batteys for it, with no luck. Not that I doubt Miss Rounds, but it would take the actual Bible itself to convince an Austin or a Rider that the authority of the Phillips ancestry given by Pardon T. Howard should be overthrown. But then my friends Austin and Rider and Clark are all gone, so who's to convince? It's just an octogenarian's tale, based on notes he copied from a ninety-two year-old spinster half a century ago. I feel the truth of it may be as lost as those graves under the berry field out in Exeter."

December 14, 1926

Fall River, Mass.

The long expected parcel from Mr. Arnold, larger than I expected. The precious daybook entries are contained in a cardboard folder but what surprises me is what is contained in a larger interior box. An ancient set of worn shears. Attached is a tag in Mr. Arnold's hand:

Miss Susan Rounds presented me these in 1872 in the hope they would help me find more old family burials. And indeed they did. They had belonged, she said, to Mr. Othniel Phillips, Exeter, R. I., 1696-1788. Given by me to my friend David P. Boynton, December 13, 1926, J. N. A.

Faig, Jr.

December 18, 1926
Fall River, Mass.

I have had photostatic copies made of the Arnold daybook entries from 1872 and gratefully return them to the author, with thanks for the ancient familial shears.

I don't know whether I shall ever present these to Howard or not [I write]. I shall see how his researches and his feelings emerge. However, I can assure you these shears have touched my life, for Othniel Phillips proves to be my distant kinsman as well.

September 19, 1927
Fall River, Mass.

I note with deep regret that James N. Arnold had died. Rhode Island has lost an institution. It is sad to think that all but Lillie Phillips and Howard Lovecraft have now passed from that group which met in 1912-1913.

November 18, 1929
Fall River, Mass.

Howard and Annie have been to Howard Hill and seen the graves of Asa and Esther Phillips as he had long desired. Upon inquiry, he is stronger than ever about the descent from Michael and Barbara Phillips and the claim that Michael was a youngest son of George Phillips. He still gives the descent as Asa of James of James of Michael. James Jr. and James Sr. are buried "far to the south, on an abandoned stretch of the Plainfield Pike." There, at least, is some of the truth coming out. Lillie has never had any great head for such matters and apparently she is increasingly incapacitated. One year soon, Howard will lose her. Annie, like her father Whipple, seems more forward-looking. I doubt she, or her father, ever gave the matter a thought. Maybe vague recollections of things his uncles once discussed. At least the doughty blacksmith Benoni and his children knew the truth. I wonder if that Bible passed into the hands of one of them.

July 5, 1932
Fall River, Mass.

Frank's widow Lillie is dead. I sent Howard my note. Funeral private.

March 17, 1940
Fall River, Mass.

Now that Howard is dead, I am passing the 1872 Arnold daybook entries along to

Contents

my genealogist friend A__ M__. I'd like to see what he can discover of the Massachusetts side of this matter.

September 26, 1941
Fall River, Mass.

A__ M__ reports he has found a 1665 ____ land transfer from Absalom Phillips to his son Eleazar Phillips, witness George Robers, Henry Daugherty, and Samuel Anson. No other record so far found.

August 10, 1948
Fall River, Mass.

A__ M__ reports that he has searched the town court records for all western Massachusetts without success for my Phillipses. He asks my permission for a discrete *Transcript* inquiry, which I authorize. With Annie Gamwell dead since 1941, no one will be offended.

February 9, 1949
Fall River, Mass.

The *Transcript* advertisement runs in A__ M__'s name:

PHILLIPS. Exeter-Scituate-Foster (RI), western (MA). Family record shows James of Othniel (d. 1788) of Jeroboam (d. 1718) of Eleazar (d. 1710) of Absalom (d. 1673) of Jeremiah (d. 1630) [Lincolnshire, England]. Seek families claiming descent and contemporary records substantiating descent. C/O A. M.
[address].

July 26, 1953
Fall River, Mass.

An unexpected letter from A__ M__ regarding "a long-delayed communication in response to our *Transcript* advertisement, which I enclose".

Braintree, Massachusetts
July 21, 1953

Dear Mr. M__:

A niece of mine has just pointed out to me your advertisement concern-

ing the Phillips family in the *Boston Transcript* for February 19, 1949. I hope this reply will be of some interest.

Most of my family claims descent from Michael and Barbara Phillips of Newport, RI. My grandfather, James Wheaton Phillips, of Foster, RI, however, he used to tell a different story.

He said our line of Phillipses was Massachusetts refugees and that one of our Phillipses was hanged there by the Massachusetts elders. He said the first Massachusetts Phillips had to flee England when Charles II was restored. He said our first Rhode Island Phillips was one Othniel, who settled in what is now Exeter, ca. 1725.

He said he was told by his uncle Benoni, a Providence blacksmith, before the latter died. Benoni showed him an old Bible which had some notes supporting this lineage. It had belonged to his aunt Freelove Phillips Battey. Benoni told him he visited the Exeter homestead to find it falling into the cellar and the graves gone.

According to my grandfather, Benoni's 11 children scattered across the country after he died in 1850. His widow, however, died at an advanced age in Providence. Benoni and his widow are buried with my great-grandfather Captain Jeremiah Phillips in a Foster cemetery which I have visited. My own grandfather and father lie in another family plot several miles distant.

I have always wondered whether there was any truth to these stories. Your advertisement is the first I have ever seen on this line. I would value any further communication you may be able to send.

Yours sincerely,

Elston C. Phillips

August 4, 1953
Fall River, Mass.

I authorize A__ M__ to lay the matter before Elston C. Phillips in its entirety.

September 25, 1953
Fall River, Mass.

I have a letter from Elston C. Phillips as follows:

Braintree, Massachusetts
September 23, 1953

Dear Mr. Boynton:

I am grateful to you for allowing Mr. M__ to share with me the Arnold records concerning the Othniel Phillips line. It certainly conforms to what my grandfather told me in 1898 or 1899 when I visited him on his farm in Foster, RI.

I think my grandfather was under the impression that one of the children of Benoni and Lucy Phillips inherited that diary. Harley was the one boy who stayed in Providence. My grandfather told me he'd asked Harley about it, but Harley had no idea of where it was.

I don't know where the other children of Benoni and Lucy Phillips settled. My late cousin Annie Phillips Gamwell was in correspondence with a Nina Phillips Kimmler of Santa Fe, IL. Benoni's brother James Phillips settled there and became a prosperous man. I can't recall whether any of Benoni's children followed their uncle there or not.

Should I discover anything more, I'll let you know and I trust you will reciprocate.

Sincerely yours,

Elston C. Phillips

November 22, 1954
Fall River, Mass.

Cutting back my roses with those old Othniel Phillips shears which James Arnold presented to me a quarter century ago. Many memories flood back. I've never been to visit the Phillips homesite and burial ground in the Exeter berry fields. Nor have I searched very hard for that James Phillips Bible. But we are all circumscribed by our own lives. I wonder if Howard has met Othniel Phillips in the hereafter (in which he always disbelieved) and if so what the two have made of each other. I leave to future generations the discovery of what bare records this earth may still contain of HPL's real ancestry.

The Man in the Bookstore
Lee Clark Zumpe

Taiz, Syria—Local authorities released a statement early yesterday claiming that nothing of exceptional value was found missing following the raid on the archeological dig at the ancient city of Tabez. The head of security went on to say that the visiting team had kept a scrupulous inventory on artifacts removed from the site. Only a few pottery shards and one unfinished stela appeared to have been stolen from the dig. The four bandits that conducted

the raid are still at large despite the efforts of local police. In addition to thievery, the criminals are now implicated in murder: One of the two guards wounded in the assault died from complications last evening.

Keith Castello stormed out of the bookstore muttering curses under his breath. Agitated by the exchange which had just taken place inside, he clumsily stumbled into the path of a young couple walking along the sidewalk. Piteously, he excused himself in a tone that sounded more bitter than apologetic. The two nodded, glanced at him intrusively, then continued down the street.

Keith silently reprimanded himself for allowing his anger to get the better of him. He paused, his heart racing in his chest, and tried to put the exasperating situation behind him. Leaning against the wall outside the bookshop, he noticed a sign glued to the door. Upon reading it, he shook his head and grunted. The sign proclaimed:

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION OUR UTMOST CONCERN

The owner certainly failed to adhere to his shop's motto. Keith had never before met such an irksome individual, had never before known anyone who could be so uncompromising. He had arrived at the shop a half an hour earlier expecting nothing more than to exchange an unwanted gift. He came completely prepared: He had managed to secure not only the receipt for the sale, but even the bag in which the item had left the store.

Had he walked in demanding money, perhaps the owner's attitude would have been more fathomable. He did not want a refund, however, for he knew he could find something that captivated him amongst the thousands of volumes lining the aisles. He simply wanted to trade the undesired book for something more appropriate given his field of interest.

The owner of the store flatly refused his solicitation, and moreover he scolded Keith for attempting to swap the text.

"What kind of a fool do you take me for? This isn't a damn library," the owner said curtly. The fat old merchant sputtered between mouthfuls of cheese curls. His fingers were stained bright orange from the snack food. "You might have already read the thing, and now you're just bringing it back to get something else for free!"

Keith argued that point for several minutes, explaining that he could not possibly have read the book because he had no idea how to interpret the Sanskrit text. He went on to tell the man how his interests laid in archaic occult volumes and that he had long been searching for a particular tome penned by the great Syrian mystic Abdullah ibn-Khaldun. The first English version of this book appeared in 1877 under the title *Tongue of the Damned*.

An acquaintance had chanced upon another book, titled *Al-Azif*, authored by one Abdul Alhazred. He mistook this book for the one Keith had coveted for decades, purchased it on behalf of his friend, and bestowed it upon him on the occasion of

his forty-second birthday.

Keith, of course, had received it courteously. He might not have ever told his friend that it was the wrong book had he not insisted upon knowing. Though he valiantly tried to hide the truth, eventually he admitted the fact that *Al-Azif* was an altogether different tome.

Of course, Keith did recognize *Al-Azif*, and knew of its somewhat legendary reputation. He sadly explained to his friend that it was the supposed original version of the infamous *Necronomicon*—a book which in fact never even existed. The copy now in his possession appeared to be a well-constructed imitation of an occult tome of the Middle Ages, but it sadly could be nothing more than an extension of an elaborate hoax that began with a horror fiction writer in the first half of the century—a writer who merely suggested the existence of the book in his stories to add an impression of ancient terror.

The book was nothing more than a meticulously assembled ruse, produced no doubt as an appendix to spur the imagination of adherents to that sub-genre of horror literature. It might indeed have some value—but only to the devotees of weird pulp fiction.

And now Keith was stuck with it, for the time being. He supposed he could make the best of it—drag it out at social affairs and perpetuate the deception upon his scholarly cohorts. It would certainly be worth a few laughs seeing some of the undergraduates at the local university paw the text greedily, too ignorant to realize its fraudulence.

Keith tucked the bag containing the book under his arm and started off down the street toward the subway station. It occurred to him suddenly that it had grown exceptionally dark, though the hour was still early. The skies above the city had been sullied by thick, rolling storm clouds which threatened to unleash a deluge at any moment. A stinging, angry gale charged down avenue and tossed hapless trees lining the pavement mercilessly.

Keith had walked only a few yards when the clouds disgorged their burden and the downpour commenced. He scrambled for cover beneath an awning, but the wind swept the rain in every direction, and it became evident that he would have to seek shelter in doors.

Much to Keith's chagrin, every store in the vicinity displayed signs indicating they were closed, out of business or up for rent. Every store except one.

The owner of the bookshop eyed Keith scornfully when he burst through the door, wind and rain trailing him like unwanted shadows. The cloudburst seemed bent on drowning the city, and any hope of reprieve seemed distant and insignificant at this point. Keith swallowed his pride and drifted over to the owner's desk.

"What the hell do you want now? I told you," he grumbled, "I ain't taking that book back. And that's final." The owner hunched over his desk, his flabby, pallid arms supporting the weight of his upper body. Folds of sweaty fat dangled from his chin and swallowed his neck. His breath came unnaturally, as if breathing had be-

come an arduous task for him.

"No—I understand," Keith finally answered, wiping rain from his eyes. "You made that quite clear before."

"So now you want to use my store as a refuge from the storm, I suppose."

"Yes. Well, it is very bad out there."

"Fine, fine," he said, his gaze falling away from Keith like a suicide victim from the side of the 12th Street Bridge. His attentions turned back to an oversized tome on the desk before him. "But I'll expect you to buy something in return since you're the only customer I've had all day. Just leave your bag with me so you aren't tempted to swindle me out of something."

"I'll look around," Keith said and shrugged, dropping the package on the man's desk. He then turned his back and headed down one of the many aisles of books that seemed to stretch forever into the gloomy distance.

"It's the real thing, you know. I didn't believe it myself at first," the owner called out after him. His voice was raspy and malignant, and the sound of it somehow bothered Keith. "But it is. Came out of Yemen a decade ago—smuggled of course. It was stolen from an archeological dig near Taiz." Keith did not know if the owner had created the tale or believed in it himself. It made for a good sales-pitch, for anyone gullible enough to give credence to it. "Of course, the smugglers all met some pretty hideous ends."

Most smugglers do, eventually, Keith thought.

Keith continued to hear the owner ramble on about *Al-Azif* and how it came to rest on the shelves of his store, and then about other strange and unrelated occurrences; within a few minutes, Keith managed to tune him out altogether. The last thing he wanted was to be drawn back into an argument he could not win, and then be pushed out into the street to face the flood that waited. He strolled indifferently toward the back of the store, his eyes brushing over the spines of books lining the shelves along the way. A few familiar titles caught his attention momentarily—but nothing stood out.

After a few minutes, he had lost himself in the maze of shelves. The owner must have trailed off at some point, because the only thing Keith could now hear was the persisting downpour. In these nether reaches of the shop the poor lighting scarcely bathed the floor. Shadows reigned in these far corners where time itself seemed to wither and rot. As he descended even further into the vast hoard of books, he imagined himself the first man to walk amidst these volumes in years.

Yet, he had the strangest feeling that he was not alone.

When he finally stumbled on the occult section he was not in the least bit disappointed. An extensive collection presented itself for inspection, and as Keith surveyed the inventory he could feel the money gushing from his checking account like blood surging from an open wound. Rare editions of both well-known and obscure occult treatises lay upon the shelves before him. No fewer than twelve copies of Barrett's masterpiece *The Magus* stood silent and eager for application. An original

French printing of Berthelot's *Les Origines de L'Alchimie* rested snugly between Dammann's *History of the Earth Spirits* and Bacon's *The Opus Majus*. These alone would afford any collector ample ecstasy.

But there was more.

Locked behind glass, Keith spotted more than a dozen books he sorely missed in his private collection: Chief among the tomes that drew his admiration were Magnus's *Libellus de Alchymia*, Niemann's *Andere Gotter*, Gaspard du Nord's French translation of *Livre d'Eibon*, as well as a shoddily bound copy of d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goules*. Though age had taken its toll on some of them, many appeared flawless—as if untouched by human hand. Keith could not help but imagine fingering the virgin parchment of such mysterious treasures.

Quite abruptly, a passing figure tore him from his musings, startling him so acutely that he gasped involuntarily. Keith had neither seen the man approach, nor heard his footsteps on the tiled floor. He gazed after him, somewhat embarrassed by his jittery reaction, and offered up a civilized salutation.

Before the man could return the greeting, Keith choked on the horrendous stench that seemed to linger in his wake.

The man stopped, wheeled around on his heel and stared at Keith.

Keith felt himself shiver.

The man's expression was one of intense fervor. Thin, cinnamon-colored lips strained in a menacing scowl. Several deep scars dug into his sun-browed face, some almost suggestive of claw-marks. A long, black beard flowed wildly from his chin and was polluted with tiny, unidentifiable morsels.

And his eyes . . . like hot, glowing embers.

The man wore a floor length garment embellished with what appeared to be traditional cabalistic symbols. Around his neck dangled a curious amulet upon which were described symbols unknown to Keith. He grunted something unintelligible and twisted his mouth in a black-toothed snarl.

Then, wordlessly, the man turned around again and resumed his journey to the front of the bookstore.

Keith stared as the figure glided down the aisle silently until finally he rounded a corner and disappeared. Something about the man seemed aberrant almost to the point of being profane. Where he had come from was not apparent, but it seemed clear that he had a purpose. Those eyes gave testimony to that: Fiery zeal shown in them brighter than a thousand suns.

Keith tried to convince himself that the man was nothing more than a vagrant that had perhaps snuck in the store the previous evening and hidden himself deep in the tangle of book-laden shelves to sleep unmolested by local police. In this city there lived far more nefarious characters than this man might have been—drug dealers and mob bosses and serial killers lurked the streets. A filthy, disturbed vagabond should cause him little concern.

Chasing more sinister thoughts from his mind, he carried on his investigation of

the occult section. He found dozens of articles that begged his attention, items that he never knew to exist before that afternoon. He predicted that his enchantment would bring him back to this store frequently. Perhaps, he might even get on the good side of the crotchety owner.

Sadly, Keith lacked the funds on this particular afternoon to purchase any one of the more uncommon volumes. Knowing the owner of the shop would not allow him to leave without buying something, he began to dig through a pile of books stacked haphazardly on the floor. These were cheaper, not nearly as old, and far more commonplace. He thumbed through a number of Crowley's productions with half-hearted interest before noticing a small pamphlet partially hidden from view by the large editions surrounding it. Its size promised that its price would be within reason.

Keith wrestled it free and had just begun to examine a curious portrait upon its cover when a brilliant flash of light flooded the shop. The thunderclap followed presently, and the lights in the shop sputtered and died. Darkness now claimed dominion over every square inch of that building, challenged only by an occasional shimmer of lightning from the storm outside. The gloom sent Keith tottering backwards, robbing him of balance, until he reached out and placed a hand on a nearby bookshelf to steady himself.

The lights vanquished; the air conditioner silenced, the sound of the rain which had been driven from Keith's mind previously now roared in his head. He suspected that the streets would be inundated by now. He had not seen a storm of this intensity since his childhood.

After several minutes, the lights flickered on for a few moments only to fade again. Keith stood patiently, trying to decide what to do.

"Hello?" he called out, hoping the owner would answer him. If he could fix on his voice, he could try to navigate his way back to the front desk. "Hello?"

Though no response came, he did hear soft-spoken voices in the distance—mere whispers really, unrecognizable and incomprehensible. He thought it rude of the owner not to respond, but considering the man's demeanor it did not surprise him.

Another thunderclap shook the store and made Keith's heart leap in his chest.

As the roar subsided, a new noise sprang to life in the far corners of the shop. Something rattled to life amidst the endless rows of bookshelves, something apparently invoked by the reign of darkness. It sent books spilling to the floor as it scurried madly across the tile.

Soon, the sounds seemed sharp and close at hand, and Keith conjured up images of an army of rats in his mind. It only took an instant for him to realize, however, that something much larger than rodents were at the heart of this disturbance.

The scraping and clawing quickly drew closer, and in no time the unseen forms were alongside him, their hairy bodies brushing against his legs. Tiny hands pawed at his slacks and tongues lapped at his shoes. He shuddered with sheer terror as the things hastened by him, cloaked in darkness, until they withdrew toward the front

end of the shop.

A third thunderclap sounded and was immediately followed by a hideous scream. Savage, animalistic growls then filled the air as a human voice begged for mercy. The pleas were drown out by howls in seconds, and soon even that faded into nothingness.

Keith sank to the floor, frightened and anxious. He tried in vain to silence his accelerated breath, but found that the more he tried the louder his panting grew. Tears streamed down his face there in the darkness, and his mind had all but snapped. Fear restrained him from attempting to put faces and forms to the things that had raced by him; fear restricted him from theorizing on the source of the screams.

Soon, fear invited the darkness to come pouring into his mind and he lost consciousness.

* * * *

Hours later, Keith awoke. He lay huddled on the floor of the bookstore, drenched in sweat. Books filled the aisles all around him, having fallen to the floor during the height of the storm. He sat up as the memories surged up from the recesses of his mind like acidic regurgitate.

In his hands he found a pamphlet—the very one he had culled from the mound of books before the lights went out. He gazed down at it, stared at the image on its cover. The picture showed an Arab man with a long black beard, and pencil-thin lips. He wore a black robe garnished with cabalistic signs, and about his neck hung an unusual amulet inscribed with strange, cryptic symbols.

Beneath the portrait was the title of the manuscript:

ABDUL ALHAZRED THEE MAD POET OF YEMIN

Keith cast the pamphlet aside, fingers trembling.

Inattentively, he staggered to his feet and stumbled down the row of books. He shambled listlessly—like one in a trance—tripping over tomes strewn over the tile. His mind replayed the appalling screeches he had heard again and again, and he winced and his face twitched nervously.

Long before he reached the front desk, Keith knew what he would find.

The owner had vanished. No sign of struggle presented itself. Not a speckle of blood marred the floor. Not a fragment of torn flesh had been left behind. The things—whatever they were—had devoured him completely.

Keith then noticed that the book he had left in the care of the owner had also disappeared. His copy of *Al-Azif* had dissolved into nothingness, swallowed by invisible demons. Keith trembled as he realized that the book had lured the beasts to this place.

Gasping uncontrollably, he was overwhelmed by the possibility that the things

might yet haunt the dimly lit bookshelves. He, too, had possessed the book—perhaps they would claim him, too.

Keith ran toward the door and burst out into the evening screaming.

ARMONK, NY. An Armonk man being questioned in the disappearance of a book store owner in Brooklyn shot and killed a visiting friend last night before committing suicide. Police were directed to Mr. Keith Castello's residence following reports of gunshots. Upon their arrival they found two bodies. The name of Castello's friend has not yet been released. Castello had been under investigation for several weeks for his involvement in the suspected abduction of a Brooklyn bookseller. Though he had not been charged in the case, police stated yesterday that he was their primary suspect.

Cthulhu, the Tentacled Old One **Franklyn Searight**

Some think Cthulhu is a brute;
Myself, I'm not quite sure,
Nor do I even really know
If it's a him or her!

Its tentacles are long and thick
Like brawny redwood trees,
With suckers that can snatch and grip
The prey it wants to seize.
It's taller than most buildings that
Ascend to scrape the sky,
And lives where there is lots of room
Because it stands so high.

It stays beneath the ocean where
Its murky needs are met
In R'lyeh, ancient city that's
Quite deep and very wet.
If you should have a dreadful dream
Of slime and ooze and mud,
You're likely in its fortress that's
Been buried 'neath the crud.
But ol' Cthulhu likes it there—
It's peaceful and serene—
And there it dreams for eons and
Remains to us unseen.

The minions who take care of it—
The Deep-Ones they are called—
Are green and scaly creatures that
Are noticeably bald.
Cthulhu sleeps an awful lot,
And even, it is said,
Appears to all who serve it as
Inanimately dead.

One guy who feared the Ancient Ones,
Alhazred the Demented,
Got plowed one night imbibing juice
From grapes he had fermented!
In shaking state he gave the world
A message, line by line, *
Penned in his tattered tent the night
He learned the Elder Sign.
The crazy couplet tells us that
A thing's not as it seems.
It's very strange and curious;
I'm unsure what it means—
Although some think it indicates
Cthulhu's dead, and yet
Will rise when all the stars are right—
Conditions not yet met.

Be careful if this bruiser tries
To pick your troubled brain,
'Cause you'd be left a basket case
And totally insane!

* *"That is not dead which can eternal lie.
And with strange aeons even death may die!"*



The Wedding of Shiela-na-gog **Glenn Rahman & Richard L. Tierney**

A ruddy glow lit the gnarled canopy of the oak grove, casting strange shadows over the wolfish, expectant faces of those squatting around the fire. All were men with light eyes and long, fair locks that swayed as they beat their knees with horny fists, keeping rhythm with the Gallic chant. Their garments bespoke a tribal kinship: similar tartans occasionally cut into a tunic of the Roman style, and a more prominent slashed garment with sleeves descending a little below the waist. Only a few had the look of warriors, and these bore weapons in keeping with their size: long swords hanging from their belts, tall shields, javelins, bows and slings. Several other Gauls, those standing and leading the incantation, wore full, black-dyed robes with red trimming—red symbolizing the nature of the ceremony this night.

There was a stir as a few latecomers arrived: a half-dozen cloaked and cowed strangers who seemed incongruous among the tribal Gauls. Ferchobhar, first among the Black Goat Druids, stepped out of the circle of men to meet them and guide them to their places without a word exchanged.

Another incongruous figure in attendance watched their arrival suspiciously—a black-haired man in his early thirties, one named Simon. This one was no Gaul; he had high, prominent cheekbones and a square, cleanly-shaven chin, the dark eyes in his otherwise impassive face flickering with reflected fire. He wore the cloak and tunic of a Roman wayfarer, though he looked no more a Roman than he did a Celt.

Simon shifted his stare from the hooded figures to an osier cage standing between the roots of an ancient oak hung heavily with mistletoe. It was composed of a tough, woven mesh that might have held strong men captive even had those within not been bound by heavy cords. All around the cage was piled tinder and dry faggots. The captives, though they knew their fate, neither begged nor cursed—and this was less from a fear of punishment, Simon guessed, than from a stubborn pride that would not give in to futile displays.

They were dark men, yet were unlike the elegant Samaritan Semitic type that Simon himself represented. Rather, they appeared akin to the Aquitani—the ancient strain that had ruled Spain and Gaul long before the Celts had come conquering from the East. The Romans called them Arverni—a corruption of Averonu, the tribe's own name for itself. When the Gauls had ruled, the story went, they tolerated the Averonu as a source of tribute. When Caesar invaded, the two races fought side by side for a time. The Averonu Vercingetorix had welded the natives of Gaul into a powerful coalition. But following that hero's defeat, both had succumbed to a mortifying Roman slavery. Now they fought for the scraps of livelihood that foreign oppression left them and their bitter feud raged in the mountains of Regio Averonum. Every captured Averonu suffered a fate similar to this one, or worse. Gallic prisoners among the elder race doubtlessly suffered likewise.

"I am glad to see you have accepted my invitation, Simon of Gitta," said a dry, cack-

ling voice above him.

The Samaritan started from his trance of thought. The Druid Ferchobhar stood close beside him, though only a few seconds before the man had been chanting within the circle of firelight.

"Tonight you shall learn much concerning Druid-lore," Ferchobhar went on.

Simon the Samaritan grunted and replied, "I hope your lore is more impressive than the trick you just used to sneak up on me. I've used it on audiences a hundred times, at least. Tell me—who are those cloaked newcomers?"

"Students of our Druid-knowledge like yourself. They are but recently arrived in our land. I shall introduce you to them later. But for now, you must excuse me. Soon you shall see that not all magic is mere mummery!"

So saying, Ferchobhar strode back into the circle of men, his narrow white beard agleam in the firelight. He raised the straight oaken staff and the other Druids ceased their chanting to draw around him in an orderly mass. When all were in position, Ferchobhar began a low and lilting song in a tongue unlike the common speech of the region that Simon had already become comfortable using.

And while the chief Druid chanted, the Samaritan magician thought hard, pondered recent events, remembered . . .

For three months, Simon had dwelt among the Druids, but so far had learned little. He had begun a study of their esoteric tree alphabet and the ogham oracle, but it soon became clear that this would require a study of years before it became useful. He had hoped for much more when he had first arrived bearing a famous name, a name much lauded by all who hated the tyranny of Rome.

Ferchobhar had assured his guest that the Druids, too, had long used their talents to resist the Romans. He had urged Simon to remain and learn their secret lore. And the Samaritan, sought by the Romans as a determined rebel, had welcomed both the promise of sanctuary and the opportunity for study.

But as the weeks passed, Simon had grown doubtful, beginning to suspect that his teachers were deliberately obfuscating, making his study as arduous and unproductive as possible. Very clearly, these Druids didn't trust him. Beyond his unproductive oracle and alphabet studies, the teaching to date had consisted of little beyond the memorization of childish mythology, some verse of a ritual nature, and a few mechanical tricks. Though promising much, he had in fact barred him from the important conclaves and mysteries. Whenever the Samaritan had chafed at this seeming duplicity, his host had affected the role of the kindest of patrons, cajoling and flattering the younger man with promises of knowledge yet to come.

"Your studies are preparing you," he had assured Simon repeatedly. "When the summer solstice comes, you shall be ready to receive a significant portion of our knowledge. It is not so far away. Many who would become one of us spend more than twenty years mastering the lore of our bards and the techniques of our *vates*. You have done well in the short time that you've been amongst us."

Simon grew steadily impatient as the appointed time approached. He grew increas-

ingly resentful of the meager scraps of knowledge that he was able to glean from the bards and he saw no point in many of the exercises or tasks assigned to him by the *vates*. Yet, Ferchobhar and his Druids were hardly charlatans and humbugs. Had he not already seen the uncanny control they wielded over mist and flame during their rituals? Furthermore, they claimed to command those strange creatures that haunted the hills and valleys: monsters elsewhere considered only the fancies of ancient legend. He had seen for himself the inhuman tracks of these beings and had been told by nervous tribesmen how the monsters were created by the Druids to harry the Averonu, and even make war against that tribe's own magical agents, the mystical Cats of Sadoqua.

Averonu, Simon had learned, worshipped the deity Sadoqua—the immortal enemy of the Druids' goddess, Sheila-na-gog, whose name meant “Lady of the Gods.” The Gauls claimed that the Averonu protected Sadoqua's shrines from defilement by conjuring up hosts of demon felines, whose pelts were as dark as the midnight sky and whose fangs glittered as brightly as the stars. An occasional cat's cry under the waxing moon, Simon had observed, was enough to turn a Gaul's blood to water . . .

Suddenly his reverie was interrupted. Like a bolt of heat lightning, the heads of the Druids' staffs flared with a brilliant blue-white light, briefly illuminating the oak grove like noonday. Simon gasped. The cowed newcomers, as taken by surprise as he had been, lurched fearfully, one ejaculating “Jupiter!” and another's cowl inadvertently falling back from his aquiline features.

Romans!

Simon's mouth hardened with apprehension; he had half-suspected their identity when he had earlier glimpsed the legionary-style footgear one of the men wore under the hem of his robe. Why had Ferchobhar tried to make him think that they were other than they were? He easily guessed the truth and no longer did he have to wonder where he stood with the Black Goat Druids!

He was not a disciple here, but a mere commodity. The Druids wanted something from the Romans, he realized, and he was the price—or part of the price—that they were willing to pay. Simon knew that he would be lost if he waited until the completion of this sacrifice, which would likely mark the moment he would be seized. Yet, how to escape, surrounded as he now was?

A ready solution came to the cunning magician. Although not a spell-caster of the same caliber as these Druids, he had studied at the feet of the Persian mage Daramos. Not the least of the ruses he had been taught was a command of the ventriloquist's art.

Without the slightest alteration of expression, Simon threw a piercing wail out of steady lips—a frenzied wail like a maddened cat's. The Druids stopped chanting suddenly and the ripping cry echoed, as if choked. Warriors sprang up unbidden and groped for their weapons; the Romans followed suit in even greater confusion. Simon, too, feigned fear, but gave a second cat's cry and then a third. The tribesmen were all jabbering panicked appeals to the Druids at once.

“The Cats of Sadoqua!” exclaimed Ferchobhar. “They're coming to save their mas-

ters from the flames! Quickly, all of you—into the forest! We will protect you!”

The unmanned Gauls needed no more urging to break into a run for the black woods.

Ferchobhar thrust his weirdly flaming staff into the tinder around the osier cage; the fire took quickly and threw red sparks into the air. Then the chief Druid himself followed the rout out of the grove flanked by subordinates and bodyguards.

Simon also pretended to flee. Once out of sight in the shadows, however, he dove into the undergrowth and waited for the last of the Gauls and Romans to stampede past him. He hastened their retreat with several more piercing feline yowls.

Then, when the hindmost Gauls were gone save for a distant rustle in the dead leaves, the Samaritan sprang back into the clearing. The fire that Ferchobhar had kindled had spawned great billows and the trapped men were already choking. Simon ran to the osier cage and laid to it with his Roman *gladius*, or short sword. Though springy, the wood clove asunder and in half a minute he had opened a gap wide enough for a man to crawl through.

“Quickly, come out! You're free!”

Although surprised, the ankle- and wrist-bound Averonu took Simon's offer eagerly and wriggled through the breach headfirst, like human worms.

“Come, now!” he hissed. Simon quickly severed their bonds with his *sica*, or gladiator's knife, as they emerged. “The woods are full of Gauls and they won't go far once they've regained their wits!”

The last of the four prisoners, a short swarthy man wriggled out of the cage with his kilt smoldering. This one the Samaritan supposed might be a priest, for his face was disfigured with many-colored ritual scars. Simon hurriedly slashed his bindings and helped him to his feet. “Let's be off!”

“Who are you?” he demanded in heavily accented Gaulish. “Why have you betrayed the Druids who were treating you as an honored guest?”

“The friends of Rome are no true hosts of mine! I helped you because I will need a haven for several days—and provisions.”

The man nodded; the cold-blooded exchange of favors seeming to him a logical one. “Follow me to my village—you may have all that I possess! But, stay close! It is a long walk and the woods are full of the Whore-Goddess' spawn!”

Simon nodded—but before they could leave the firelight, someone shouted from the dark forest:

“Simon of Gitta, I knew you were an enemy!”

The Samaritan whirled toward the unseen accuser. In the shadows stood Ferchobhar, and beside him clustered five other men—three armed warriors and a pair of Druids of lesser degree.

“Run!” barked Simon to the Averonu, shoving the closest of them toward the trees. “Into the forest! I'll hold them till you get away—!”

“Take him alive!” shrieked Ferchobhar. “His life-energy is precious!”

Immediately, like unleashed dogs, the two warriors bounded at him, screaming a

war cry: "Gogmagog!"

Simon crouched in a fighting stance, then darted toward the on-rushing Gauls, his gladius in one hand and his keen-bladed sica in the other.

The foremost Gaul, the largest by a head, bellowed and swung his sword. Steel rang and sparks sailed through the darkness as Simon parried expertly. Then blow followed blow with dazzling swiftness as the other warriors joined in. Ferchobhar, watching from a distance and scarcely able to follow the strokes, remembered that Simon had claimed to have spent two years of his youth as a gladiator in Italy—and he clearly had not let his sword-skill languish since then! The Samaritan handled himself with such skill that the chief Druid could almost mistake his darting figure in the shadows for three distinct men.

"Beware!" yelled Ferchobhar. "He is arena-trained!"

But the warriors, already aware of their opponent's prowess, cunningly sought to busy him while their priestly masters slipped in from the flanks to pierce his unarmored body with their long daggers. With heavy longswords they flailed away at Simon's guard, forcing him back with their greater reach—but always the Roman sword or the sharp sica flashed before them, turning their berserk blows, while the Samaritan's lean figure eluded deadly thrusts by the scantiest margins with nimble turns and dodges. Never did their opponent set foot wrongly or waste a motion; he was always a menace, even in defense, executing his ripostes so precisely that the Gauls could not coordinate their attacks properly, but hacked and hewed piecemeal.

Desperately Simon leapt and spun to counter each new danger, snarling with rage as sweat trickled under his clothing. Just in time, he caught the edge of a foe's sword on his gladius, and then stabbed with the knife. The Gaul bellowed in pain, and then leaped vengefully at the Samaritan. His lurch momentarily blocked his companions' blows, giving Simon time to pounce upon one of the circling Druids, knock his ritual dagger out of the way, and sink the sica into his breast—in the deft manner the gladiators knew, so that the blade did not stick between the ribs.

Of a sudden, there was a lull in the fighting. Two Gauls lay moaning underfoot, the arm of another warrior bled profusely. Ferchobhar looked dubiously from the wounded men to Simon, who was taxed but untouched, and hesitated. He could order his remaining priest and the fit warrior to finish the Samaritan off, but the odds had been reduced considerably. If his men did not get lucky, the Grand Master of the Black Goat Druids knew that he might find himself standing alone before a skilled, vengeful enemy . . .

"Back, men," he called out. "We need more help—!"

Simon shouted after his vanishing betrayer. "Your treachery is even more despicable than your cowardice, goat-priest! I thought you Druids were men when I sought you out, but you're no better than the Roman masters you serve! I leave you to them!"

With that he ran fleetly into the dark oaks in the opposite direction—but heard Ferchobhar cry out after him:

"You have not escaped us, Samaritan. You have belonged to us from the moment

you discovered our village. You will yet pay the wage of your ingratitude!”

* * * *

Simon made his way through the night, stumbling uncertainly in the unfamiliar forest, finding no sign of the victims he had freed. Gloomily he realized that his hope of succor and shelter had come to naught. As dawn broke, he recognized a range of mountains distantly merging into the soft blue mists—peaks that the Gauls shunned. There, he knew, he would find an Averonu stronghold.

The morning air was perfumed by the scent of crumbling rocks and damp gorse. The terrain sloped downward, over heavily eroded boulders covered by forest and sparse grass. Though he felt fairly safe from pursuit, he still pressed on. In fact, since his fight with the Gauls, Simon had seen no sign of human life at all.

He grumbled a curse, realizing that if he had to flee Gaul now he would take little knowledge with him for all the time spent here. Least of all had he discovered the nature of the forest creatures that haunted the mountains and foothills, or the source of the Druid's alleged power over them. Druidic myth connected the lurking beings with the goddess Sheila-na-gog, the most important and mysterious deity of the Black Goats' pantheon. Her symbol was a crone with obscenely exaggerated genitals; grotesque, perhaps, but what Simon had seen of her worship had appeared even more repulsive. Devotion to this monstrous goddess set the Black Goats apart from their brother Druidic societies. He had learned that the Wild Cats, the Beavers, the Rabbits, and most other Gallic cults condemned the dark magic practiced by the priests of Sheila-na-gog. And the more he had learned, the more he had come to mistrust his hosts. That was the reason he had turned against them at the first hint of treachery.

Regio Averonum stretched before him league upon league, a sea of granite cliffs, broken hills, and dense forests where the sun rarely found the ground. As Simon wended his way through the lowering groves, rent with ravines and craggy outcroppings, pigeons cooed. The deep, resonant sound reminded him of his hunger. A bird might be brought down with a makeshift sling, he knew; it might be eaten raw if need be, but could be roasted should he feel safe enough to kindle a fire. He picked out their dark shapes in the high branches against the sky.

Simon picked up a stone from the bottom of a gully and walked softly toward them. At his movements the cooing stilled and some of the birds warily changed their positions.

Although intent on his hunting, Simon was suddenly alert to a stealthy sound behind him. He wheeled about just in time to see a glittering blade clenched in a gnarled fist—behind which leered a devil's mask. Then the dagger plunged toward his breast.

Reacting like the trained fighter he was, the Samaritan caught his assailant's wrist in his left hand and drove his stone-hard right into the black, tangled pelt of his belly. The creature bleated painfully and staggered back.

Only now did he get a good look at his would-be assassin. Even in that dim light, it



could not be mistaken for a man. The face, though coarsely human, had a bestial cast. The torso, too, though superficially human, possessed knot-like muscles that moved strangely under a thick, sallow skin. But below the waist humanity ended; the creature was a living satyr—man-like above and a two-legged goat below. And it was big—almost as tall as Simon, and broader. It danced from hoof to hoof, as nimble as the animal whose hind limbs it possessed.

The demon's protruding eyes glared into the Samaritan's face, but Simon forced himself to watch instead the curved dagger that the monster rapidly switched from hand to hand, as quick as thought and seemingly to no purpose, unless to intimidate him with a display of preternatural dexterity.

The creature leaped without warning, a sharp hoof aimed at Simon's middle. Simon dodged the attack barely in time. Landing nimbly, the satyr recovered, and leaped

again like a compressed spring, evading Simon's skillfully wielded gladius and driving a hard shoulder into his chest. Both combatants crashed to the stony ground, clawing at one another while rolling across a blanket of dew-wet leaves.

Simon brandished his blade, but the satyr, anticipating his move as no common human could have, caught his sword-arm, and stopped it with a powerful clench. Then he began to squeeze the captured limb with the pressure of a cartwheel, until the blade tumbled out of Simon's numbed fingers.

Frantically, he groped for the sica at his belt, but in doing so left an opening through which the satyr's dagger plunged. Simon felt its cold bite into his side, heard its tip grate upon a rib, then saw it rear up into the sky for a second descent.

But instead of striking again, the monster suddenly bleated and lurched forward, blanketing the Samaritan with its slick, reeking body. Simon stabbed at it and bucked furiously, trying to throw it off—but he sensed immediately that it was not fighting back. Using a wrestler's grip to put himself on top of the creature, he discovered why it was not: a Roman pilum protruded from its broad back. Simon scanned the trees and spied several figures emerging from the forest. Gauls and Romans!

Enemies!

Urgently Simon tried to regain his feet, but a shot of pain brought him down flat, clutching his side. The Romans rushed the wounded man and beat the sica out of his fist. When unarmed and held hand and foot by several warriors, their leaders strode up to him.

"Mailaen," said a short, potbellied Roman officer, "your monster was told to take him alive! Had I not given the order, the creature would have slain him!"

The Druid shrugged. "Sometimes, Mettius Aelius, the spawn obey their basic nature in spite of all orders. Ferchobhar shall be displeased that you destroyed the satyr. His type is very precious and it required a rare sacrifice to create him."

"Ferchobhar had better concern himself with my displeasure! The creatures he makes for me must obey absolutely!"

Simon had perked up his head upon hearing the Roman commander's name. The Druids were evidently not dealing with simple renegade Romans. Scaevola—Mettius Aelius Scaevola—was proconsul in charge of keeping peace among the wild tribes in that part of Narbonensis sometimes called Regio Averonum. Simon knew his reputation—an agent of Caligula until that mad emperor's demise. Many of Emperor Gaius' creatures had not prospered in Claudius' regime, the Samaritan had heard, but apparently, by touch-and-go maneuverings, Scaevola had won an important office from the present Caesar. Whatever the Roman-Druid conspiracy, it obviously reached into the highest circles of the province.

Scaevola turned away from Mailaen and approached Simon, pompously, with the air of a conqueror. The effect failed to impress the captive, as the Roman was a small ungainly man, plump in the belly and skinny in the limbs. His craggy face was characteristically Latin, but sagging from dissipation. Unlike most Imperial officials, he sported a beard—a short, sparse fringe that outlined his pallid face like a wreath of brit-

tle moss. Without his uniform, the keenest imagination would not have pictured the proconsul as a soldier—but for the last generation many worthless sorts had risen into the high ranks on the strength of personal friendship with Tiberius or Caligula.

“Your recapture is a fortunate stroke for me, Samaritan,” said the Roman, grinning at Simon's look of consternation. “Oh, yes, Simon of Gitta, I know you—by reputation. Of course, the Black Goats reported your presence to me in Augustonemetum. Ferchobhar knew I needed a man like you. His only problem was keeping you in place until the rites of Midsummer. He chose to use deceit rather than chains.”

“What do you want?” Simon demanded stiffly. “Obviously you have greater magicians than me licking your boots—and with Caligula groping in Tartarus where he belongs, there can no longer be any great reward attached to my carcass.”

“You underestimate yourself, Simon. You are a remarkable man—and the Druids have use for such.”

Simon fell silent, judging Scaevola to be a man who might gloat for hours without answering a simple question.

“How are his wounds?” the proconsul asked.

A centurion lifted Simon's shirt and examined the gash the satyr had made. “It's not serious if it can be dressed properly.”

“Permit me,” volunteered Mailaen. “We have skills even your Greek physicians know not of.”

“Get on with it,” muttered Scaevola, “and spare me your boasting. The wound will not weaken his powers, will it?”

“Physical suffering,” smiled Mailaen, “if short of killing, does not diminish one's soul. Indeed, some men's latent powers are enhanced by it. Occasionally—when we believe it will heighten the victim's psychic energies—we employ torture before sacrificing him to Sheila-na-gog.”

“Then why didn't you fools prevent his escape by cutting off his arms and legs before he realized you were tricking him?”

The Druid shrugged. “Such prolonged suffering might indeed have wasted his life forced in the mere struggle to stay alive. The master did as he thought best.”

* * * *

Wounded, bound, and closely guarded by the proconsul's bodyguards, Simon found no means to escape his cage over the next two days. His wardens—ignorant, taciturn underlings—either knew nothing about what it meant “to be given to Sheila-na-gog,” or would not say.

Then, on the third morning after his capture, he happened to overhear Scaevola and Ferchobhar arguing:

“I know about Druid treachery, old man. I warn you, if I don't get what I want and return safely to Augustonemetum, a legion will burn this place out! Even if you personally escape into the hills, you'll be a hunted dog, without wealth or followers to make you feel important.”

"Your fear talks. You are wrong to mistrust me." Ferchobhar admonished softly. Scaevola's eyes flashed.

"No, take no offense," the Druid went on, "for even I have my fears. Sheila-na-gog is mother of all living things, all things upon this world that ever were and ever shall be. Steel yourself! If you do not attend the spawning, you cannot attain power over the beast."

"I will bring my guards!" warned the Roman.

"Bring them," his host replied.

"You agree too easily," said Scaevola, keen suspicion in his voice. "What of your precious secrets?"

"Every Roman who enters that place is a traitor to his emperor and his gods. If he is not mad, he will not speak of what he has seen. And if he is mad, or goes mad, his words will not be believed."

"Mad?"

"There is that danger. But the ends we pursue are great and well worth the risk. You have sworn that you will accuse the Averonu of plotting to rise as they once did under Vercingetorix, and destroy them utterly. In return, you may count upon the Gauls of Regio Averonum to march shoulder to shoulder with your own legions, and we Druids to work great magic in your cause."

"Perhaps I would do better if the Averonu were my allies. While you Gauls were fawning at Julius Caesar's hem, the Averonu were the only ones that showed him any fight! As I recall, he only laughed at your magic."

"When all the Caesars have passed away," replied Ferchobhar grandiloquently, "there will still be Sheila-na-gog. Remember, once you are emperor the repressive laws of the Claudians shall be abolished and a temple of the Goddess shall be raised in Rome."

Scaevola grunted derisively. "I'll give you your temple. There are worse gods entering Rome every day. What do I care if Sheila-na-gog becomes first among them?"

The two conspirators walked on, still speaking in low tones. Simon watched them disappear behind a hut. So that was it—a double treason, racial enemies embracing for narrow ends!

In less than an hour, Simon again saw his foes, this time as part of a procession that was gathering in the heart of the village as the morning sun rose above the surrounding trees. The highest Druids, now robed in black, mingled with Gallic warriors and fully-armed Romans. A number of lowly acolytes leaned upon their staffs with bulging packs of provisions hanging from their backs. Another acolyte, one near the head of the assembly, held a stake on which was impaled the severed head of a huge black goat with great, twisted horns.

Simon was then brought from his cage, chained by the wrist to a Roman on either side. His wound did not pain him much anymore, and he could walk with some confidence. Evidently, the healing herbs and ointments of the Druids were as potent as they claimed.

Ferchobhar stepped to the side of the goat-head standard and led the procession, choosing a path from the village toward the volcanic hills. The pathless trail rose up through a forest of beech and juniper, over black basalt ledges largely clothed in thick carpets of moss. As they ascended the later growth petered out, but a clinging mist gradually filled in around the group, almost as if summoned by the Druids to disguise their winding route. Occasionally it thinned and the Samaritan could make out a ghostly peak in the distance, a peak he recognized as the dead crater of the ancient mountain Cantal.

Ferchobhar's retinue continued climbing for most of the day, as if seeking perhaps, the very roof of the world, where waited—what? What was the thing they called Sheila-na-gog . . . ?

In the gray twilight, the master Druid at last motioned the column to halt on a blasted ridge near the summit of a long-extinct caldera. Only a rare scrub clung here and there to the dark, cracked rocks. The valley below was shrouded in a layer of brume, through which only the evergreens on the highest bluffs managed to break. More than merely the grim desolation, Simon sensed a queer presence that chilled him to the quick. His senses told him it was not a lurking being, but a lurking spirit of suffocating malevolence. His companions evidently felt it too, for a subdued tension was apparent in the experienced Druids, and a nervous agitation evinced in the novice Romans.

"What is this place, Druid?" demanded Scaevola, a poorly disguised tremor in his voice.

"We have arrived," said Ferchobhar simply. "Bring the Samaritan forward."

The guards, seeming even more ill-at-ease than their captive, prodded Simon along between them.

"My warriors shall guard the entry," said the chief Druid. "Let your own men come in with us, Proconsul, if you so desire."

The Latin renegade nodded nervously and beckoned his bodyguards with a wave of his hand. "Let's get on with it, Druid."

Ferchobhar deployed his warriors, and then led the rest of the procession underground, along a chasm whose walls ran with verdant slime. In places it was gathered into blisterous shapes and where they stepped on it, it clung like pine gum to their boots. At the end of the rift, they came upon a pit that sloped downward and gave off an acrid stench. Once it might have been a chimney channeling black lava over the mountain's steep side; now it only vented fetid air.

Ferchobhar descended by a narrow path into the pit, followed by Mailaen and the other Druids. The Romans' gawked longingly at the light they were leaving behind, and then fell in behind the priests, who advanced more confidently—though even Ferchobhar wore a grave expression. What horror, Simon wondered, could so affect the very priests who adored it as their goddess . . . ?

The darkness was suddenly banished by the Druids, whose staffs flamed on as if by mental command. Simon, studying the enchanted torches carefully, noticed that the

smooth finish at the head of each rod was neither blackened nor consumed.

"What magic is this?" Scaevola blurted. "Those staffs—?"

"A magic handed down to us by the sages of ancient Acheron, who brought our Goddess to this mountain from ice-cursed Hyperborea long ago," explained Ferchobhar distractedly. "Be silent now; we approach the Sacred Presence."

In the glaring light of the druid's torches Simon noticed that the walls of the tunnel were completely covered with innumerable carvings, weirdly twisted *triskeles*. Simon had never seen this particular symbol before, though it somewhat resembled the sign of the triple-aspected Greek Hekate or the Celt's Cailleach. He was hurried along by a shove from behind, and a moment later they were brought to what he surmised was an antechamber to the goddesses' sanctuary.

Ferchobhar raised his flaming staff and chanted the words of a ritual older than Rome in a language older than man, as if to awaken or warn his goddess of their imminent approach: "Ia! Sheila-Na-Gog ygnaih varkos Abho-kurat! Ia! Gof'nn Abhot Ia! Shupnikkurat! Kumat alaz Arag-Kolat! Ia! Gof'nn Ishni-Garr Ab Gog Ia! Ia! Ia!"

Simon could see that the chamber opened into a rough-hewn black hollow from which puffed a warm and ill-smelling draft. The breeze somehow made Simon's face and bare arms feel begrimed. The Druids, entering first, lit the cavity before the Romans and their prisoner shunted inside. The Samaritan, as he entered, drew up sharply in surprise and horror.

Bubbling within the vast cavern was a huge gray pool, some thirty yards across. Its churning constantly put forth gigantic mouths, eyes, pseudopods, and animate creatures. These last were the most incredible, swimming along the glistening surface, or flapping above it on clumsy, dripping wings. A few had escaped to the shore and grown somewhat - but even as Simon watched, tentacles or a sucking force from underneath pulled those near the pool back down. The monstrosities resembled composites of bats, toads, birds, reptiles, and less-attractive forms of life. Thankfully, the pool dissolved them—but just as rapidly gave birth to more of their kind, similar only in their hellishness.

The infant monsters on the scummy bank paid no attention to the intruding men; but the Romans jabbered incoherent prayers and shrank back as some of the small beasts happened to wriggle close.

"Begone!" commanded Ferchobhar, extending his staff toward a small, gelatinous lamia that was squirming his way. At once, the thing dissolved into fluid and rilled back into the turbulent pool.

The chief Druid raised his arms and proclaimed: "Behold the womb of Sheila-na-gog, Mother of Life! Now, in the Hour of the Lark, we bring to our Goddess a worthy mate. May his seed conceive in her a child of unsurpassed power. Receive him, O Goddess, into your sacred body!"

Ferchobhar then continued to speak, but in a tongue that Simon did not recognize. The remaining Druids struck up an undecipherable chant in his support.

And Simon at last understood—and wished he did not! The gelatinous creatures

cast off by the viscous pool had very little physical stability to them; the Greeks knew of such things and called them “khimeras.” Although a few might escape into the outer world, they could maintain a semblance of life only by vampirizing living animals and humans—which themselves might or might not have descended from the goddess’ womb, as the Druids professed to believe.

But such entities would not suit the needs of the Black Goats, who wanted servitors of dependable physical permanence. Apparently, a human or animal from the outside world, cast into the pool, would provide the substance to fashion a real monster — such as the satyr that he had fought in the woods. And, if he correctly understood the comments of his captors, it would be especially powerful if the victim was animated by a strong life-force . . .

Scaevola turned and grinned wolfishly at Simon. “When you fell into the Druids’ power, they realized that you would provide the soul and flesh for what I demanded of them—a servant like no man has possessed before! There are men who must be destroyed and others who must know terror before I dare make my move to overthrow that limping fool who reigns in Rome. Judging from your notoriety, Simon of Gitta, you possess great spirit. Surely the Druids’ slime-goddess will fashion from you nothing less than a demon—perhaps a host of demons—and then Ferchobhar’s magic shall make your spawn my absolute slave!”

“Mot take you first, madman!” snarled Simon, leaping for his throat. The guards chained to the Samaritan responded barely in time to restrain him.

Angrily, the Roman commander struck his would-be assailant across the face and thrust him back.

“Take off these chains and try that again, Roman scum!” howled Simon.

“See how he fights!” Scaevola trumpeted. “What spirit! Did I not choose rightly? What he generates in union with Sheila-na-gog shall shake the throne of Mars!” The official signaled his guards and said, “Grant his wish and remove his shackles.”

One of Simon’s escorts dug a key out of his pouch. As the guard opened the bracelet around his own wrist, Simon’s mind raced. When his left hand was also free, he would make his move. The Romans were ill-at ease in front of the incredible, unclean pool, distracted by its heavings and birthings; he might strike one of them down with his bare hands, then seize the man’s gladius and kill as many of his foes as he could—possibly even fight his way back up the tunnel. The Gauls waiting outside—little chance to elude them, but better a fighting death than a surrender to Sheila-na-gog. . .

Suddenly a cat’s scream echoed. The Druid’s chant ceased. The Roman holding the manacle-key jerked in nervous surprise and fumbled, dropping it into the bubbling slime underfoot. The Romans and Druids looked anxiously at one another.

“Stay where you are!” ordered Scaevola. “It’s only the Samaritan! He made fools of you once!” The echo of his martial voice thundered between the rheumy cavern walls.

The wail of the cat was followed by shouting in the Gallic tongue. Scaevola looked askance into Ferchobhar’s pallid face. “We *are* being attacked!” exclaimed the precon-

sul. "Hurry—let's get this over with!"

He gripped Simon by the shoulder and pulled him forward. The soldier still shackled to his left hand lurched and nearly stumbled.

"Fool!" roared Scaevola. "Remove that chain or you'll go into the pool with him!"

"It's not my fault!" the guard protested anxiously. "Marcus dropped the key into the muck!"

"Then strike off the Samaritan's hand!" barked Ferchobhar, "—but in the name of the Goddess, hurry!"

Swiftly Simon shifted his weight, seized the chained guard by the wrist and upper arm, bent forward, and expertly flung the surprised Latin over his muscular shoulders. The man crashed into two more Romans, sending them likewise sprawling.

"Stop him!" bellowed Scaevola, retreating behind the Druids.

Ferchobhar, showing more spine, thrust his flaming staff at Simon's chest. The Samaritan sidestepped with the agility of a gladiator—barely in time, for the brand singed his woolen chiton. Cursing, he savagely struck out with the heavy manacle still dangling from his right wrist, bringing it down on Ferchobhar's shoulder. The old Druid yelped and slacked his grasp upon the staff. Instantly, the Samaritan locked a hard fist about it and jerked it from his hands. In the same instant he lost his advantage as the chained Roman gave the other shackle an angry tug and made him slip to his knees on the scummy stones underfoot, dropping the Druid's staff.

Simon grappled with the man while the other Romans came at him en masse with swords drawn. The foremost legionary raised his gladius over the Samaritan's head for a certain kill.

"No!" shrieked the proconsul. "Take him alive!"

The warning spared Simon a severed neck. Instead of finishing him off, the Latins seized the Samaritan by the legs and his free arm, controlling him despite a struggle that would have done credit to two men.

"Hold out his hand!" yelled a Roman, his white knuckles clenched purposefully upon his sword grip. Two others forced Simon down under their combined weight and wrestled his manacled arm into a position convenient for its detachment.

Suddenly there came the sound of running feet and a man howling in pain. The Druids and Romans glanced toward the entrance as a Gallic warrior stumbled into the grotto with a black cat clinging to his bleeding back.

"The Cats of Sadoqua!" blurted Mailaen.

The Gaul, seemingly blind with terror, plunged through the midst of the startled men and blundered headlong into the roiling pool, the cat leaping from his back to the bank barely in time. The living mire held the Gaul submerged to the waist for just an instant, like a berry on steaming porridge. Then, as his horrified cries intensified, tentacles formed out of the upper surface and dragged him under as the pool literally swallowed him up.

Few paid him heed, for frenzied yowls rang down the narrow tunnel from above and fear lit every Druid and Roman face.

Ferchobhar alone retained the self-control to shout: "Defend yourselves!" and retrieve his staff from under the Romans' feet. He had scarcely done so before dozens of black feline figures gushed out of the tunnel as nimble as bats.

Spitting and hissing, the Cats of Sadoqua sprang straight into the mass of men, claws and fangs bared, moving so swiftly that Simon, now abandoned by his captors, could make out little of them in the uncertain light and hurtling shadows. He glimpsed darting, shiny pelts and eyes gleaming like moons.

The Romans and Druids fought them with steel and flaming staves, but were obviously disorganized by fear and the ferocity of the attack; even those hardened veterans seemed baffled by the smallness of their foes and the supple ease with which the Cats evaded their weapon-thrusts.

The chained guard, forgetful of the manacle in his panic, scrambled to his feet and dodged a rushing cat; the chain brought him up short and threw him off balance. Screaming in horror, he plunged into the pool of Sheila-na-gog, feet-first.

As the man was drawn under, the manacle they shared wrenched Simon's arm with a force that rolled him over on his belly and dragged him toward a like destruction. Frantically, he caught hold of a scum-caked stone with his free hand and arrested his slide, but the bubbling fluid was swallowing the Roman as if down a deep gullet—and Simon was perforce accompanying him down into the bowels of Sheila-na-gog!

With desperate strength he tenaciously held on. The edge of the iron wristlet cut his skin, and some of his blood dribbled into the filthy ichor. Pain grew in his elbow and shoulder joints till he feared that his arm would tear off—a severance even more painful than the quick cut the Romans had intended for him . . .

Suddenly the chain sprang slack and Simon dragged the manacle from the slime. "Baal!" he gasped at the sight of the other wristlet hanging empty, not a trace of blood on it. The Roman had been swallowed alive and utterly dissolved.

Shaking off his astonishment, Simon scrambled to his feet—only to find himself jostled and trampled by the struggling Gauls and Romans. Except for himself, every man in the cavern had one or more biting, clawing Cats clinging to his clothing and lacerated flesh. Blood reddened the black robes of the Druids and rilled down the Romans' limbs as they threshed about. Their panicked shrieks filled the grotto and mingled with the yowling of the Cats—which sound now began to shed its feline-tenor and become more like arcane syllables screamed in a forgotten tongue.

The demonic chanting seemed to drive the beleaguered men mad. They ceased to defend themselves and ran crazily around the narrow ledge above the pool, jostling one another, striking themselves senseless against the walls, or stumbling blindly into the goddess' viscous mass where greedy gray tentacles and tongues and less identifiable limbs and organs surged out of the slime to drag them to their doom.

A louder voice penetrated the commotion—Ferchobhar's, evoking a protective spell against the Cats' shrill voicings. Bright flashes of flame suddenly lit the cavern—searing blasts from the end of the Druid's magic staff. The fire consumed the felines it touched in the wink of an eye, but also charred those luckless men who were intermin-

gled with them, driving more of them in their blind agony into the clutches of Sheila-na-gog, as if it were a pool of cool water.

Then Ferchobhar made a dash for the exit, and close behind him ran Mettius Aelius Scaevola, the vanquished Cats no longer barring their escape. Quick as thought, Simon grasped a Druid's fallen staff and threw it between the proconsul's legs. Even as Ferchobhar vanished up the tunnel, the Roman stumbled and crashed to the rocky floor, his armor ringing. Before he could scramble to his feet, he felt Simon's strong hands upon him.

"Latin dog!" hissed the Samaritan.

"Spare me!" Scaevola gasped against the crushing pressure of his calloused hands. "I had nothing to do with this! It's these damned Druids! I can make you an important man—!" Disgust welled in Simon's breast. It had been corrupt Roman officials like this one who had plundered his home in Samaria, slain his parents, and sold him into the arena.

"Scum who would rule the world," he snarled, "kiss the bride you would have given me to!"

Then with a sudden wrestler's throw, he heaved the proconsul over the brink and into the womb-pool of Sheila-na-gog.

For a moment, like the others, the Roman stuck like a fly in the surface of the seething, paste-like slime; then, screaming, he was sucked down like the others before him. Simon watched, dark eyes narrowed, repulsed by the process but feeling no pity for the doomed officer. Scaevola burst out with one more howl that was cut suddenly short as his mouth was filled with several of the glistening gray tentacle-tongues, choking off his voice with a grotesque kiss as his frantic eyes vanished beneath the fetid surface. The depression Scaevola left behind slowly filled with foul-smelling ichor.

Suddenly Simon realized that he stood alone in the grotto. The Cats had gone, and those men who were not dead or senseless underfoot had vanished into the goddess-pool. The Samaritan began to succumb to the effect of his recent exertions. The tendons of his left arm burned from the wrenching they had suffered and he felt a heaviness all through his frame as the polluted air had its effect on him.

Something huffed close by and, turning, Simon beheld a new creature heaving itself out of the gelatinous womb of Sheila-na-gog. It was a small criosphinx—a ram-headed beast with leonine hindquarters and wings dripping with slime. Other hybrid monsters were similarly rising, most of them smaller and frailer than the first—some possessed of forms that had no known equivalent in Nature. Simon recoiled; here, he realized, were the men, both Romans and Druids, who had gone into the pool, now remolded into abominations not of this earth.

He backed away, turned toward the tunnel—but just then he heard men's shouts and footsteps coming from around a bend. Was it the rest of the Gauls? Had Ferchobhar rallied the men outside?

Simon snatched up a Roman sword in his good arm. Though wounded and sickened, he would yet make a fight of it.

The intruders moved cautiously into view. Simon's gladius wavered unsteadily, for these were not the Gauls, although Ferchobhar's face was in the forefront.

Aye, in the forefront, but not as their leader. In the fist of the first Averonu tribesman dangled the bloody head of Ferchobhar, Grand Master of the Black Goat Druids.

"Put down your weapon, Simon of Gitta," said the toad-faced Averonu chief. "We surely have not made this attack on your captors and taken losses with the intention of harming you."

Simon recognized the newcomer as the last man he had released from the Druids' osier cage. He nodded, lowered his sword, and slumped wearily against the wall.

"I thank you," he muttered, fighting to keep from swooning.

Several Averonu nudged past him and began to attack the creatures of the pool with spears, axes, and knives, hewing them into lifeless pieces that quickly dissolved and flowed back into the writhing gray mass within the pool.

"Good," said their chief when the butchery was finished. "Now, let's get out of this accursed hole to the Hells!"

They all hurried from the cavern; but as the last two torch-bearing Averonu helped Simon through the exit, he looked back into the torchlight—and gasped as he observed one final creature rise from the womb of Sheila-na-gog. It had surfaced in an obscure corner, near the spot where Mettius Aelius Scaevola had disappeared; it was small and had the shape of a rat, but its pallid, bearded face and hand-like forepaws were evilly human.

Then a sudden bubbling of the pool frightened the creature, sending it scurrying into the shadows with a loathsome, piteous titter.

Against the Stars Themselves James Chambers

*"... he had risen up out of the blackness of
twenty-seven centuries, and ... he had heard
messages from places not on this planet."*

—"Nyarlathotep," H.P. Lovecraft (1920)

The silver ship shuddered. Its nuclear engines burned to life, correcting its course against the pull of the nearby Moon's gravity.

Within the cold metal skin Coleman Chang awoke and swatted at the *flutterby* hovering and beeping by his temple. He raised himself on his elbows and blinked the deep, cold dryness from his eyes. Beyond the nearest viewport icy stars sped by amidst the black void.

None of the others had survived. The monitor lights at the base of their suspension tubes had all turned blue.

Coleman knew the entire crew, himself included, had been expected to perish, but he had harbored secret hopes of beating the odds. Not that any of them were

important. It was only the data that mattered, and that was secure in the belly of the craft.

Coleman pushed back the glass seal and shifted out of his tube. His flutterby withdrew, the blue disc floating a standard three feet behind his left shoulder, its devices scanning his vital signs, recording his every move. The blue discs of the others lay cold upon the steel and glass cocoons that had become their coffins.

Fifteen years, thought Coleman. I'm going home alone.

Out of those fifteen years he had spent perhaps one full one conscious, with six months alone dedicated to the team's research. Their work could only be completed in the period when their seemingly infinite, preprogrammed trajectory carried them within range of Pluto and the mysterious celestial body beyond.

What had they learned? Was it worth the lives of six men and women, Coleman's friends and colleagues?

He didn't know. The data they had collected was beyond his judgment.

He was only a messenger.

The hum of the engines faded, and the ship plummeted onward in heavy silence toward Earth.

Coleman moved to the tiny cockpit and began the required diagnostic routines. All systems checked out. With luck the *Marathon* would approach Earth orbit in less than two days. There was nothing left for Coleman to do but wait. The cockpit was cramped and cold, but he didn't like the thought of returning to the sleep chamber where the others rested. He wished for a book or some music to soothe his restlessness, anything to distract his mind from the enormity of what they had undertaken and the sheer horror that demanded their sacrifice.

Coleman tried to pin the beginning down to a single event, but there were too many. It was impossible to see what had happened as anything but the inevitable confluence of history. And he had no idea how history might have changed during his long absence.

Just in his lifetime there had been the riots early on. Led by men and women who had succumbed to madness and degenerated into a primitive state of bloodlust, thousands of cultists burned the cities and murdered all those they could. Humanity trembled in the grip of raw violence for nine dark days before order returned as thirty, fifty, a hundred nations enacted martial law to stamp out the erupting savagery.

Coleman had been seven years old then.

Five years later the Black Armies of Kavage Kash rolled forth from the deserts of Africa and marched in conquest across Persia into Asia and Europe. Strange weapons they bore—massive, glowing contraptions and dirty, soot-coated machines hauled on heavy trailers to spread poisons and disease. They held great cities hostage and bent once-powerful nations to their will, and it seemed not long before the entire world would fall beneath their ruthless onslaught. But then a fleet of planes came bearing bombs of immense force and the most crucial armament—

information. A shard of luck had revealed the location of the leader of the Black Armies, and so the head of the beast was shorn loose.

He and all life surrounding him for twenty miles were obliterated from existence in a day.

But there were those who claimed that Kavage Kash was not the true power behind the Black Armies. Small circles of cynical men spoke in whispers of a dark and powerful leader, who traveled in mystery surrounded by a fog of panic. It was said that in his mind dwelled the secrets of ultimate chaos and despair and that his hidden connivances edged the world ever closer toward an unyielding abyss. Where he walked, cities screamed in the night.

From the dust of the Black Armies' destruction, abhorrent, deformed creatures spilled forth from the sea, rising to attack lonely ships on open waters. Rumors circulated of isolated communities of men who were no longer men, but hideous beasts who had forfeited their humanity for terrible profits. Perversions were unveiled behind the doors of even the most respectable families, and the rulers of the world were known to be utterly bankrupt of conscience.

At age eighteen Coleman joined the military. Five years later he was recruited to lead six others on a fearful journey further into the depths of the cosmos than any other man had ever traveled.

In his last earthbound days, his grandfather came to bid him farewell.

The old man spoke a long while of times past when smoke and blackness did not fill the skies, when men still cherished the idea of living in peace for it was only among each other that they fought. He recalled arriving in his adopted country, his soul swelling with pride and determination to build a new life. Many of grandfather Chang's generation had gone insane in the face of the changed world. "Bleak" and "hopeless" they called it, an "abomination of life," but to Coleman, who had never known it otherwise, it was just the world. He marveled at the confidence in his ancestor's voice, speaking of subjects that caused others to tremble with emotion.

"You do a noble thing, Coleman. I admire you. It's a fitting way to define yourself," said the elder Chang. "But the universe has its plan for us and the power of men—whatever role we are meant to play—may be insufficient to alter it. Fate will make us its agents, willing or not."

Coleman wished his grandfather could have lived long enough to greet him when he returned.

The *Marathon* had lifted off before dawn on a hot summer morning.

The resources of the entire nation had gone into the vessel's construction. The seven-person crew underwent two months of the most intense training Coleman had ever experienced. They would be unconscious for most of the trip, but there could be no margin for error during their active period. Each crewmember would fulfill a vital function, and there would be no second chances. Given more time the scientists might have perfected the suspension tubes in which the crew would sleep, but time was an empty well. The crew left knowing that no test subject had ever

successfully been placed in suspension twice.

Coleman thought of the feverish passion that had burned in President Aldrich's eyes, the glow of physical energy and iron will that had surrounded that barrel-chested man when he spoke, as though secrets within him were bursting to be let free.

Three nights before departure he brought Coleman and the crew by helicopter from their training base in Virginia to an isolated valley in the mountains of Pennsylvania. There, Aldrich transported them deep beneath the surface through the labyrinthine tunnels of an abandoned mine until they entered an underground complex, where he gathered them into an observation room overlooking a darkened chamber.

Lights flared to life. Coleman and the others flinched in disgust from the vast, fetid mass that writhed below them. It moved like a single-minded beast, but its body was like a bundle of thick worms fused together at the tails. A strand of the thing smacked upward and caressed the heavy window, smearing a sticky trail of smoking slime on the glass.

Cold dread flowed through Coleman. He had seen horrors in the line of duty, mutations and feral killers, demonic creatures and foul pathetic cannibals, but none so fundamentally repulsive as this.

Aldrich could not say what the thing was, where it had come from, or even if it possessed the power of reason. The wretched organism had been seized from a Navy destroyer found adrift in the Indian Ocean. Fifty-three men had died to transport it in an empty oil tanker and bring it inland for observation. Aldrich revealed it to Coleman and the others to prepare them. It was only right that those who were about to give their lives should be warned first hand of that against which they struggled. Life existed elsewhere in the universe and in other dimensions where man was unwelcome and should never venture, Aldrich told them. There were dormant entities, even now present on Earth, which looked upon men as men looked upon swine, and they were stirring to reclaim the world they had once inhabited as masters.

Aldrich led them on through the complex to other rooms where scientists studied alien metals in laboratories that stank like graves, where learned men ruminated over the enigma of ancient works penned on paper and skins now desiccated and fragile, where generals plotted their resistance. These men pried at the locks on the occult knowledge that would guide them as they schemed for the freedom of mankind on Earth. Coleman's team would take the first steps toward securing freedom for humanity in the universe. Their investigation would determine the truth of disparate ancient writings that heralded a benighted body beyond the ninth planet as home to otherworldly beings.

And so they had done.

Coleman assembled a mental picture of the icy, inexplicable mass they had encountered, the horrifying structures that dotted its surface, the slowly spinning

black forms that covered miles of ground, and the tiny, wriggling figures that flitted through the air. Sickly-colored gasses filled its atmosphere shot through by bolts of carmine lightning. Jets of emerald flame flared from great crevasses in the planetary crust. A ring of shining, black bodies, like demonic idols carved from obsidian, orbited the equator, the sleeping guardians of a veiled world. Most of the crew viewed the high-resolution camera images of the surface. Coleman hadn't bothered. The expressions on the faces of people he knew to be fearless told him all he needed to know about the visions of Hell they had dredged up. Completing the mission was his only priority.

He was dozing on the crest of a nightmare when the flutterby chirped him awake.

In the blackness ahead loomed a shining craft Coleman could only think of as a starship, though he had never before seen its like. It blotted out the heavens. Coleman pounded on the course controls, but his ship was locked on its heading.

The radio crackled with a familiar voice. "This is President Aldrich to the *Marathon*. Do you read me?"

The words stunned Coleman. It was the last voice he had expected to hear. His heart brimmed with feeling. Aldrich repeated his greeting twice more before Coleman could muster an answer.

"This is *Marathon*. Colonel Coleman Chang here," he said.

"Coleman!" the President replied. "My God, you're alive! Incredible. It's good to hear your voice, Colonel. What's your status?"

"Ship status, fine. All systems intact," Coleman said. "Crew status is . . . six members code blue."

"I'm sorry, son," Aldrich said. "But welcome home. We've taken over your craft by remote, now. We'll guide her in. You relax. We'll have you up here in no time. You've done more than we could ever have hoped for, soldier."

What could have happened in fifteen years? Why was this ship here to meet him halfway between the Earth and the Moon? The *Marathon* had been the peak of human technology when he left. How could such a vast machine have been constructed in so short a time? Why wasn't the President on Earth? Why was he still in office after so many years?

A dark portal blistered open on the hull of the massive starship and Coleman's craft floated into it. He saw dim lights and the glint of steel, felt the thrumming power of the immense thing all around him, and then his ship emerged into the sterile glare of a hangar. He shaded his still-sensitive eyes and braced himself as the *Marathon* lowered to a soft touchdown. Coleman struggled for his bearings. Metal clanged as a tube connected to the craft's dorsal hatch. Minutes later it creaked open and two men appeared, garbed in tight-fitting environment suits. They helped Coleman from the cockpit.

He spent three hours in a small medical facility. Doctors dissected his flutterby and processed the data within. They conducted countless tests, took a dozen read-

ings, drew blood and other fluids, flashed lights in his eyes, and poked, probed and injected him. Finally the physician cracked the seal on his mask, removed his headpiece, and with a smile, pronounced Coleman healthy.

"We're not sure why you survived your second suspension, Colonel, but you're no worse for the wear," the doctor told him. "Guess you just got lucky. That old tech is unpredictable. Occasionally it outperformed expectations. Of course, we've got all those bugs worked out these days. Freeze you and defrost you a hundred times and you'd never feel a thing."

The doctor left, and Coleman sat alone for a while in the cold med chamber and thought of his lost companions. For him only a day had passed since they had said goodbye.

Before long a trio of soldiers arrived and escorted him through cramped corridors to a compact and austere room, where he sat on a plastic bench affixed to the floor. A garish piece of abstract art hung framed on the opposite wall. Coleman's eyes strained to make sense of the image. And then he realized that it wasn't art at all, but a map of the world. Here and there he could distinguish the shape of a familiar coastline or the outline of an inland body of water. But so much had changed. He pictured the old world laid over this new configuration, and his head ached. He forced himself to look away and was grateful for the distraction when a door swept back and President Aldrich entered.

"It's beyond words how good it is to see you, again, Colonel," Aldrich said. He took Coleman in a rough embrace and patted his back. "A lot of people want to speak to you, but I ordered them off. I want you to myself for a spell."

Aldrich was no longer the man Coleman had left behind. The President had grown gaunt and frail. His hair had thinned and fallen out. A jagged scar disfigured his left cheek. His wide blue eyes that had once burned with life were now stark and rheumy, and his hands trembled.

"I'm terribly sorry about your crew. If we'd had then the technology we have now . . . well, we're already analyzing the data your team retrieved. Excellent work, Colonel! Really exactly one-hundred percent what we sent you out there to do. Of course, it's nothing we don't already know, now. We've learned a great deal since you've been gone. But it's confirming some of the less definitive things Doctor Abgrund has told us. And precise intelligence is the key to a successful campaign."

"Excuse me, Mr. President, but what campaign? Who's Doctor Abgrund?" asked Coleman.

Aldrich nodded and sat beside his soldier. "Yes, I'm sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Don't wish to jar you. It's one of the reasons I made radio contact myself. Familiar voice. But we know so much more about the Old Ones now than we did when you left."

"The Old Ones?" asked Coleman, but Aldrich didn't seem to hear him.

"There aren't many people left on Earth, now—maybe a million on each continent, counting those trapped in the Antarctic deserts. We could keep a lid on things

for only so long. I mean, what kind of cover story can you devise when a sinkhole swallows Berlin and spews forth a host of demons? Civilization broke down. More of the things started to appear. You remember the one I showed you? Like that and worse. North America hung on the longest, but then the sunken city returned and the prophecies could no longer be questioned. That's when Doctor Abgrund finally reached us and explained the massive tactical blunder we had made so many years ago. We thought Kavage Kash and his Black Armies were the crawling chaos the ancient texts described, the avatar destined to bring about the apocalypse. But the Black Armies weren't bent on conquering the world. Abgrund gave them the weapons and technology to save it. We only weakened ourselves when we destroyed them. How many lives were lost for our ignorance? Abgrund knows the Old Ones better than any of us. Once he served their cult during his youth in Egypt and Sudan, but when he realized the extent of their evil, he turned on them. His unique knowledge has been vital to implementing my contingency plans."

Aldrich rose and stood enrapt before the map of the world while he collected his thoughts. He had seen the questions in Coleman's eyes, the worry and the fear, the uncertainty. He could imagine how disorienting it was to jump fifteen years into the future.

"When I was a child my father told me a story on his deathbed," Aldrich said. "He had exhausted his life in the pursuit of perverse pleasures and forbidden delicacies, and his body was as wasted and as spent as his soul. How many awful secrets he took with him to the grave, I couldn't say, nor do I care to know. But with his final breaths he whispered in my ear a message of terror—not of his own death—but of the doom awaiting all men. With those words he redeemed himself. Through me, he saved mankind. He confided in me the location of a cache of books and materials he had hidden, and he made me swear to take measures to protect myself against what I would find expressed within them. The books were . . . difficult to understand . . . but I could make out enough to realize that I was meant to serve a greater purpose. I would save us all from the Old Ones who would destroy our way of life and enslave us. My sole purpose became preparing for the coming battle. I acted in secret at first. Who would believe such things until they were before their very eyes? I needed power enough to destroy them, and so I dedicated my life to obtaining it. Yes, I underestimated them in the past, but now I have all the force I need at my disposal."

"Sir?" Coleman interjected.

"I'd planned the ships since the first day I took office. This one. The hundred others like it. The technology wasn't there, but it was the concept that mattered. Abgrund provided the missing pieces of the technical puzzle. He perfected our suspension tubes and designed our engines. We had but to build them. It was deemed vital to our success that I should remain President until the crisis passed. And so when the sunken city emerged we gathered all those we could onto the ships and ordered the strike. It lasted three days. We fired fifteen hundred missiles. We wiped their

worshippers—the dirty traitors—off the face of the Earth. We buried the pits from which they rose. We scattered their numbers and slew their minions.

“But it wasn’t enough. In the end the sleeping city stood undamaged. It sank, again, beneath the waves after unleashing a psychic blast that left a billion mindless shells wandering our destroyed cities.”

Aldrich rubbed his eyes as though he were very tired and chilled to the bone.

“And then I understood what we needed to do,” he whispered.

“What, sir?” Coleman’s voice quivered. The meaningless deaths of his friends paled before the anguish he felt at hearing of his world brought to the brink of extinction.

“You see, Colonel, the stars were in the wrong configuration. Doctor Abgrund erred in his calculations. He believed the time was right for such a massive strike, that we should have been able to destroy the city when it surfaced, and thus eliminate the heart of the Old Ones’ foothold on Earth. But it appeared for only a short time, not long enough for its prisoner to fully rouse itself. Its protections were still intact. But when it sank again, it gave us the respite we need. We don’t know how long we have, but we have our plan before us. Abgrund has translated the ancient texts fully now and we know that the stars must be in the proper alignment for the Old Ones to return. We know which stars are required.”

Aldrich took Coleman’s arm and helped him up from his seat.

“Within this vessel are hundreds of thousands of men and women locked in their suspension tubes, and in fifty other ships, the same. Our journey will be long. Many will die. And so we have reinforcements, endless and waiting to be called upon, prepared to assert the will of mankind against the stars themselves. They are our future.”

A cold flame gleamed in the President’s face. The idea of his race entombed in living death numbed Coleman.

Aldrich gripped the colonel’s arm tighter and led him into an adjoining auditorium. A wall-length portal afforded a view of Earth, but it was not the planet Coleman remembered. The colors were wrong and the clouds roiled in tumultuous, lightning-seared swirls.

“Yes, we devastated the Earth to save it, Coleman,” Aldrich admitted, “but I won’t let those countless deaths go unanswered. We must be sure that mankind never falls prey to the Old Ones. This ship and its companions are capable of traveling beyond our solar system. Doctor Abgrund has led us light years beyond where we were when we built your little spacecraft.”

Coleman followed the President down an aisle between the rows of plastic seats that filled the room, each one occupied by a man or woman, their bodies as worn and deteriorated as their leader’s, a touch of madness in all of their eyes. They gazed at Coleman’s clear expression, unblemished skin, and powerful body with a dangerous hunger.

On the dais before the viewport stood a tall man in a black uniform. His skin was

the color of ash, his face hidden behind a smooth, featureless, silver mask. Through slits his eyes flickered like sulfurous coals. They burned through Coleman. The effect dizzied him as though an invisible force reached out from the man to send Coleman's thoughts aflutter like a child running through a flock of feeding pigeons. Coleman averted his eyes, but he felt weakened.

"Colonel Chang, please meet Doctor Abgrund," Aldrich said. "Together, he and I have become the architects of our survival and the champions of our freedom. Behold our works."

The starship rolled and the fleet drifted into view—ten, thirty, fifty, and more ships like the one on which Coleman stood, hanging in the endless night. Mounted along their flanks were innumerable steel spears like the weapons of a giant-killer, an arsenal of missiles with the power to turn space itself to embers. The ships dipped and swayed like a school of fish, orienting themselves for the long migration ahead. Between them as they shifted, Coleman glimpsed the ruined shell of the world he had once called home.

"We'll make sure the stars can never be right," Aldrich announced. "We'll destroy them."

The auditorium exploded with applause. Coleman's mind drained to emptiness in an instant. Through the darkness he heard only the simmering laughter of the man in the silver mask, a dissonant, vaguely musical whistling like the pressure of eternity forced through a narrow pipe. It filled the void within him.

The Tulu Jar Ann K. Schwader

Stuck at the back of the convention's art room—again! Evan groaned. He couldn't risk this; not after the vandalism he'd suffered this year at cons and festivals and galleries. One more piece damaged, or one more pre-sold item stolen, and he might as well give up his basement studio.

Still, if the staff desk had a clear view of his exhibit . . .

Evan lifted his two boxes of ceramics onto the table before heading up front to check. Halfway there, he saw the problem: too many display flats in the way, most noticeably one crowded with splatter punk acrylics. Vince Featon's, of course. All the imagination of *Gray's Anatomy*, plus the subtlety of a chainsaw. Some judges liked it, more didn't—but the man's style never changed, no matter how many shows balked at hanging his efforts.

Mentally shaking his head, Evan returned to his own work. So much for friends of friends on con committees. Nothing to do but set up, and hope for the best.

Which hadn't happened once this season.

Unwrapping his major piece carefully, he centered it on its polished hardwood base before unwinding the cotton protecting its spines. The slender cylinder had taken over two months to make—not counting all its tiny embedded details. Or cousin Max's research time in M.U.'s Archeology department, though authenticity

had its price: that specially-mixed glaze had taken forever to dry, and even now it looked oily.

Smelled authentic, too; like something washed up on a beach weeks ago.

He'd registered the jar as eight inches high and blue-green iridescent, but had never been sure of either. Those were just the original specs Max had sent along with his clay and glaze formulas. The clay fired pure black with greenish crystals. As for the glaze, he'd finally resorted to photographing the work in progress. Lucky thing he'd taken so many shots: out of three full rolls, he'd found maybe a dozen similar enough to display.

Still, this replica "Ponape Artifact" was his last chance to do well this year; and it probably would. If he stared at the damn thing too long, even *his* skin started crawling.

"Evan? Evan Champlain?"

Photographs scattered from his hands. Muttering irritably, he glared back at a blonde art room staffer.

"Sorry," she said, picking a couple of photos off the floor. "Just wanted to tell you we did get your request for front-table space . . ."

Evan's expression eased.

". . . but we couldn't do much about it. Y'see, this room was practically booked solid months ago. You were lucky to get in at all!"

Her blue eyes sparked in unison with the rhinestones on her unicorn sweatshirt. Evan gritted his teeth.

"Look, I know this is a major convention." *I just drove eleven hours straight, didn't I?* "I just want my work safe when I'm not here."

Blue-Eyes frowned. "Safe? We've never had any problems."

Taking a deep breath, Evan indicated the jar on its polished base. "That," he said, "represents over eight weeks of work. It has a decent chance, *if* it gets judged in one piece."

Blue-Eyes stared at the jar and its label for a moment, blinking.

"I sure wouldn't touch it!" Fleeting disquiet clouded her face. "What's a 'Tulu Jar,' anyway? Or a Tulu?"

Evan hesitated. Max's department had some pretty bizarre theories. Something about some minor Polynesian myth-cycle . . .

"Just a name a friend of mine found in a book—something to sound intriguing, make people notice." He tapped the jar's auction slip. "Which is another reason I'm worried about safety. If somebody wants to buy this—especially at the Quick Sale price—I'd better keep it in one piece."

Blue-Eyes agreed that this made a certain amount of sense, but he still couldn't get a better table. If he was worried about his work, he'd just have to keep checking on it . . . did she mention they were short of volunteers this year? . . . or maybe . . .

"Hold it," he said, playing his last card. "Do you know Aaron? He's a friend of mine on the con committee, and he said I'd at least be able to get an after-hours

passkey."

Blue-Eyes scurried off to check. Evan went back to work, hoping he hadn't just talked himself out of the con entirely—at best, Aaron was a second-hand acquaintance. Fortunately, he was also an acquaintance who'd promised umpteen things to umpteen people this week, on no sleep.

Twenty minutes later, a key slapped down next to his elbow.

"I don't know why Aaron's letting you have this." Blue-Eyes' voice held a late Friday edge. "I don't even think he knows you. If there's anything missing from this room all weekend . . ."

He scowled up at her from the cylinder's full-color photo display.

"I still don't know why you're so worried," she said, retreating quickly. "Whatever the heck a Tulu is, I sure wouldn't mess with its jar!"

By the time Evan got back to his room, it was almost seven-thirty. If the people he'd promised to have dinner with were running late—as usual—he had just enough time to check the mail he'd grabbed on his way out this morning.

Amid the usual junk and bills was one real letter. Its envelope was bulging, taped shut, and red-markered URGENT. He knew the return address even before he checked it, but Max's letters were always worthwhile. Emotional, yes; obsessed with his grad work, frequently.

But boring, never.

Dear Evan, this one began, *WE'RE IN TROUBLE*.

He stared at the worse-than-usual handwriting, trying to decipher what the hell Max was talking about. The actual letter was only about a page long; but he'd stuffed in several more photocopies, all covered with typescript and scrawled printing Evan didn't recognize.

Plus the word "Tulu" printed at the top in red ink.

Separating Max's letter from the rest of the mess, he skimmed it quickly. M.U.'s real Tulu jar, it seemed, was actually a scroll container. Max hadn't found this out until four days ago. Some colleague of the original finder—or Max's thesis advisor, or both—was preparing to publish a translation of fragments found inside. Fragments of what, Max wasn't certain. M.U.'s Biochem lab had been puzzling over the leathery stuff for nearly a year now.

Which was fine and dandy, but where did the trouble come in? He skipped down the page until he found it, underlined in all caps: *CANCER*. Metastasizing intestinal cancer. The jar's finder had just died of it, which was why (Max suspected) his colleague was so eager to publish. One completed fragment translation had turned up in the dead man's desk. What could be easier than taking ninety percent of the credit?

Frowning, Evan forced himself to slow down. Max had drawn a connection here he wasn't seeing. What did cancer have to do with academic rip-offs? Maybe it involved the translation itself instead. A note clipped to the copies said *read immedi-*

ately . . .

He flipped through the papers scattered on his bed. Fifteen pages at least, blurry and almost illegible. Whoever'd done this work—the fragment translation, he assumed—had banged it out on a balky manual typewriter, then changed his mind about half the words and corrected them in longhand.

*& to a thing of Tulu [marked by Tulu?]
if harm [attack?] cometh
the unspeakable corruption of [possibly religious referent, unclear]
shall find soon [immediately?] whosoever . . .*

"Champlain? You going with us or not?"

The pages dropped from his fingers. He took a long breath and felt his heart pounding, rivaling the impatient fist at his door.

Gathering up the photocopies, he stuffed them back into the envelope with Max's letter. Nothing like an all-day drive and an empty stomach to really mess with a person's mind. He'd read the rest after dinner, if he felt like it.

Right now he felt like a beer or three.

* * * * *

Florescent light still slicks the fresh blood tint dominating his paintings, but all the volunteers are gone now. All his alleged competition. Turning away from the tortured images on his display flat, the artist reaches into one jacket pocket. A safety-cased razor blade comes to his fingers readily as he heads for the back of the room.

Where Mister Every-Award-In-Sight (until this year!) is about to have another bad weekend.

This weird sea-colored glaze on the lead display still feels damp. Damp and slimy. Examining his fingertips, the artist is relieved to find them unstained. He hasn't even left any prints for security.

Just the blind accusation of a dozen tiny glass eyeballs, nestled here and there in the jar's fragile spines.

He taps one speculatively. No; that would look too much like a real accident—wouldn't want anybody thinking that. Easing the blade from between his fingers, he unsheathes it against a clear patch of ceramic. Hair-thin curls of glaze peel away as the razor bites, exposing raw blackness . . .

Damn.

Digging around with his uninjured hand, he finds a tissue in one pocket to wrap the bleeding finger. The stained razor goes in the same pocket; his injury goes into a loose fist. Hotel security's not likely to notice much—they never do—but a little paranoia never hurts.

Nobody's outside at all. Too many parties tonight, idiots getting idiotically drunk. He's halfway to his own room before the sting of that wrapped-up finger

throbs into real pain. Checking down the vacant hallway first, he unwraps it carefully and squints.

Hard to tell without more light. Can infections start this fast?

Better see if the desk's got a first-aid kit. Some iodine, at least. No telling what made the glaze that gawd awful color.

* * * *

When Evan finally got back to his room, the phone was ringing. Fumbling his key into the lock, he kicked the door open and grabbed the receiver.

"Yeah?"

The speaker on the other end—long distance? — hesitated. "Evan, is that you? You don't sound good."

Max's voice, even tenser than his letter. Evan could sympathize. Even after three Coronas with his enchilada plate, swinging by to check the art room had wound him right up again.

At least nobody'd marked any bids yet on the jar's auction slip.

"I'm OK," he finally managed. "Just got back from dinner, that's all."

"Get my letter yet?"

"Yes, but I've just skimmed it." He glanced back over his shoulder and nudged the door closed. "Max, there was some very weird stuff in there."

"Read it later." The connection popped and whistled faintly. "First, you've got to get that replica jar . . . scroll case . . . off display. Tonight, if you can."

Evan's fingers tightened on the receiver. "That could disqualify my whole entry! If you expect me to believe that . . ."

"I don't expect anything, Evan; just get that replica out of the show. Send it here. The department will pay twice whatever you're asking, just to get that thing off the market."

Right.

Evan settled the phone and himself on the bed. Once Max got worked up, there was no making sense of him for at least five minutes. "Look," he finally said, "has this got something to do with those copies you sent?"

"That first fragment . . . God, Dr. Hodgkins didn't *know* when he took scrapings . . . Just get the damn thing back here. We'll take care of it."

Evan's stomach knotted. Wasn't Hodgkins the guy who'd died of cancer? *Paranoia city*. Better get a grip.

"This is just flat-out strange, Max," he said. "I can't believe you want that piece pulled, not after all our work. Didn't you have to practically bribe the chem lab for those formulas?"

"I'm not taking all the credit, either; you know that. I've got a whole display panel just for M.U.—all the publicity you and the department could want."

The connection's static thickened abruptly. When Max finally broke through, he sounded strained and a little sick.

"Evan . . . this kind of publicity, we don't need."

He didn't say anything else after that. After several seconds of dead air, Evan hung up and tried going to bed, but his beer and enchiladas weren't sitting well. Between that and the vandalism and Max's craziness, he'd be lucky if he slept at all.

Lucky, he decided next morning, wasn't the word. One look at his major piece made his stomach churn.

There'd be no way to hide anything from the judges now. Besides the long gash in the glaze that he'd found last night, several of the jar's spines were snapped off short. The handmade glass-and-ceramic eyes they'd held were mostly still intact, but a couple had fallen on the floor and gotten stepped on.

And the thing still looked too much like his nightmare. Not an indigestion nightmare, either: last night's had been the genuine article, timeless and dark and suffocating. Suffocating underwater? That was it; he'd been underwater—deep water—staring at his jar half-buried in silt. When he'd reached down to recover it, one of the spines stabbed into his hand and an icy black shadow started rippling overhead, like a *National Geographic* manta ray.

Except it hadn't been a ray.

He bit his lip hard and turned away for a moment. When he looked back, the jar was just damaged crockery. Damaged like everything else important he'd showed this season. If he ever caught the bastard responsible . . .

Right.

If he expected diddly squat from the judges this afternoon, he'd better get busy. Fortunately, the jar's photo exhibit—*A Dark Fantasy "Artifact"* — hadn't been touched. If he made that his main entry, this show might not be a total loss. Max's research alone ought to be worth something.

He'd just started for the staff desk when a last glance at his ruined jar drew him up short. Wet darkness glistened on one broken spine . . . darkness he hadn't noticed earlier.

Fishing a bandanna out of his jeans pocket, he cleaned off the substance gently. Blood from last night's vandal? Not likely; that wouldn't be liquid now, and this stuff definitely was. Liquid and thick and greenish-black, with a stench he couldn't place.

Even turned the jar's hardwood stand in a careful circle. Here and there, always on broken edges, more ooze beaded. He wadded his bandanna tightly before cleaning his exhibit off, making sure his skin touched neither the liquid nor the jar itself.

No sense taking chances. The glaze he'd cursed at so much already had obviously changed again. Before, it had only looked oily. Now, it felt worse than oily through the crumpled cloth—fish-belly slimy, and unnervingly cold.

Deep ocean cold?

The wadded bandanna slipped to the floor. Checking around, Evan found a cheap ball-point pen and lifted the mess into the nearest trash can; then dropped the

pen in after it.

Maybe Max did have a point, albeit a warped one. Taking his jar off display and selling it to M.U. was probably the only way he'd profit from this project. It certainly wouldn't get bids in its present condition.

On the other hand, pulling it now could only weaken the photo exhibit . . . possibly antagonize the judges as well. And its disappearance would mark another victory for the vandal.

After a whole winning season.

Clenching his fists, Evan headed for the staff desk again. Re-registering his jar Exhibit Only might be a pain, but one look would tell anybody why. No sense hanging around any longer worrying about it.

The damage couldn't get much worse.

* * * * *

"So why gloves at lunch?" His girlfriend wrinkles her nose in distaste. "Fashion statement? Hangnails?"

Drop dead, bitch.

Flexing his fingers in suede gloves from the hotel's lost-and-found, the artist hopes surly silence will be enough. Let her think he's hung over. Which he usually is, this early on Saturday. Never mind he didn't make it to any parties last night—including the one he'd promised to meet her at.

Nobody hung over smells good, either. The wrinkled nose says she's noticed something there, too; despite cheap aftershave from the gift shop. Not his style at all . . . but still better than what he's been trying to disbelieve all night.

His right index finger is slick greenish-black now.

Nearly rotten.

Hell of it is, he doesn't dare get help. Even emergency doctors ask questions, though he doubts they'd believe the answers. This cut finger doesn't look like any gangrene photos he's ever seen. And just over twelve hours isn't long enough, no matter what Champlain put in that glaze.

"You *like* cold fries?"

The stupid cow snags a half-dozen off his plate, but he's not paying attention. He's flexing his toes inside his boots. Inside three layers of socks, plus a T-shirt he tore up this morning. Just looking at the rare burger he special-ordered makes him sick.

She's staring at him now, big mouth all ready with more questions he can't/won't answer. Sliding out of the booth, he stumbles to his feet and gets moving. Her whine rises behind him . . . about the check he's just stuck her with, probably . . . but the coffee shop doors cut her off.

He makes it halfway to his room before the pain gets bad enough for limping.

His gut says this is a major mistake, but he's still got to see for himself. The boot comes off hard. He clamps his eyes shut, sucking air to keep from screaming. How

bad can it be? *Just count ten and open your eyes . . .*

He wraps the foot up again, quickly.

* * * *

Judges' Choice Award? Evan still couldn't believe he heard right. Balancing a plateful of cheese and crackers, he wound his way back through the reception crowd to touch his rosette with unsteady fingers.

Not bad for a three-panel photo display plus one damaged ceramic cylinder. Damaged and re-damaged, despite so-called con security. Happy Saturday night.

Evan shoved a cheese-whizzed cracker in his mouth and frowned. He should probably be grateful—two other pieces of his won ribbons as well—but he wasn't. The jar was what he and Max had spent time on, researched and slaved over. It deserved Judges' Choice in its own right.

Now there was another chip missing, right from the top.

It didn't take much searching: the long blue-green shard lay near one of his display panels, two shattered spines catching the overhead light. Both oozed with something dark, but his eyes kept averting themselves.

Could he replace it safely if he just touched the edges?

Evan laid his plate aside. Holding his breath, he positioned thumb and forefinger on opposite sides of the chip and moved them inward gently. The edges didn't feel sharp. Trying to ignore how they *did* feel, he pressed slightly harder, lifting his hand off the table.

"Hey, Champlain! Congrats!"

The shard snapped in his fingers. He dropped the pieces like white-hot metal and turned around, swearing. A spacecape artist from Saturday's marketing workshop stared back at him.

"Sorry," Evan said. "I was just trying to . . ."

The splat of an overloaded plate distracted them both. Glancing past his well-wisher, Evan saw someone kneeling, shoulders working frantically under a denim jacket as he scooped up the mess.

With suede-gloved hands.

Deep water again, liquid midnight; and the shadow overhead rippling closer every second. Tearing his gaze away from the jar half-buried in sand, Evan kicked out convulsively and flailed at the sea around him. His lungs strained with the effort, threatening to explode as panic burned through him like poison; like raw instinct screaming *too late*.

The bedside phone tore him out of it, still trembling and sweating. "Hello? Hello, this had better be damn . . ."

"It's me, Evan."

Max's voice was high and tense in the connection static. "Something's happened here. You've got to get that scroll case off display—now."

It took Evan a few seconds to remember. "You mean our Tulu jar?"

"Dr. Wilcox . . . Hodgkins' colleague . . . he's dead." Max's breathing rasped in his ear. "For God's sake, you can't leave it out in the open!"

Evan's grip tightened on his bedding.

"Max, you're not making sense. What happened? What's some Prof dying got to do with that jar?"

Static silence quavered for almost a minute. "Dr. Wilcox was double-checking an inscription. He had to pick up the case, the real one. It slipped out of his hands and broke all over . . ."

"So?"

"So that's how he died. It broke, don't you understand?"

Evan took a deep breath. "No, I don't. Broken jars—scroll cases—don't kill people. What really happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I saw it. If you'd seen too, you wouldn't . . . Evan, you've got to keep that thing safe. In your room, till I find somebody to come pick it up."

"Right. All the way out here from Arkham?"

More crackling silence. Evan stared into inky hotel night, feeling his guts twist. The way Hodgkins probably felt when he was dying of intestinal cancer, after he'd . . .

After he'd done something to the Tulu jar. The real one.

"I'll call my advisor," Max finally said. "He knows half the Folklore department. They've got to have somebody who can handle this. We'll drive to Boston, fly out first thing tomorrow."

The dark around Evan seemed to thicken.

"Listen," he said, dry mouthed, "we both know you can't afford a trip like this. What are we talking here, a bomb squad?"

"Something like that." Their connection spat and hissed. "Just keep that jar safe until we get there, OK? Somebody could really get hurt . . ."

Evan hung up. Reaching for the jeans he'd dropped beside the bed, he pulled them on and felt around for his keychain, then checked the penlight it held on the way to the door.

Just keep that jar safe.

It broke, don't you understand?

Sweat beaded his forehead as he hurried down the hallway. Maybe he should have told Max about this weekend's vandal, but he hadn't had the nerve. Or maybe it didn't matter. After all, nothing had happened to him.

Yet.

Punching for the convention center three floors down, he was relieved to find the elevator empty. No half-blasted party animals, no weird hall costumes. He leaned against one wall, letting the metal cool his bare skin, but what little he'd read of that photocopy still tormented him.

*& to a thing of Tulu
if harm cometh . . .*

He stumbled out of the elevator, straight into two road warriors and a semi-dressed brunette in green body makeup. One of the warriors was very drunk. Muttering apologies, Evan sidestepped a punch, then broke into a dead run down one more hallway. One more damn long hallway, with double doors at the end and far too much lighting.

He checked over his shoulder. Finding the coast reasonably clear, he shoved his passkey into the lock.

Somewhere behind him, another door squeaked open. Tan uniform appeared at the edge of his vision.

"Hey!"

He froze and waited for hotel security to come to him. The heavysset man did so cautiously, one hand gripping a walkie-talkie.

"Mind tellin' me what's goin' on?"

Evan took a deep breath. "Checking on my artwork." He pulled his key from the lock to show the hotel's logo. "Just got a call from a friend who said he'd seen somebody around here. I want to make sure my stuff's safe."

The walkie-talkie slid back into its holster. "Everything's probably fine, mister—we haven't had any thefts all weekend. Might as well check, though."

He pulled a massive flashlight from his belt. Evan slipped his passkey back into the lock, hoping the guy would keep believing him. If he could just get inside, the jar's display label plus his driver's license might be enough. What could be more natural than a nervous artist taking something back to his room for safekeeping?

Clicking on his penlight, Evan started to slip inside. And froze.

He hadn't so much seen as heard it: a shuffling, groping sound near the back of the room. There was another noise as well, intermittently. A thin whimper like stifled pain.

Evan strained his eyes, but the penlight's weak beam found only another shadow among shadows, one that stooped near his table fumbling with something. His gut knew already, but if he moved or spoke or breathed . . .

Stark light cut across his face as the guard kicked open the door.

"Hold it!"

There was a sharp explosion of broken pottery. Then the screaming began, raw and terrible . . . and *changing*, as the organs producing it changed.

Evan squinted into the flashlight's glare only briefly. Clamping both hands over his eyes, he staggered back into the hallway, sour sweet sickness rising in his throat. Behind him, the guard swore convulsively as his hi-beam jittered across a Judges' Choice rosette on the floor. Across this season's vandal—whoever he'd been.

Evan through his nausea, Evan realized he'd never know for sure.

There wasn't nearly enough face left for that.

The Groveler in the Grotto

Mark McLaughlin

Assuredly I am not a trembling leaf of a man—not the sort who chirps with terror and befouls his dungarees when some weensy, breeze-tossed speck of pollen tickles the inside of his nose on a golden summer’s day. No, I am not the sort who waves crucifixes at kittens or calls out the National Guard just because a cricket is nibbling on the crust of his sandwich. And yet I remember a day back in 197—, when I did run as fast as my legs could carry me out of the house of my childhood friend Reginald Blathingsmythe. I wore a mysterious black leisure suit, and I ran and ran until I collapsed, and then I got up, ran some more, stopped at a coffee shop for some cappuccino, and then ran for another five minutes.

By then, I was home.

But the next day, while doing the dishes, I thought about what had happened in that accursed house of mind-shattering doom—and the water from the tap suddenly ran cold.

My name is Wintergreen Fortescue St. Valentine, and at that time, I was renting a house in the peaceful town of Dunwich—the sort of laid-back little village where nothing ever happened and people felt free to leave their back doors unlatched at night.

At that time, I was writing a bestselling series of thrillers with the words ‘portfolio’ and ‘death’ in the title. *Dr. Portfolio and Mr. Death. Death of a Portfolio Salesman. Ring Around The Rosie, A Portfolio Full of Death.*

I was working on my latest epic, and I needed a new place where I could really think. I was having difficulty coming up with a new title. The best I could think up was *Portfolio, Portfolio, Portfolio, Death, Death, Death*. Not bad, but I felt that I could do better. I found I could no longer concentrate in my lavish Manhattan penthouse. The little cherrywood table next to the bidet had once given me a nasty splinter. Cherrywood. Feh!

My old pal Reginald Blathingsmythe had always spoken well of Dunwich, so when my publisher tapped his wristwatch in reference to my deadline, I decided it was time to roll up my sleeves and get to work in the peace and quiet of Smalltown, USA.

Lars, my live-in butler, secretary, and disco-dancing instructor, took care of finding a house for me. He arranged for some of my clothes and belongings to be transported there. He made sure the utilities were turned on, all the bills were paid in advance, the lawn was mowed, and he even put a chocolate on my pillow (on a doily, of course, so it didn’t leave a mark on the fabric).

“This whole moving business has been a terrible ordeal,” I said to Reginald on my first day in Dunwich. We were seated in his living room, eating cucumber sandwiches. “But I think I will find the strength to pull through.”

“And how does your Lars, your lover, like the town?” Reginald asked, handing

me a steaming cup of oolong tea. Reggie was a plain-looking, chubby fellow with thick black hair and eyes of different colors—one green, one orange.

“Lover?” I chuckled dismissively. “You mean ‘butler.’ Lars is my hired man.”

“But he lives with you. Yes?”

“Of course,” I replied. “That is what butlers do.”

“And he makes your meals. Yes?”

“He is my disco-dancing instructor as well. He keeps track of every calorie I ingest, since a potbelly would ruin the classic lines of a leisure suit.”

“And he goes to bed with you?”

“All part of a very specific exercise regimen. He says it loosens up the hips, and I am inclined to believe him.”

Reginald choked on his tea and began to blink furiously, so that for a moment I thought he was conveying a message in Morse code.

Reginald’s furnishings, I noted, were solid oak. Oak! Now there was a wood you could trust. I noticed something odd about his bookcase—something that caused a small but sharp bell of warning to ring in my mind. Most of the volumes on its shelves were quite old, and bound in rotting human skin. Finally I noticed the thing that had set off my inner alarm: the bookends were mismatched. One was a human skull and the other was a kitschy little plastic owl. Certainly plastic has no place in the decor of a gentleman’s study.

Then I saw something else rather unusual. “So tell me, Reginald. That door in the corner—the one marked with that blood-red symbol of unholy dread. Where does that lead?”

The bland, cheery face of my host then underwent a marked change. His plain, dreary features—too boring to be considered ugly, really—suddenly twisted into the spasm-ridden, demon-haunted visage of a doomed soul being relentlessly pricked by the flaming pitchforks of the demons of Tartarus.

“The doorway to the secret grotto—I mean, spare bedroom?” he whispered hoarsely. “Nothing hideous or diabolical about a *spare bedroom*, I assure you.” He laughed nervously. “This relentless questioning of yours is uncalled-for! It really is *too much!*”

What an interesting response, I thought. “So the door really leads to a secret grotto, eh?”

“Dash it all!” he cried. “Who told you? The shocking legacy of my accursed family has been kept hidden in shadow for well over three-hundred years! And now it seems that everyone with an unusually intimate butler named Lars knows about it!”

I found Reginald’s behavior to be disturbing and inexplicable—not ‘cool,’ to borrow a term from the young people of the time. “So are you going to tell me what’s in this grotto of yours or not?”

“No! Never! It is forbidden!” His cuckoo clock then warbled the hour. “My mood-ring discussion group will be here at any moment,” he said. “Do stop by tomorrow—so long as you do not mention the black door of the Blathingsmythe fam-

ily secret, or dance-cults that worship primordial devil-gods!"

"Now why in the world would I mention—" But I cut myself off in mid-sentence. No sense in throwing poor addled Reginald into another tizzy. But I saw he was looking at me curiously, so I thought of a cunning finish to my sentence. "—puppies?"

He smiled pleasantly. "Puppies are fine. Puppies are cute. You may mention puppies as often as you like. Just not devil-gods or ancient scrolls."

"Very well then. Puppies! See you tomorrow, Reggie."

* * * * *

Back at the house, I told Lars about Reginald's behavior. He put down his newspaper to listen to me, and also to help me with my grooming. I did not like the paper's lurid headline—GRAVEROBBER'S AGAIN ABSCOND WITH THE HIDEOUS ROTTING CARGO OF LOCAL TOMBS. People so often jump to outrageous conclusions. Why, maybe the grave robbers in question were just *borrowing*.

"This matter of Reginald . . . very curious," my butler stated. "I shall have to ask the group their opinion of the matter."

Lars, in addition to his many other talents, was also a singer with a musical group called 'The People of the Village.' I was forever telling them to shorten that name—to perhaps take out some of the smaller words. But their response was always that 'The People Village' was a bit awkward, so they would be leaving the name as it was.

There were five members, and they dressed in the garb of various professions. Lars, of course, had his butler suit. Gregor wore a pirate's swashbuckling finery. Theodore sported the billowy hat and smart white outfit of a French chef. Horatio's costume was that of a matador, while Calvin favored the multi-colored togs of a circus clown.

"So you will be going back tomorrow?" Lars asked. He had just finished applying a thick layer of wax to my back. "Perhaps I should go with you. This Reginald fellow may be dangerous."

"I don't think I have anything to worry about. Reginald wouldn't hurt a fly." I screamed just a bit as Lars ripped off the wax, along with hundreds of thousands of back-hairs. "You know," I said after I'd regained my composure, "I'm still not sure what back-hair removal has to do with disco-dancing."

"Nothing. I just like waxing people. How hairy is Reginald?"

I ignored the question. "If for some reason I do not come home tomorrow, feel free to come and rescue me. Bring the group if you like. The more the merrier."

"That's what I always say," Lars said with a smile. He aimed a pair of tweezers at my face. "Now let's see what can be done about those eyebrows."

* * * * *

The next day, I had to knock several times before Reginald came to the door. I was

appalled to see that my friend had experienced a shocking transformation since our previous meeting. His thick black hair was now streaked with white, and his plump face now sagged hideously and was networked with the deep wrinkles of advanced age.

"Great bowls of clam-dip!" I uttered. "I take it your mood-ring discussion group didn't go well . . . ?"

He led me into the living room, where the coffee table was set up for the dispensal of any sort of drink one could imagine—except coffee. Bottles of gin, vodka, tequila and ouzo cluttered the lacquered surface. Reginald's booze-soaked breath conveyed to me that he was pretty lacquered as well.

"How can a man," he sobbed, "endure the burden of a century-spanning legacy of unspeakable decadence, the likes of which no decent, God-fearing society could ever tolerate?"

"Don't know . . ." I looked around the room, and noted that the black door was open about an inch. "But I bet this whole legacy of terror rigmarole concerns what's behind that door."

He followed my gaze and, seeing that the door was open, rushed over to shut and lock it.

"Oh, stop being such a mollycoddle," I said with a laugh, mixing myself a Manhattan from the assorted bottles on the table. "Let us see what is behind this door of delirium, this entryway of evil, this gateway of ghoulishness, this—"

"Okay, okay, I'll show you." Heaving a huge sigh, he unlocked the door. "Follow me."

I quickly downed my drink. "If what's behind that door is so terrible, shouldn't we carry a machete or two? A kitchen knife? An especially sturdy cocktail umbrella?"

"There is no weapon on Earth one could wield against such terror!" he moaned.

"Oh, I see. Then we should just go in unarmed. Well, fine. Lead the way."

We passed over the threshold of the black door, into a hallway of stone and earth walls shored up with heavy timbers. The way was lit with bare bulbs strung every ten feet or so on an electric cord that ran along the ceiling.

"So. Your decorator is into minimalism," I remarked.

"This is no time for bon mots and flippancies!" my host thundered. "The matter at hand is as serious as the Pope having a heart attack while wrestling with the Devil over the fate of the world's blind orphans!"

"Oh. Okay." I shrugged and followed him.

"My ancestors," Reginald said, "came to America from a little-known country called Lower Belgravia—a harsh, windswept, forsaken country, only three miles across, bordering the Flemm River, just north of Even Lower Belgravia. Oh, I know you probably thought I was descended from British royalty—in line for the throne and all that—"

"Actually, the thought never crossed my mind."

"Anyway, when my people came to this country, they shortened their name to Blathingsmythe so that they would fit in—"

"They *shortened* it? What was it before?"

"VanDeBlubblatheringsmythenstein. My ancestors came to Dunwich hundreds of years ago, bringing with them huge boar's-hide trunks filled with all sorts of ancient secrets—some of those being in fact *living* secrets, which my ancestors have had to feed for centuries, and which I had to feed about ten minutes before you arrived . . ."

"They like mixed drinks?"

"No, you fool! That was for me, to steel my nerves. Have you not read about the local grave-robbings?"

"I saw the headline, but I didn't have time to read it. Lars needed to wax me."

Reginald raised an eyebrow, then continued with his lunatic ravings. "Long story short, I have to rob graves to feed the—the *things*—you are about to see. They are quite frightening, I assure you."

"Is that why you look so grey-tressed and age-ridden?" I asked. "Did the sheer fright do this to you?"

"No. I just took a shower and forgot to reapply my hair dye and Skin-So-Tite face cream. I'm actually ninety-seven years old."

"But you were my childhood friend!" I reminded him. "We played together on the jungle gym, the see-saw, and the steam-powered child-slinger—which is now, I understand, outlawed in most states."

"I was having a spot of trouble with the law back then," he said. "I was in disguise."

"That explains a lot," I said, remembering his thick childhood moustache.

"Behold!" he suddenly and very dramatically cried. "The Grotto of Grotesqueries, where the VanDeBlubblatheringsmythensteins have hidden their loathsome secret for lo, these many years."

Certainly I'd had no idea what was to be found at the end of the tunnel trek, though I half-suspected giant killer moles with snail antennae. Imagine my shock to find—milling around in an enormous, fungi-encrusted cave, littered with skulls, ribcages, and class rings—not giant killer moles with snail antennae—but in fact, enormous centipedes with goatlike heads and bulging multi-faceted fly-eyes. And yes, snail antennae. I was right about that, at least.

"Sweet coleslaw for breakfast!" I wailed. "These beings are the very pinnacle of vileness! Nothing could be more horrible!"

"Wait until one humps your leg," Reginald said with a shudder. "My ancestors brought the eggs whence these atrocities sprang into this country in those hellish boar's-hide trunks, for they sought to someday harness the insidious power of these creatures. But alas their efforts failed miserably—as have those of all their descendants leading right up to me. Of course, now I am the last of my family—all my relatives have died of old age, and I never took the time to get married and have a

few kids. So there is no way I will ever be able to control these living blasphemies. What a pity that no six male Lower Belgravians have ever lived at the same time who all had a natural sense of rhythm. *I do*, but I have never met or even heard of any others so endowed. For only those from Lower Belgravia can unlock the ultimate secret of these multi-limbed abominations."

"I don't quite follow you," I said. One of the goat-headed, fly-eyed, snail-antennaed centipede-creatures began to sniff at my pennyloafers, so I shoo'ed it away.

Reginald crossed to an alcove on the far side of the cave, where he rummaged around for a while in an old trunk and finally produced a time-yellowed scroll.

"Unhallowed centuries ago, my ancestors engaged in numerous hideous acts of carnality with the dread primordial nature-god Shub-Niggurath, who is known as the Goat with a Thousand Young. This fiend is endowed with both male and female . . . properties. Months later, my female ancestors—and I blush with mingled horror and embarrassment to tell you this—unnaturally spawned the eggs that eventually hatched into the grotto-dwelling spawn you see before you!"

"So you are related to these loathsome beasts?"

"Don't rub it in. And actually, they are called blogdoths." He unrolled the scroll and held it out for my inspection.

"It looks like . . ." I studied the charts, the graphs, the pictures of little feet, the curved lines, and all the bizarre mathematical formulas and musical notations. ". . . like some sort of ancient . . . *dance lesson* . . ."

* * * * *

Suddenly we heard a great shuffling of feet. "Reginald," I whispered, "are more of those blogdoths heading this way?" Then I realized that the noise was coming from the tunnel to the house.

Imagine my surprise when my faithful butler Lars and his musical group, The People of the Village, emerged in full costume from the tunnel's mouth.

"Hello, boys," I said cheerily. "What brings you to the Grotto of Grotesqueries?"

"Well, in the middle of rehearsal, I realized you'd been gone an awfully long time," Lars said. "Nobody answered the phone when I called Reginald, so we all decided to rush over and see if old Reggie had gone crazy and slaughtered you like a pig. Oh, hello, Reggie. Say, where did all the blogdoths come from?"

"You know about blogdoths?" Reginald exclaimed.

All of The People of the Village nodded. "Sure," Calvin said. "We're all descended from good, hearty Lower Belgravian stock!"

"Astonishing!" Reginald enthused.

Horatio nodded. "Yes, we met at a meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Lower Belgravians over in Arkham a few years ago. We found out we shared a love of singing and dancing, and the rest is history."

"I wish I'd known about that society," Reginald said. "Especially since it's dedi-

cated to people from my home country!"

"But aren't you British?" Lars queried. "Heck, I thought you were in line for the throne."

"Look at all these blogdoths," Gregor said. "I was just telling Theodore the other day, what a pity we don't have access to some blogdoths and the Dance Lesson Scrolls of Shub-Niggurath. Why, we could, according to old Lower Belgravian legends, control an eldritch force of unspeakable power. Isn't that right, Theodore?"

Theodore nodded.

"What a mind-boggling series of coincidences!" Reginald marveled. "For here—here in my hands—I hold those very Dance Lesson Scrolls!"

"Quite a coincidence indeed!" Lars said. Then he turned to me. "Well, Wintergreen, we'd better be heading home. You're long overdue for a pedicure."

"Wait a minute," Theodore said as we all turned to leave the cave. "Reginald, can you dance?"

"In my youth, my friends called me Twinkle-Toes."

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" Theodore grabbed the scroll. "Why, if the six of us—Reginald and The People of the Village—followed the instructions on this scroll, we could harness the power of the blogdoths, and who knows, maybe even the cosmos! But can someone refresh my memory? What part do the blogdoths play in this ancient ritual?"

Reginald rushed over to the alcove and brought out what appeared to be an ancient oil-lantern with a directional visor on one side. He took some matches from his pocket and fired up the wick inside the lantern. He then handed me the relic. "The blogdoths will huddle together to watch when the dance begins. Shine the Lantern of Th'narr directly into their eyes."

I trembled with anticipation. "Wow. My first ancient ritual."

And so it began.

* * * * *

The six men of Lower Belgravian descent consulted the scroll, and then started the complex dance, complete with hand gestures and hip swivels. At several points in the proceedings, they spelled out S-H-U-B-N-I-G-G-U-R-A-T-H one letter at a time by shaping the letters with their hands, arms and occasionally even legs.

As per instructions, I directed the light of the lantern into the shiny fly-eyes of the huddled blogdoths. Thousands of beams of multi-colored light reflected off of those multi-faceted orbs, onto the gyrating dancers. I was a little disappointed I couldn't join the dance, since I wasn't from Lower Belgravia—but hey, somebody had to work the lights.

I think the glow of the lantern hurt the eyes of the creatures, because they soon began to cry out, some high, some low, in a complex series of otherworldly rhythms that created an effect not unlike a rather snappy pop tune.

The whole spectacle was pretty entertaining. But then that toe-tapping good time

turned into a horrific, soul-freezing nightmare from the mephitic depths of the Devil's own bowels.

For suddenly, the cave walls began to fade away, transforming into the star-spattered darkness of outer space, while the cave floor turned from damp gray stone into a hard black surface spinning beneath us.

"Great Caesar's enema bag!" I bellowed. "What is going on *now*?"

The spin of the black surface, which was disturbingly etched with grooves, threw me right on my backside. But I still managed to hold onto the lantern. I looked up, and saw—saw—

There are some visions that no human eyes were ever meant to see, just as there are certain odors that the human nose was never meant to sniff. Above me towered one such sight, and it reeked of one such scent.

It was a gigantic, goat-headed, snail-antennaed, titanic deejay with a multitude of furry legs, and it was pumping those hairy, behooved limbs as it rocked to the beat of the song created by the mewling blogdoths, who now were scampering all over the giant *record* which the grotto had become. Reginald and The People of the Village were also stumbling around, vomiting in time to the blogdoth-music as they nauseously danced in circles.

I knew then that the ancient deejay had to in fact be *Shub-Niggurath, the stinking Goat with a Thousand Young*—and so I set the lantern by my side and began to grovel—grovel before the primordial god of *getting one's groove on* . . .

I guess all my groveling must have paid off, because suddenly I was wearing the Black Leisure Suit of High-Priestliness, and Shug-Niggurath was giving me a big thumb's-up—or rather, hooves-up—and the nature god bid me to dance, to show my true talent so that I might become the ultimate power of the Universe. And just as I began my disco-dance of triumph—

I accidentally kicked over the oil-lantern.

The giant record caught on fire, flaming blogdoths were running around bleating, The People of the Village all caught fire, too, since their costumes were made of flammable man-made fabrics—it was just a mess.

Shub-Niggurath waved goodbye with his hooves as the grotto reverse-faded back into place. I found myself standing on damp gray stone again, surrounded by a variety of charred, dead bodies.

The visor from the broken lantern was resting at my feet.

I picked it up and sadly looked at my reflection in its shiny surface—

And ran.

I ran from the grotto, down the tunnel, into the living room, out of the house—and that pretty much brings me back to the beginning of my narrative.

What did I see reflected in the accursed visor of the Lantern of Th'narr? Surely it was a vision of supreme insidiousness, spawned in the bubbling crap-craters of the abyss. I was the Chosen One of Shub-Niggurath, and I would forever wander the Earth with that foetid god's mark upon my wretched brow.

Let me put it this way —
The TV isn't the only thing in my house with . . . antennae.

Yhagni's Priest
James William Hjort

I. DRIFTING INTO COHERENCE

How long he lay, companioned only by the pain, he could not determine, could not calculate, for his thoughts did not flow in coherent channels. There seemed naught but the agony, and the underlying longing for relief.

He found himself lying upon a bed of thick blanketing in a room litten by nineteenth century lamps. A yellow glow diffused through the chamber, imparting a warm softness to all the furnishings, the wall tapestries, the desk in the corner, and the shelves of disarrayed and well-thumbed books.

But he paid no attention.

His head throbbed incessantly, eyes ached, and there was a buzzing which filled his ears as of ocean waves badgering rocks. The misery precluded all thought, all perception save its own insistent presence.

Dimly, through eyes which squinted like those of one coming out of long confinement in a dungeon, he saw the door swing open, and a graceful form enter, carrying a tray of some sort. The tray bore no food, but merely a glass, brimful with an amber liquid.

"You are awake at last," he heard the soft voice of a girl speak. He closed his eyes from the pain.

"Here," she said, even as he felt a small glass being touched to his lips. "Drink."

Like an automaton, like an ill child fevered and delirious, he obeyed, quaffing slowly the amber fluid.

"There," she said, in tones soothing as the drink itself.

And gradually, over the space of several moments, he sensed a lessening of the aching. At last his breathing eased, and the lines corrugating his brow softened like harsh facial features mellowing with age. Soon he found he could open his eyes without the accompaniment of agony.

For the first time, he gazed upon the room with awareness. Its furnishings were unfamiliar, the books and roll top desk, and bizarrely embroidered wall-hangings.

Closer at hand, like soft incense, a night stand's lamp cast a sullen glow upon the face of the girl. She sat upon the edge of the bed like a beautiful nursemaid, softly stroking his forehead with a cloth dipped in a basin of cool water.

Once again his eyes narrowed, not from pain, but puzzlement, and wonder. For although it seemed the girl knew him well, her face was as unfamiliar to him as the room. Recognition escaped him.

When he attempted to sit and speak, the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder easily restrained him.

"No," she whispered with words flowing like streams. "You must rest. Regain your strength. Do not hurry it, let it return of its own accord. You have suffered a great ordeal, and it will require time."

He sank back, drinking in the loveliness of the girl's features, round, fine, with hair held away from her face by strangely ornamented silver braids. Her garment reminded him of something out of *Canterbury Tales*, a pastel gossamer gown whose translucent character revealed more than a hint of flesh underneath.

He averted his gaze when his focus suddenly became embarrassingly apparent.

"You do not recall my features," she said. "I can sense it in your eyes, the way they shift in silent questions."

A smile touched her lips, not expansive, but gentle. "You do not even recall yourself as yet, do you? Think. Tell me your name?"

He tried. And although it flitted on the edges of his consciousness with the elusiveness of a butterfly, still he could not grasp the name.

"Soon enough your memory will return. And you will know who you are, what has been done, and what yet remains to be accomplished."

She rose with the smile yet upon her features. "Now I must tend to Father."

He tried to speak, but she interrupted with a finger over her lips. "Shhh. Try to sleep. Soon I'll return." she interrupted with a finger over her lips. "Shhh."

After gathering the tray and empty glass, she left the bedchamber, left him alone with a mind over spilling with questionings.

II. RECOLLECTIONS AND RECONSTRUCTION

It was true. He did not recall the girl, the place, even his own identity. These things eluded him, as one who tries to contain the wind. Perhaps, he conjectured, if he could see the reflection of his face? He glanced about. A mirror hung upon the far wall. But even without rising, he sensed that his legs would yet be too weak and un-supportive.

He thought therefore of the girl. Her manner was tender, reassuring. And yet he could not banish the tenuous impression that there lay something else beneath the comfort of her words.

An apprehension perhaps? Something plagued him, as if all were not aright, the atmosphere tinged with an unidentifiable darkness, like a shadow darting beneath waters of a crystal pool.

But despite this, at least there was comfort. The awful headache had been relieved for the nonce. Evidently he was well looked after. And without recollection of past events, he had no desire to be elsewhere.

He lay back, closing his eyes.

Perhaps by association he would be able to summon an inkling of his identity, where he was, or where he belonged.

He thought of cities, sprawling metropolises of skyscrapers and dim-lit alley-

ways. Boston. New York. Dallas. Tall phallic structures of concrete glass and steel, teeming with life and yet somehow lifeless. And smaller ones, Colfax, Arkham, Melando. They possessed a familiarity, but he could not envision himself as having dwelt in any such places. No reconstruction of his past came, and there was no sense of belonging attached to the names.

With surprising ease, names of other places came to mind. Kali, Ignar-Vath, Carthmesh, the abyss of Y'qaa, Yuggoth, Irem and the City of Pillars. Again, a vague association existed, but nothing substantial.

"Rest," the words of the girl returned like echoes flung against grotto walls. "Soon enough your memory will return. And you will know who you are, what has been done, and what yet remains to be accomplished."

With the headache abated, it was but a matter moments before submerging into a slumber deep and prolonged.

His sleep did not remain tranquil, however, and the bed shook often with his tossing and turning.

As one consumed by fever, his face contorted from the visions within his head. A cold sweat beaded his brow, trickled into the furrows of his cheeks, and ran in tiny rivulets onto his pillow.

In his dreamings, eidolons moved, swirling like varicolored inks in a sorcerer's pool, or the patterns of moth-wings. They merged, coalesced into shapes which were indistinct, and yet not wholly formless.

Gradually, as with the lifting of a fog, he became aware of his surroundings. Vast walls extended on either side, fronted by close-fitting pillars, whose bases touched, and whose tops stretched away at odd angles and tilting inclinations.

Like sentinels, the pillars towered on either side, in rows, adorned by carvings and runes of some alien language, hieroglyphs whose illustrations depicted scenes of uncanny vistas, and creatures foreign to earth's nurturing.

There were winged beings whose spongy faces mimicked hands which ended in clusters of tentacles, or worms, hideous black dog-like things, hounds with snouts like malformed aardwolves.

And yet as he gazed upon the unearthly, multi-appendaged abortions, it seemed as if they were not completely foreign, as if he had seen them before, somehow, somewhere. As if they were more than figments of a weird mythology, or dream-induced fantasy

He walked, and the zoophoric columns before him converged toward what seemed to be some sort of altar, or dais. And behind, two huge doors stood ajar, yawning, beckoning darkly. They invited him to explore the secrets beyond, summoning him like a lamia who curls her fingers, luring her victim and lover with the promise of purple lips and sublime death.

Somehow, within the deepest recesses of his mind, draped behind veils of neuroscience, he knew what lay beyond the doors. But as with the other aspects of his life, the memory escaped him, evanescent as mortuary perfumes, whose scents can be

recalled only through experiencing them anew.

Ultimately, there came a creaking, gratings of ancient hinges, of metal against metal, like gates of a shunned mausoleum, like doors of a crypt where things moved which ought to be dead.

Even as the sound stung his ears, his heart fluttered in silent response. Nameless dreads prodded his feet to mercurial action. He turned to flee, running swiftly as if formless demonian things slavered at his heels. On either hand, the pillars whizzed past like the rushing of vulturine wings, till they merged into a blur which spread to fill his entire vision.

He awoke, with the pillow soaking with perspiration. His clothes clung to his skin as if he had been plunged into a midnight pool, a cavern of cold clammy waters.

The dream vanished upon awakening, leaving but a stale residue in his mind, and a lingering mood of menace. To his consternation, the headache was resurging like the inexorable flow of moon-drawn tides, like a potent bewitchery which can be banished only briefly.

Palsied hands rose to massage his temples, only to jerk suddenly away. He winced, for there bulged outward, from his right temple, a lump. It stung at his touch, and burned with the same fierceness as if he had scraped the flesh of an open sore with glass.

The incident set his head athrob with greater intensity even than before, so that, amid the suffering, he wondered at his past, — if he had not experienced some severe blow to the temple, some violent accident which had left him with a concussion, an absence of memory, and the resultant headache as blood throbbed through damaged tissue.

Perhaps he had even splintered the bones of his skull. Such an injury would do much toward explaining his plight and convalescence.

He longed for the girl's promised return, for more of the amber fluid to alleviate the pain, for a return to narcolepsy. For despite the ill dreams, his body craved for more rest.

How long had he slept? The sole window of the chamber was hung heavily with curtains, so it admitted no light and he could not determine daytime or night. No clock hung upon the wall to mark time's passage, nor upon the desk in the corner, which lay covered with books and papers and scrolls.

The books were piled in a disorderly way, but with pages open, indicating their use in some manner of research, or inquiry, rather than casual reading. Something in the thought of papers and scrolls struck a chord in his memory. Names wandered to mind, perhaps meaningless, but with the flavor of antiquity—the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Shards of Koth*, and *Yhondau Thane*. The names were like a handful of musical notes, familiar—and yet too brief to reconstruct the symphony.

Music, he thought. There had been music.

He closed his eyes, consciously relaxing his facial muscles. Resistance to the pain

only served to increase it. He allowed the strains of music to return of their own accord. Gentle sounds gathered, like delicately played flutes, and yet undertoned with other noises, vague, indefinable, as though not music at all. He drifted as one afloat on serene waters, whose current runs inevitably to the lair of singing Lorelei.

Again he found himself in the temple.

Now he knew it for what it was, a sanctuary, a fane, a temple of perpetual shadow where the light of the sun never filters, located deep within the earth, buried beneath immeasurable layers of stone and soil.

Noises were distinguishable beneath the music, like groaning sounds which issue from vocal cords of flesh, and not handcrafted instruments . . . thick, guttural sounds, waxing almost to a bellow.

The fluting increased in intensity in response to the deep rumbling sounds, or were they more like words?—the noise of some vast inhuman thing, unearthly, sickening and yet somehow alluring, akin to the low moan of lamia before she devours her lover. Then, through no discernible intimation, he knew that the music was meant for him, as a song sung unto him, and he shuddered.

Thoughts flowed effusively now, and so long as he allowed their entry, he forgot the agony which burned his temple. He sat awake in the room, impressions conjuring themselves as they willed.

The scene of his daydreaming shifted. Other shapes passed before his visioning, shapes such as those in the carvings which adorned the temple pillars. But these were no mere images chiseled and painted in stone by unknown hands, but the reality itself, fully fleshed out.

Things. Things which flitted above spiring towers on leathery wings, intent upon darksome errands. Bat like things whose bodies were long and serpentine, with faces little more than glowing orbs sunken in scaly skulls. They darted above a city of crowded constructions and cone-shaped buildings, like piles of sand in monstrous hour-glasses.

And in the city below, myriad other creatures lumbered on steeply inclining streets, upon oblique ramps, which passed beneath oddly curved archways. Creatures which oozed rather than walked, which flowed or crawled like huge blasphemies of serpents and insects. In shadows they moved, like slithering corpse worms, or snails, or slugs; with unseen methods of locomotion, and appendages whose function was as indeterminable as the basalt-like architectures through which they traveled.

And there were others, others who dwelt in sundry places, vistas and climes beyond recounting, count- less others, winged, crustaceous, insectoid, things covered with glaring, penetrating eyes, red clacking mouths, and tentacles bristling with spines and protrusions and wide slitten gullets.

The children, he thought. All the children. The thousand young. The Spawn. The Minions. In a thousand places, separated by seas of time, and gulfs of space, they dwell, and wait. Wait.

He blinked his eyes and all were gone, gone from his immediate thoughts, and yet ever-remaining to plague the edges of his consciousness. Why did these visions come with such ease, while details of his past life remained fogged and ungraspable?

III. HER FIRST RETURN

Dimly he realized that the sound of a knocking had drawn him back to the reality of the bedchamber. A feeling of relief and anxiousness overcame him. The girl, he thought, pleased.

"Come in," he blurted, and was surprised at the sound of his voice, for it seemed strangely not his own, as if heard now for the very first time.

"Ah," she smiled as she entered, again bearing a tray with a goblet. "You're awake. Have you slept?"

He nodded affirmatively, even as she offered him the glass. With a hand still palsied, he clasped it, and raised it to his lips. It was deeper of hue than before, almost crimson, as if the amber drug was laced with a blood-red additive. It seemed thicker, too, than before, and salty-sweet. A broth, he assumed, added to aid him in regaining strength.

She gazed for a moment upon his forehead. "Yes," she said. "You're doing fine. It won't be long now. Father is also progressing quite well."

"Tell me," he said, having found his voice. "Tell me who I am? What has happened? And of us, are we friends, brother and sister . . . lovers?"

She halted in her efforts of stroking his forehead with cloths, of exchanging his pillow for one dry and comfortable. He stared into her eyes, and the expression returned was one of yearning, longing. But it was equally evident that something restrained her, vying against her desire to answer. A struggle ensued in silence behind her eyes.

"No, I mustn't," she said, finally. "Father says your memory must seek out its own paths, through its own discoveries. Otherwise . . ."

"Otherwise?"

There was a pause, while her gaze shifted downwards, breaking the bridge which had joined their eyes. "Otherwise the shock . . . might cause your mind to retreat yet further, and our work would be delayed weeks, maybe even months."

"What do you . . . ?"

"Please, don't ask. I love you, can't you see that? Its better that you come back on your own. . . How I long for that time." She took his hand, ". . . when we can be as we were."

He still did not know her, but his heart responded to the emotion she had expressed. He tried to draw her close, compassion and perhaps more welling within him. But she pulled away.

"Soon enough. Soon enough," she said, with words spoken to console herself per-

haps more so than him. She rose, quickly, as if to tarry would break her resolve.

He was confused, befuddled, plagued by the impression that there was more here than a mere injury to the head.

"Give me something," he pleaded, as she reached for the ornate door handle. "A name. Your name, at least. . ."

"Karina," she surrendered as the door closed.

Karina, he reflected as he lay back. The name rolled on and on in his mind like the endless washing of waves upon the shore.

IV. LIBRARIE

Indeed the broth she had added to the cup was potent and enlivening. It warmed his stomach and soothed his trembling hands and knees, so that he even fancied rising from bed to gaze in the mirror and peruse the manuscripts spread upon the desk. There, he hoped, he might uncover some clue as to his identity, something to enkindle his remembrances, and banish forgetfulness. Although, on the other hand, he reflected, if his amnesia were due to a blow upon the head, perhaps only time would heal the injury and bring with it the return of his past.

When he flung back his blanketing and rose from the bed, his head throbbed in response. Dizziness seized him as though he stood upon the vertiginous battlements of ancient ruins, gazing down upon deathly heights. But in a moment, these qualms subsided. Slowly he strode to the table and a wall-hung looking glass.

A face glared back at him, imprisoned in the quicksilver. It was a face at once both familiar and that of a stranger. He brought fingers to his cheeks, traced the lines of his thin, gaunt face. His eyes were deep set and ringed with purple, as one who has undergone a terrible ordeal, or suffered a prolonged sickness. But even so, there was a glint of determination in those eyes, as well as a softening of the edges, as if he were one whose resolution and intentness were coupled with understanding and compassion. The features were not unhandsome, however, and in a more healthy state would have been strong and well-defined.

Brows of blondish hair furrowed as he saw the nodule which painfully adorned his temple. For it seemed more than a lump of pinkish flesh, being laced with dark veining and a mottling of color like the egg of some obscure reptile.

Unfortunately the sight of his features did not break open the floodgates of memory. The only intimations he possessed of anything beyond that of the girl and his present situation were those things envisioned in his dreams, and they were doubtless the spawn of nightmared sleep, the creations of a troubled mind. Of his past, his identity, his birthplace, how he had come to be in the house, who Karina's father was,—of these and myriad more he was wholly nescient.

Perhaps some clue inhered in the pages strewn below him, some hint, some phrase or writing which would serve as the catalyst to re-establish him in reality.

But while he stood there, an eerie sense of detachment prevailed—akin to the in-

expressible feelings of aloneness and non-existence which come in moments of solitude, of quiet contemplation of the abysses of space and stars at night. For the moment he felt strangely alien, as if somehow he did not belong, as if he had been snatched from another world, another life, and thrust into a foreign environment.

To him, the girl seemed unreal, the room, and the body with which he was draped. Reality seemed somehow allied with the features of his nightmares, the temple, and what he knew must be waiting behind those massive doors.

He shook his head as one tossing off a daydream, and thumbed through the papers which now demanded his attention. As he had suspected, they were notes of some manner of researches, correspondences, and pertinent passages marked in various reference works,—some recent, some fairly crumbling in their moldiness, with leather binding, and clasps of iron and small copper padlocks.

As he perused, his bewilderment increased. Much of what he saw seemed utter gibberish, chronicles of some manner of heretical superstition or fable or folklore. But the writings attempted to trace certain links and similarities present in the doctrines of Egypt and Babylon, Druidism and even certain North American Indian beliefs.

Scattered papers, he found, were written recently on clean paper, and were evidently a compilation of various underlined book texts and passages. And these drew his scrutiny.

Whether he had been the author or recipient of these particular notes, he could not determine. But what they suggested was darkly intriguing. The one which he now held appeared to be a letter to a scholar or colleague . . .

"Think not, Jonathan, that what is written in those manuscripts you have uncovered tells the whole tale. For even as the patterns of fabric may be altered or paintings retouched to please the viewer, so too has the truth been distorted through passage of time. As with histories of mankind, the changes have been accomplished more by omission than by outright fabrication. Though I am afraid we have seen our fair share of that, too.

"Well it is said that histories are written by those who win the battles.

"As for these studies in which you are involved, Jonathan, doubtless you acknowledge much of the truth which underlies the legends of Cthulhuism. And though publicly the theories are scoffed at or at least held in disregard by the academia at this university, there exists a core of persons who know otherwise. As you know, I number myself among these.

"But whether these tales are to be taken at face value, or explored as allegories of conflict and power and resurgence of another reality, I do not know. Time and further researches, perhaps, will tell. Though more and more I am becoming convinced that the underlying basis for these legends is a viable reality with which to contend.

"I have long been looking forward to the time when a grant will allow

me the freedom to pursue the researches necessary to establish the validity of some of these matters, and would be most overjoyed if you would visit me at your convenience to discuss further the possibility of your joining such an expedition. I'm sure that Karina, whom you have met, shares my enthusiasm and anticipation of your visit.

Yrs. MacKenzie."

And another:

"It is not what he wrote that drove Abdul Alhazred to madness, as loathsome and nightmare-inducing as those things are... but those things that he failed to write, or were later expunged from the original Arabic manuscript by his own hand. That there have been alterations at various times is evident. It is known, for example, that the Miskatonic copy of the *Necronomicon* omits several passages which are found in the Arabic. One pertaining to the resurrection of a sorcerer's dead corpse through the efforts of his own indomitable will. As well as others. This tampering was accomplished with purpose. "There are words which when written set aflame the very paper they embellish, and others which, when spoken, rot the tongue in the mouth of the speaker. In Colfax I found such a reference, as well as this rather unusual phrase:

Yhagni pthagi tal kai pthagiis
Yhagni dreams her own dreams

"There is a text, the *Shards of Yhondau Thane*, which purports to reveal certain inconsistencies in the Orthodox Cthulhu texts. There is presented, therein, evidence of tampering, alterations, and omissions. And it lays bare the existence of heretofore unknown members of the Great Pantheon.

"There are deeper secrets than those of Hastur and Yog Sothoth, and Azathoth and Nyarlathotep. Yhagni dreams her own dreams "Though I have gathered photocopies of scrolls which predate first century codices, the *Shards of Yhondau Thane* seems of much latter origin, perhaps eighteenth or nineteenth century . . . certain phrases, word usages, suggesting the latter date. Some portions are in need of no translation whatsoever. . . *Shards of Yhondau Thane*, initial translation of the ckulfathx manuscripts:

"Great and wondrous Yhagni, in the gates your children shall laud you, and await with open arms your glorisome return. The winds gibber with their voices, and the earth mutters with their consciousness. In darkness they tread, and Great Cthulhu, who is their cousin, spies them but

dimly.

"Of their glory and grandeur, the chosen ones shall know. And when the hateful gates which hold them in abeyance are dissolved, and the stars move aright, then shall they return. Then shall the Messenger go forth to R'yleh and Kadath and Yuggoth and all other places, manifold and scattered, where they wait . . .

"And woe shall be to those who have [obscure]

"Till that time shall arrive, and the cycles revolve, those who serve them shall give them shelter and worship and feed them.

"And when [obscure] Those hidden in the depths, the primal lurkers beyond time and yet in all time, shall [obscure] And the hellish minions, the spawn who prepare for their return to greatness, and bear the mark in their flesh [obscure] And this shall be the sign of acceptance into the priesthood, a [obscure] and from it grows the very flesh of Yhagni,

"Yhagni pthagi tai kai phtagiis
"Yhagni dreams her own dreams.

"Her name is extinguished from the annals, and shunned even by the priests of Cthulhu . . . even the Mad Arab did not give mention of her in the Necronomicon, save in symbol and obscure prophecy.

"Cthulhu knows the deep ones, and his brothers know the Dhols, the Abominable Mi Go, the Tcho Tcho People, the Gugs, the Gaunts of the Night, the Shoggoths and Voormis, and the Shantaks, and all the others... All those who are children of the Children of the Old Ones, and who await their return.

"But Yhagni dwells alone, served only by her priests in her Temple of Pillars at the depths of Kyartholm.

"She is shunned even by her cousin Cthulhu, and hated of Hastur for her hideousness. And more . . . for she dreams her own dreams, and Yhagni dreams of dominion. And from sea to sea, and the moon to the setting of the sun, shall she one day hold sway.

"For she was imprisoned, not by the ELDER GODS in ages past, but by those of her OWN KIND , long before they themselves were overpowered by the Lord of the Abyss and cast into Outer Darkness and far flung places of death and divers places of sleep and restraint.

"It was their hands which raised themselves against her. And Yhagni forgets not. Yhagni dreams of vengeance."

He paused, massaging the bridge of his nose with his fingers, to relieve the eye-strain, and insure that what he had read was truly there, before him, and not some extension of his ill dreaming. Once he caught his hand moving in an unconscious

gesture to his temple, but the remembrance of its extreme tenderness quickly halted his action.

He was tiring, but could not pull himself away from the papers, for, in spite of their wild and fanciful doctrines, they were intriguing, and drew him like a sliver of iron to a lodestone.

He examined another letter, or portion thereof:

"Where is her haven? The *Shards* delineate her stars and their positions. Do you realize what this means? The stars are right for this hemisphere! Even taking into account the shift since the *Shards* were written, they are visible only from the North American continent, in their prescribed positions in relation to one another.

"She is here! She is here!"

An extension of the *Shards* was upon another page:

"Of the Great Old Ones, it is said that they are immortal, for theirs is not the possession of life as it is known to man, nor is it death. And yet, be-times, they do draw sustenance, and feed.

"As for their spawn, hideous and manifold are these, who bear varied resemblance and kinship to their sires, and who exist in sundry forms and secretive places.

"Their authority and power is lesser than their sires', and yet hideous it is, and awesome and deadly. And these bear fruit on THIS side of the gates, and spawn their young in earthly warrens. Some are held by sigils of old, and dwell in confined realms and limited spaces. But these are not wholly restrained in their places, and are mobile in cycles, and breed in their seasons.

"But their seasons are not those of the sons of men, and their ways not those of humankind. In horrid ways are their offspring engendered, and in unspeakable ways . . . [obscure].

"For the gate is flesh and ravenous are the young when born . . . Yhagni dreams of children.

"But Yhagni is ALL, and needs no mate. She is father and mother, progenitor and begetter, beginning and end. And she dwells alone in her - Temple of Pillars."

Here followed some scribbling, added in red pencil beside the quotation:

"The priestly line died out, or were murdered long ago, she has been unserved and unattended for decades. It is not known whether the priests of old were the original builders of this house, or not. Perhaps

some unsuspecting parties constructed it with the intention of using the caverns below for the protection they afforded in windstorms or times of war . . . and were later ousted by the cult.

"Beware her touch. For flesh she takes, and makes it her own. For her touch is death and her flesh walks alone."

Here followed a question mark, and notes scribbled in commentary or possible explanation.

"She devours flesh? Assimilates it into her being, as we do the food we consume? Or can she appear in the guise of flesh? Take on a humanoid appearance and likeness? What? Is she mobile? The sigils define her sphere of activity, do they not? Could our discovery have been more than chance? Could her mind have reached forth, because it was time for the priesthood to be renewed? Because she prepares for emergence?"

These things he read and more. And from them, as pieces of a vast puzzle, he began to reconstruct at least a probable background of himself.

For the time being, he felt that his name was Jonathan, that he had been a teacher of some sort, or at least an assistant to a professor, in the specialized field of historical research, chronicling folklore and religions of old, possibly archaeology.

In conjunction with another pedagogue, a collegiate, MacKenzie, he had embarked upon more specific researches. They had uncovered vague references to a heretofore unknown deity or abstruse fetish, some deity who belonged to an obscure and yet seemingly consistent mythology of alien beings, who filtered to the earth in primordial times, who held dominion, and who were ousted by dimly described elder gods, and imprisoned in various times, dimensions, and places hidden on the earth and throughout the universe.

There prevailed a recurrent theme of resurgence of rebirth, and re-emergence of their dominion, not unlike the Messianic Cycle of Biblical themes; but of a malevolent nature, more akin to portions of the Book of Revelation which presents the Serpent being cast for a thousand years into the abyss, only to return to do battle with the holy ones.

And there were countless facets of the mythos whose precise inter-relation he could scarcely fathom at this point.

He suspected that he and MacKenzie had traced the worship of the deity to the surrounding locale. Priests had possibly dwelt in that very house. There were catacombs and passages below ground throughout the region. Perhaps beneath his very feet.

What had happened to him? How had he been injured? The papers revealed nothing, nor could he justifiably have expected them to. Had they been on the trail of something, he and MacKenzie, who was doubtless the father of the girl, Karina?

Had they been attacked by someone, someone who resented their prying? Or had they merely fallen? Perhaps while exploring some ancient warren or ruinous temple constructions located nearby? He found no marks or bruises elsewhere on his body to substantiate the theory of having suffered a fall, but the knot on his head bespoke of some memory-jarring encounter or mishap.

He recollected a phrase. "Soon shall rise the day, and in that day, all that which is in secret shall be uncovered, and that which is hidden be brought to light."

He hoped, with a mirthless grin, that the same would prove true of his memory.

For a long while, his debility, his weakness, had been returning. And as he lay down one of the last pages, he felt a tinge of queasiness grip his intestines, a tinge which quickly waxed to nausea. Amid sudden heavy breathing, he stumbled towards his bed.

Pulling forth the bedpan with epileptic fingers he withdrew it just in time to receive his nauseation.

Thick globules of blackish slime filled the pan. With the giddy weakness that follows vomiting, he pulled himself to the bed.

Once before he had bled, in profusion, from a tooth extraction, and afterwards disgorged clots of stomach-thickened blood. But when he tried to seize upon the recollection, it vanished, as if some will forestalled his effort.

With the nightstand towel, he wiped his mouth, nervously, tremulously. He had exerted himself overmuch, and the broth had not settled on his stomach.

Sleep came, heavily nightmared, and wet.

V. PHANTASMAGORIUM

When Karina returned, he was the first to speak.

"I had a dream," he said, holding the goblet before him, staring into its swirling depths. ". . . about this broth. I dreamed I saw someone slaughtering small animals, bringing me their blood in this bowl, I . . ."

The tray she held slipped from her hands, clanged to the floor loudly, like a shield dropped by an arrow-pierced warrior.

Without reply she rushed through the ritual of wiping his brow, caring for his bedding.

"I cannot stay. Father's improvements were short lived. He has had a relapse, and I must see to him." She voiced her words with a thickening in her throat, suppressing a sob.

At the door, in agonized silence, she locked eyes with him, almost sadly. "What am I supposed to do? You read the books, you must have. . ." She half pleaded, half sobbed. "Answer me . . . it's part of the ritual. It's necessary. You were the one who always had to convince me of each step, each phase, overcome my reluctance, objections. . . You and Father. . . And now you want me to . . . Oh Jonathan, I can't . . ."

Her words hung in her throat, but found expression instead in tears. She left.

He was stunned, trapped in the silence of dumbfoundment. Was there some truth to the outré things he had read on the scrolls and papers and handwritten notes? Evidently he had been embroiled in some venture beyond that of mere researches into a dead belief, more than the uncovering of a revival of an ancient worship. More and more he suspected that he and MacKenzie and the girl were the revivalists, the worshippers. And that they had sought some sort of entry into the priesthood of the obscure goddess Yhagni.

He thought of patriarchs and colleges of the mysteries of old, the priests of Babylon, the hierophants, the bridge-makers between gods and men, the ministrants, the keepers of perpetual flame, overseers of oblations of blood and wild frenzied rituals of knife-slicing and incantations. What were the duties of the Priests of Yhagni? Had he undergone some ritual of initiation, leaving him without identity, his head screaming in pain save for the drug?

Enough of his former character of inquisitiveness, his sense of wonder, had survived into his amnesiac state, so that he yearned to know what dark secrets could drive men such as MacKenzie and himself to such actions. And yet, with this revelation, this conjecture, there came a resurgence of the nervousness, disquietude that had smothered him in his nightmares. Anew, he felt the clammy terror experienced as he had listened to the music of the idiot flute players, stood before the doors, and heard them creak in grim opening.

And upon his bed he shook, with dozens of questions racing unresolved through his head, transforming them into horrid dreaming as he passed from consciousness into sleep.

When again he heard sounds from without the chamber, and the girl Karina entered the room, he spoke, choosing his words carefully, never averting his eyes from the girl, so as to gauge her reactions.

"When will the Ordination be complete?"

Karina's face, which had avoided him as she proffered the goblet of brew, suddenly brightened. "Your memory has returned!" she exclaimed. But while she beamed at him, he remained silent. So that soon her countenance fell, passed over by a shadow of doubt and reservation. She sought her own indications that he had truly returned to his senses, but there was no outward flow of love from him, no joyousness at the sight of her face, no evidence of a lover's reunion.

"No," she said slowly, with sadness and disappointment. "It has not returned, or else you have changed."

"It has returned, partially. In pieces. I'm sorry, but what exists between us is yet a blank. Now tell me. When do we return to the Temple of Pillars? What has MacKenzie said?"

She seemed undecided for a moment, but then resigned, evidently convinced of his partial recall.

"Tonight, the cycles are aright. And then not again until the two days of the full moon a month from now. But will your feet carry you?"

"Yes," he said, and was not fabricating. "The broth has strengthened me. Now go, tell MacKenzie that I'm ready."

She frowned, not a scornful frown but one of grave concern. "Even if you are ready, I don't know about Father. Something about his condition worries me. It's not as we were led to believe. Perhaps it would be better to await the next opening." She shrugged. "But the decision isn't mine. It never has been. I'll see what he says . . ."

Karina gathered the tray, and in one impulsive moment, he reached out to take her hand. And this time she did not draw away. There was warmth, tenderness, and much more in her touch. But upon her face, there was concern, a visible manifestation of the subtle, ill-premonitions that he had felt when she had first come into the room, hours beforehand. The shadow was still there, the lurking beneath the pool, the darkness in the mirror, the quiver in the voice.

And as she departed, he felt the growing of both tension and excitement; for the first time, he felt as though he were playing an active role in that which befell him.

VI. THAT IS NOT DEAD . . .

A scream, shrill and piercing, shattered the air, shattered his concentration, causing him to jump from his bed. There followed a clangor as of a metal tray falling, and glass shattering. The screams were unabated, terrifying, chilling the blood and senses.

All the unformulated fears and apprehensions he had borne, all the terrors of his dreams, all his own suspicions were given sudden violent voice by the screaming.

With heart in his throat, he ran out of his room for the first time, ran into the hallway, a lavish, museum-piece of decor of polished wood, and luxurious furnishings, strange decorations, tapestries of inhuman creatures and men in postures of obeisance, prostration.

But he paid no attention, seeking out the sound of the screaming. It beckoned him unerringly to a room round the corner of the corridor.

Karina stood in the hallway. The screaming had stopped now, and she was heaving, sobbing uncontrollably. "My God, my God . . ." She staggered like one smitten by unbearable grief. Her hands covered her eyes as if to catch the tears.

She had closed the door behind her after having emerged, and she leaned back against its carven surface for support, conveying the impression that she held back something within, shut away, and out of sight.

Through misted and swollen eyes, she glanced up at his feverish approach. A thousand thoughts flared behind those eyes, unfathomable, unvoiced. The love was gone, replaced by something else.

Like an irrepressible fountain, those thoughts were suddenly unleashed.

"I should have known. God, I should have known . . . now it's too late . . . This was madness from the start. You're insane. Both of you. And I was a fool to help . . ."

He reached for her.

"No, don't touch me! Let the wrath of Yhagni fall on me. What does it matter? Eternal Priesthood, what blasphemy! What an abomination! You've been deluded all along."

She laughed bitterly at some secret understanding. "She never intended to give you and Father life on her level, to serve her as she is . . . to initiate you to her priesthood. You are food for her children! Do you hear me? Food! Poor Father, poor Father, the blind fool!"

Again, he extended hands to comfort her, enfold her, to calm her, as if by holding her, he might also quell the dread which ate at his own soul and could not be vanished.

"Oh God, leave me alone. Just leave me alone . . ."

She drew in a breath of air, as if to steady herself, brace herself for some action.

"There's so little time. So little time. If you have any humanity left in you, Jonathan, you won't interfere."

Even as she spoke, Karina crossed the hall. When she returned, she bore a sword culled from a decorative wall holder.

"The blade is of silver," she muttered cryptically.

A gleam smoldered within her eyes. "Don't try to stop me." She added with intensity, "She'll not have even a part of Father. I won't give her even that . . ."

Impassioned determination replaced her tears. She pushed on the door handle, which swung inward on its hinges in mute protest.

As she vanished into the dark interior, he stood dumbfounded, muddled with confusion, alone, like a sailor adrift without bearings, faced with a sudden and unnerving calamity.

He had nothing to offer the girl, no consolation, no true grasp of what was taking place in that shadowed house. Even now he was more a spectator than a participant. He saw the door, silent and grim. Whatever had driven the girl to such a sudden and radical change lay beyond it.

Muffled sounds wormed their way to his ears, groans and bleatings, and heavy breathing.

In the dim light, he witnessed a scene the equal of any snatched from his nightmares. Karina stood at the bedside, the sword held aloft in hands which seemed paralyzed between action and indecision.

And there on the bed itself, he saw something, something as hideous as the most abominable of his dream-spawned creatures. It huddled over the corpse of the old man, or its remnants.

The man's head was split in two, skull bones hollow, and the chest cavity shredded as though ripped open and gutted. The thing was hovering, crouching, squatting, its outlines wavering as if it were growing larger and stronger with each passing moment.

It occupied itself with licking the corpse, licking the ooze as a cat licks mucous from a newborn kitten. Portions of the thing's body were disturbingly clear, horrify-

ingly alien, while others appeared even more hideous due to their formlessness, — like newly hatched wasps, white and partially developed, slimy as slugs or mollusks ripped from their shells.

From the doorway, he stared at the scene, believing and yet disbelieving the testimony of his senses.

Repulsion and fascination, horror and enthrallment, melded together.

The thing on the bed, in its vulturine posture, did not see the girl, did not see the silver blade glinting in the lamplight, nor the way Karina's eyes closed in tears as her arms fell, again and again, upon the thing.

She stabbed at it, hacked at it wildly. Her chest heaved and sobbed with each swing, each blow.

The abomination which huddled over the corpse, its extremities almost indistinguishable from the remaining portions of the body, did not scream. But it exuded a sickening whine. It sputtered from vocal cords of appalling locations, and moaned from mouths in multiple places.

The shadows of the chamber misted. Blood and ichor splattered upon Karina's gown and face, and yet still she hacked.

Tentacles twitched spasmodically, curling like earthworms, wet and thick.

Finally their motions ceased. Karma fell to her knees, her hands frozen upon the sword's hilt, knuckles white as bones, fists clenched like vises.

She looked up at him.

"Give me that," he said, extending a hand to take the sword. She glowered at him, and aimed the befouled tip his way, holding it aloft now with arms dipped to the elbows in a bloody bath.

She rose from the bedside, away from the wet sheets and gory blanketing. Maintaining her face and the sword point toward him, she backed to the doorway.

"See what your madness has brought? At least Father has been released. And she did not touch me. I am clean of her foulness. Goodbye, Jonathan. You're one of them, and she can have you . . ."

Karina's last words were heard obscurely. His eyes did not follow her as she fled, running down the maze of hallways, hopelessly lost to him. A stab of pain gripped him, like a branding iron shoved through his temples.

The sudden and violent resurgence unmanned him.

His head throbbed, and when he touched the lump, it seemed to be extended, elongated, swelling, bulging. The pain waxed a hundredfold, and when he took a step, he staggered, his balance stolen. The pressure within his head pulsed unbearably. The buzzing assailed him anew, roaring like a thousand maelstroms.

He clutched his head, screaming, as hands encountered the things which now extended from his temple like horns or snakes.

He staggered drunkenly, poised upon the brink of some great abyss. He stumbled towards the center of the room. The momentum of his weight carried him into the bed, onto the sodden mash which befouled the blankets. His face fell—ground

in a green and crimson slime, sticky as the oozing from a broken egg. His hands pushed out in a vain attempt to rise, touching the shattered skull fragments of old MacKenzie, the clumpy piles of grue, the wet vileness of his remains, and the remains of the thing which had been consuming MacKenzie's corpse.

Acheronic vapors rose from the remains, stung his eyes, his nostrils, clung to him unattenuated.

Somehow he slid away from the bed, and through misted eyes saw the flask of amber fluid, unbroken and brimful of the drug. On knees and hands, he sought the table, crawling blindly, groping for the bottle.

And when at last he felt it within his grasp, he thrust it towards his mouth, unfeeling, all sensations blurred by the white hot agony of his temple.

The whole bottle was downed. But pain attenuated only slightly. Through a haze, he managed to rise to his feet, to stagger into the hallway, and stumble down the stairway.

Tables were shoved aside.

Lamp stands fell from their perches.

Curtains were torn down as he grasped for support and many times fell to the ground.

But still he continued on, reeling through the passageways, lurching down stairways into subterranean vaults, into catacombs and tunnels which led deeper and deeper and deeper.

Yhagni pthagi tai kal pthagiis
Yhagni Yhagni Yhagni

The words floated, like drumbeating, throbbing with the same regularity and intensity as his protrusions.

They issued from both within his own brain, and from outside, from beyond, from the place to which his feet conveyed him.

He knew the passageways.

He followed instinctively, on and on until once again he stood beside the zoophoric columns, the carven pillars, the high vaulted ceiling.

Tonight the cycles are aright.

Yhagni Yhagni Yhagni
Yhagni dreams her own dreams

The noise of the fluting filled the chamber, echoed endlessly from the vast columns, the inclining walls. The groaning arose. Low alluring sounds mingled with the high shrill music of the spheres, and with the noises in his head.

In an instant he knew. The cycles were right.

Yhagni had come into her season. She had given them, not the mark of the priest-

hood in their flesh, but more. She had impregnated them with her seed.

They had served, not as fathers, but as carriers, hosts, for the embryo. One of her children had been hatched from MacKenzie, consuming his corpse for strength even as the growing fetus does the embryonic fluid.

Yhagni Yhagni Yhagni

He saw the marvelous doors beyond the dais, and they were opening, slowly, beckoning, summoning. They demanded entry into the shadows where she waited.

Before Jonathan saw her in her true form.

Before his vision split and his eyes waxed unfocused as the distance between them widened.

Before his head cracked open.

And the tentacled thing wormed its way out of his broken skull and out of the rent-open chest cavity.

Before he fell beside the open-leaved doors in one last paroxysm,—Jonathan gave voice to one final utterance . . .

"MOTHER."

The Devil's Steps

Robert M. Price

Alice Spenser waited patiently through the routine. She stood on the rich but faded carpet in the oak-paneled reception office while the Great Man's secretary verified her appointment. Of course Alice knew Miss Briarton knew that Dr. Ap-Rhys was expecting her. She was a regular visitor. As the President of the Graduate Students Association at the Brichester University Divinity College it was her task to make regular reports to him as to the academic progress of her student colleagues, to make suggestions for the improvement of the program from the student point of view, and generally to keep the lines of student-faculty communication open. This she did well, for it had not taken her long to learn that despite Professor Ap-Rhys's frosty exterior, a vestige from the days of pre-War Old School decorum, he was actually quite warm and truly interested in the progress of the tiny band of apprentice scholars training at the prestigious school. The two had quickly developed a friendly working relationship.

"You may go on in now, Ms. Spenser," said the bespectacled matron, one of that tribe of devoted secretaries who seem to eschew marriage as infidelity to her beloved Professor.

With an appreciative nod, Alice passed through the door, as many in her position had done over the years. She was no longer intimidated by the look of the place, for it had the appearance of an old library in which a process of spontaneous generation caused new books to appear atop old ones with preternatural rapidity. She did half fear being caught in an avalanche. Knowing that this office, too, must be oak-

paneled, she could nonetheless no longer see much of it, seeing that most of the vertical space was book-covered or festooned with framed photographs of the likes of C.H. Dodd, F.F. Bruce, T. R. Glover, Sidney Lampton, and other greats of British New Testament scholarship, Dr. Ap-Rhys's own field of study.

And yet she could not stop her eyes from wandering to the shelves for a moment before settling on the owlish visage of the Professor, looking up from a shapeless stack of books and papers.

"Good day, Ms. Spenser. I've been expecting you. I suppose you'd say we're in the mid-term doldrums now, so we may have little to discuss. Any news on the Colloquium speaker for next year?"

"Not yet, sir. We're still waiting on Dr. Marshall, but his duties at Edinburgh keep him pretty busy. I hope to know before the end of the month, though. I know that's cutting it close. Dr. Lincoln at Sheffield is another possibility."

"Very good. It's never easy. It will come out right in the end. Always does. Now what else is on your mind, Ms. Spenser?"

"As you say, sir, there's little else to report—except for one bit of news that I think will surprise you."

"Yes?"

"It concerns that fellow Tedrick."

"Oh yes, the poor chap who can't seem to arrive at a thesis topic. How long has he been at it?" Dr. Ap-Rhys sat back in his leather chair. He could not repress a note of amusement, though he did feel for the young man. Every few years there would be someone like him, with a substantial command of the scholarly lore, but with no discernible originality. British scholars were accustomed to the task of the archivist and the apologist, unlike their German rivals who made innovation their watchword, but some creative insight was necessary. One must after all prove oneself with a dissertation, and a dissertation had to have something new to say.

"I don't know, sir. He was here when I entered the program. But he's apparently come up with something at last, and he promises to unveil it at the seminar tomorrow." This last was a regularly scheduled but unofficial function where the graduate students would meet to share ideas, present paper drafts for the scrutiny of their peers before handing in their final version to the professors.

Dr. Ap-Rhys gave it a moment's thought and asked, "I don't suppose it would intimidate the lad unduly if an old faculty member were to sit in?"

"I can't rightly say, Professor, but then I should imagine he'd be flattered at your interest. And it's certainly your prerogative."

The interview did not last much longer.

The next afternoon the small circle of students were indeed surprised when Professor Ap-Rhys stepped into their lounge just after the start of the meeting. He nodded and quietly took a seat. Mr. Tedrick could be seen to swallow hard, but he betrayed no other sign of nervousness as he launched enthusiastically into his presentation,

setting forth the basic concept of the book-length paper he hoped to begin writing as soon as the appropriate committee approved his thesis prospectus.

All were silent, keenly interested, and, Alice began to think, even vaguely alarmed. For Mr. Tedrick's researches had taken a peculiar direction indeed. Alice could not read Dr. Ap-Rhys's poker face, but then it rarely evidenced any real emotion anyway.

Tedrick had reached the final lap. "Here's the meat of the thing. In both Synoptic versions of the Beelzebub Controversy, the scribes charge Jesus with 'casting out demons by the prince of the demons,' and he refutes the charge. But he does it in quite different ways. Mark's Gospel has him begin with a rhetorical question, 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' The 'Q' source underlying Matthew and Luke lacks this and instead substitutes two subsequent hypotheticals: 'If I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?' and 'If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.' This complex is plainly a secondary midrash applying to Jesus' case the Exodus story of Moses' triumph over Pharaoh's magicians who finally had to acknowledge Moses' superiority, saying, 'This is the finger of God.'

"So, bear with me now, if you omit both Mark's rhetorical question and Q's midrash, you get close to the primitive tradition lying behind them both. And what's left is no refutation at all! Indeed, we must take Jesus' words as an admission and a defense of his practice of 'binding the strong man.' In other words, he did bind the power of Beelzebub to do his bidding. He was at first regarded not as the Son of God, but rather, as Celsus and the rabbis maintained, a magician who used the power of Satan against Satan, so that Satan's kingdom would come crashing down. I can adduce plenty of parallels from the magical papyri to show how well it would fit current practice, but I think you get the idea. Any questions?"

All eyes swung over to the impassive face of Professor Ap-Rhys. After a moment he spoke, as if sensing the others needed him to speak. "Well, Mr. Tedrick, it's original, I must say, however unorthodox. Let me give some thought to the matter."

Through all this, the young researcher seemed not one whit apprehensive, though he might have been expected to shiver at the prospect of being shot down in flames before his peers by a judge whose verdict was to be feared only less than that of God himself. But instead Tedrick seemed positively eager to finish and almost disappointed when the comments were so meager. When Dr. Ap-Rhys rose abruptly to return to his office, Tedrick took this as his clue to exit as well, as if he cared not a fig for his colleagues' suggestions. This left the rest of them more than a little dumbfounded and feeling abandoned.

"Well, Ian, what did you think of it?" asked one blank face.

"To tell the truth, the word 'blasphemy' comes to mind. I'd laugh it off if his reasoning weren't so bloody cogent."

Alice paid little attention to the interchange which was beginning to take on a more heated tone. She rose to leave, feeling a strange urgency, yet unaware of her

goal. She found herself walking at a brisk pace across the campus, through the venerable stone archways and past the megalithic, ivied halls devoted to Science, Archaeology, Literature. She could not get the shrunken figure of Hugh Tedrick off her mind. She knew little about the man. He was thirtyish, ill-kempt with the obliviousness of one who lives in his mind rather than in the world. His straw hair was usually greasy and chopped for convenience rather than style. He kept to himself, and, as far as anyone knew, his only diversion from his studies was his habit of taking moonlight walks through the wooded hills just beyond the campus.

Dr. Ap-Rhys turned in early that evening, feeling strangely fatigued, even, he might even have said, spiritually fatigued. As he prepared himself for bed in his rooms at the University that night, he reflected gravely that today's students tended to seek novelty for its own sake, no matter that they stood to upset the faith of the humble in Christ's flock. But the church had, after all, weathered the teapot tempests of her own bishops, Colenso, Robinson, Jenkins, even that Pike fellow over in America.

Once abed, despite his exhaustion, he had unaccustomed difficulty falling asleep. He dreamed, but upon rising with the dawn, the Professor had no recollection of what he had dreamed. And at this he felt somehow relieved. He reflected that he might as well betake himself to his office and make an early start.

He had hoped to spend several hours at work on a new manuscript to deal with the theology of the Pastoral Epistles on the hypothesis that they had the Writer to the Hebrews for their author, as a few scholars held. Several verses might be viewed in a new light if one might make significant cross reference to a much larger corpus of material by the same author. But his plans were cut short with a burst of frantic pummeling on the door. It was too early for Miss Briarton to be at her post fending off annoying callers, so there was nothing for it but to answer the knock. He was readying his polite but firm dismissal when he saw who awaited him.

Alice Spenser stood without, disheveled and hysterical.

"Come in, my dear, and by all means tell me what has happened. Here, take a seat. Go ahead while I stoke the fire."

It was a moment before she could compose herself sufficiently to answer. By this time, Professor Ap-Rhys had pulled up a chair beside hers so as not to have the width of his great desk as a barrier between them. He took her hand and held it firmly, as he had done with his own daughter in earlier years.

"I still don't quite know what happened myself, Professor," she gasped between sobs. "It was yesterday afternoon, just after Tedrick's presentation . . . the bastard! He left shortly after you did. Then I left. I suddenly felt like I had to. I couldn't think of anything but his greasy face. Not his presentation, just him. Before long I found myself knocking on the door of his rooms. I hadn't even known where he lived, but there I was. He opened immediately, said he'd been expecting me. What kept me? I was already confused, but this made me feel panic. I can't explain it, but outwardly I

was calm.

"He reached for his coat and said he supposed I'd be warm enough as I was. Then he said he knew I must be wondering where he'd gotten the idea for the thesis, and that he wanted to show me! We would be going for a little walk. When we got back outside it was beginning to get dark. He took my hand and held me close to him as we walked. I was disgusted and wanted to run away. Somehow I couldn't, though, and we walked on past the edge of the campus and into the woods. We climbed a ridge and stood there arm in arm. Inside I was protesting, but I swear I couldn't make my mouth say what I wanted it to say. Then we . . . Oh, Professor, I'm so dreadfully embarrassed to be telling you this . . . we started kissing! I couldn't help it; it was as if someone else were in control of me.

"As we stood there, the moon rose. It was getting colder, and a breeze was rising. I guess he thought it was romantic, almost as if he'd orchestrated it. Then he took me over to a clearing and pointed out what looked like a set of footprints set into the ground. The soil thinned out there, and it seemed like these four footprints were set in solid stone. The moonlight made it easy to see the contrast of shadows.

"He smiled and said, 'Alice, this is where I come to get my prayers answered. It always works here. I just discovered it. I suppose it's something like Eliade's theory of Sacred Space. Some places are just more powerful than others—if you know how to use them.' I remember everything he said, because I was beginning to be afraid of what he would say next. I knew something awful was about to happen.

"He continued: 'I wasted all that time, years, I guess, waiting for some idea to pop into my head so I could get to work and receive my degree. And then I learned about this place. Here's how it works. All you have to do is put one foot in one of the prints, then say your prayer, and it works. Why, it was no sooner than I prayed the first time than the idea came to me, the one you heard earlier today. You can only pray for three things, and I've got one more. And I'm not greedy. I guess it would happen anyway, but I'm going to pray that my thesis becomes accepted, not just by the committee, you know, but by everyone. I'm praying it will become 'critical orthodoxy,' and that on the strength of it I'll be offered a post at the Divinity College, or maybe at Cambridge. What do you think?'

"For the first time I felt able to say something, so what I said was, 'But you said there were three prayers allowed. That's only two. What was the second?' He said I was. Then I couldn't say any more, couldn't scream like I wanted to, and . . . and . . ." She broke off into sobbing again.

"I think I can guess the rest, my dear," said the Professor. He helped her over to the couch and put her feet up, then went to fetch a cold drink. "Now, you just settle down, Alice. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you a few questions when you feel able to answer them."

Alice Spenser grew calmer and then slid rapidly into slumber. This Dr. Ap-Rhys was pleased to see, and in the meantime he stepped into the outer office where he found Miss Briarton settling in. She was quite surprised to see him already at work,

then more surprised when the Professor explained as much as he felt he might vouchsafe. He instructed her to secure fresh clothing, a few medicaments, and to have the number of the campus infirmary at the ready. Meantime he must not be disturbed. She must clear his appointments, make up any excuse she liked.

Then he busied himself at research among the volumes in his study. Something Alice had said gave him an idea. He took down several volumes of local folklore, more on historical demonology. These he had seldom had occasion to use, but he was glad now he had kept them. When some hours later Alice had awakened, he was ready to offer her a possible explanation.

"Ms. Spenser, I wonder if you have heard of 'the Devil's Steps,' because whether you have heard of them or not, it is certain you have seen them."

Alice looked puzzled. "You mean those footprints in the rock?"

"Yes, quite," continued her benefactor. "Local legend has it that these were the footprints left by the devil as he fled the gospel preaching of John Wesley when that good man canvassed these parts some two centuries ago. But, to apply the words of St. Luke to the case, it would seem that Satan had departed only until a more opportune time presented itself. For darker cycles of local legend indicate that the site of the Steps themselves became a place to seek out the devil. If one arrived on the night of the New Moon, one had only to place one's feet into the steps one after another, making a wish, which the devil promised to grant. One dared not surpass the third step, for the fourth would cause the foolhardy to come to the devil in person, where there would be hell to pay. Most of the stories are, as you might imagine, cautionary tales, showing how this or that poor fool was led by his overweening greed to chance the last step for a fourth wish, only to be damned horribly."

"So, Professor, you think Tedrick had learned of this legend, and that his prayers were prayers to the devil?"

"That, of course, is exactly what I think. Ms. Spenser, I realize that you and I belong to different generations, and that your contemporaries, even when devout, are little inclined to the beliefs of my era. It is surprising that young Tedrick believed them, but perhaps desperation and ambition drove him to trying the legend for himself. And I am inclined to judge it more than legend, especially in view of what happened to you this evening past."

Alice looked into the fireplace, the embers of which still lent their comforting warmth to the chill morning. "The truth is that I had pretty much consigned belief in the devil to St. Paul's bin of 'childish things' to be put aside. But now I have to wonder. He didn't hypnotize me, I'm sure of that. Suppose there is a devil at work here, Professor, one besides Hugh Tedrick, I mean. What is there to do? I've been raped, at least that's what I'd have to call it, but I can hardly press charges! There won't be any marks of violence. I couldn't exactly resist him. And no one would believe my story. How can I make sure he doesn't do it again?"

"My dear, I doubt you have much to worry about on that score. He doubtless believes that his 'prayer' secured your slavish obedience in perpetuity, else he would

never have divulged to you all that he did. That he was wrong is evident from the simple fact of your presence here. I cannot believe he would employ his last wish to bring about another encounter. And yet he may become upset and do something rash if he realizes that, knowing what you know, you are no longer under his control. So we will have to move quickly."

"Move quickly?" she parroted. "You don't mean you're going to help me get revenge on him?"

"That is not my intention, no. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay.' And yet the end result may not be altogether different. You see, my dear, there are far larger issues at stake here, forgive me for saying it. Don't you realize the implications of Mr. Tedrick's other wishes? He has as much as admitted that his blasphemous notion of our Lord leaguering himself with Satan was inspired by Satan himself! I mean, directly."

Here the old scholar rose and walked to the casement window overlooking the University Chapel. It was a tall and stately structure, built at the center of the campus, though subsequent expansion had thrown it off center. That was a sign of the times, he had more than once reflected. Christ and his Kingdom were no longer given the central place in the University and her affairs.

"And that is only the start of it. He has said that he will use diabolical means to secure universal acceptance of his heresy. I doubt that our vain Mr. Tedrick has in view any more than his own personal renown. But 'We are not ignorant of his devices,' as St. Paul said. I am sure there is something altogether more far-reaching in significance here. And we must seek to forestall it if we may."

Here Alice begged leave to return to her own rooms, assuring the Professor that she could see to herself and did not require the services of the infirmary. She promised to call him the next day. By this time the afternoon had far advanced, and Dr. Ap-Rhys felt the encroaching return of the previous day's lassitude. He locked his office, and his forgotten monograph, behind him.

This time, he was barely able to climb into bed before sleep overwhelmed him, and he began to dream at once. He found himself robed for a convocation, marching with his colleagues down the great nave of the Chapel. He usually did not dream in color, but this night he saw the vivid and garish hues of the stained glass windows. These were not the accustomed colors of those widows to the celestial world. Now they opened on infernal sights, as one beheld depicted in their frames the frightful images of Korah, of Absalom, of Judas the Iscariot, Simon Magus, Sodom and Gomorrah, even the molten chasms of Hell itself. The Great Harlot Babylon flaunted her lewdness, while demoniac satyrs and unclean nymphs sported in depraved revelry. Here the apostles engaged in unspeakable acts, while there the Blessed Mother of God stood rouged and beckoning. And all the while the unseen organist kept up a mad storm of dissonance that fairly mimicked the screaming damned in Hell.

Struggling to keep his feet as he continued in the line of march, the dream coun-

terpart of Ap-Rhys steadied himself against the shoulder of the man ahead of him. To his surprise their robes were deep red velvet, not the traditional subdued blue-black. And the face of the man, as he looked back over his shoulder at him—why, it was the smiling countenance of Professor Hugh Tedrick!

They had seated themselves now, and the crashing cacophony of the insane organ subsided as the Chaplain of Brichester began to speak. Ap-Rhys could hear no words, but only the roaring as of a great furnace. And now the dream changed: the Chaplain seemed to be presiding at the Holy Eucharist, but it was a crying infant he held aloft to consecrate. Dr. Ap-Rhys could not watch and so shoved aside those around him, emerged unsteadily from the end of the pew and lurched stumblingly back down the nave to the outside doors. There stood Miss Briarton, grotesquely naked and obscenely tattooed, warning him with a finger to her lips, not to disturb the service. He lunged past her and collapsed onto the handrail, half walking, half falling down the long steps.

He staggered onto the green lawn before the Chapel, narrowly stepping aside when he noticed he was about to trip over the squirming bodies of two students locked in sexual congress out in the open air. As he looked around him, the whole of the yard was covered with such scenes, several of the fevered couplings between members of the same sex, some involving animals. He made his way to the broad sidewalk where he hoped to find a clear path. The massive slabs of pavement were defiled everywhere with spray-painted graffiti obscene in the extreme. It nauseated him to look upon the scrawled filth.

Finally he sank to his knees and raised his old eyes to the beckoning heavens. They, too, had changed. Above him he saw a low dome of roiling red, as if the heavens had turned to magma. He regained his feet, old knees aching with the effort, and made to run again, as far as he might. After only a few yards, as his heart began to pound dangerously, he dropped himself by the base of a statue whose shadow loomed over him. It should be a statue of the Savior, his arms beckoning. In relief he clasped the knees of the stony Jesus. He lifted his eyes to meet the haloed visage—only to flinch at a horned and grinning Antichrist.

Then it was that he woke up screaming, torn shreds of sweat-soaked sheets held tight in his white-knuckled fists.

He sat for a while at the edge of the bed, this time remembering every vivid detail of the nightmare. At length he turned on the radio to nothing specific, counting on the crackling noise of the mundane to make him feel part of the real world again. He went to the cabinet and opened some brandy. He did not seek more sleep for fear of what it might hold. As for what he had dreamt, he did not doubt it qualified as a true vision, much like those recorded and discussed in such detail in Lampton's classic Apocalypses: the Apostolical and the Apocryphal, though from what source they stemmed he was not yet sure. Neither could he discern whether the vision were purely symbolic or actually descriptive, but in either case it surely heralded what might be in store—if young Mr. Tedrick were allowed to proceed with his

third wish.

Earlier in the morning than he would ordinarily have considered proper, Dr. Ap-Rhys rang up Alice Spenser. She was surprised to hear his voice since neither was it the Professor's custom to make telephone calls himself, unmediated by Miss Briarton. The Professor, whose voice sounded to her strangely hoarse, as if he had missed too much sleep, simply requested that she drop by his office at her convenience sometime that day.

Miss Briarton appeared worried as Alice entered the outer office, whether more concerned for the young woman in view of her recent ordeal or for the haggard-looking Professor Ap-Rhys, Alice did not know. She thanked the older woman for her silent hand-clasp of sympathy and progressed into the inner sanctum. There the Professor had dozed off, and she gently prodded his arm to wake him.

"Ah, Ms. Spenser, I regret my inattentiveness. I have not been sleeping especially well, you see."

"Nor I. And I daren't tell you what I dreamed, Professor."

"I think you needn't. Then we are in this together." This terse pronouncement Dr. Ap-Rhys punctuated with a rare smile.

"It is clear we must act against the too-deeply delving Mr. Tedrick. By all means we must prevent him from taking the next action he has planned. We must contrive to be present when next he treads the Devil's Steps. That must be one week from now, as he is limited to the night of the New Moon. Until then, you will have little choice but to meet him. I suggest, my dear, that, insofar as you can manage it, you feign a romantic devotion to him."

Here Alice reflexively rose to her feet. "Doctor Ap-Rhys, I don't care what's at stake, I'm not about to suffer the advances of that . . . that . . ."

His raised palm quietly interrupted her. "Of course not, Ms. Spenser. God forbid! But if you can bring yourself to speak to him as if his spell had taken hold, I believe he will not doubt his continued hold on you even when you make excuses not to accept his advances. He is smitten with infatuation, and any young man in that position finds it difficult to understand the actions of his young woman. The sweetness of your words will be enough to sustain his illusion even if your behavior frustrates and surprises him. As I have said, he is unlikely to spend his last wish regaining your obedience."

Alice nodded her head soberly. "And in the meantime maybe I can find out more information."

"That would be most helpful, except that I think we probably already know enough."

"Why, Professor, what do you have in mind?"

"Let us wait till the night of the New Moon, shall we?"

The week passed more quickly than Alice expected. She actually saw little of the

hated Tedrick, and when the two did meet, he paid her scant attention. She was relieved no little at this turn of events and speculated that he had simply been interested in the initial conquest, that now his beloved thesis again occupied him totally. She was only disappointed that she had no more opportunity to gather information helpful to the Professor. And it was he that she now went to meet, this time at the Field House.

There he was, his stout form incongruously wrapped in black pants and turtle-neck sweater. Alice, too, had remembered to wear the color of the night to pass unseen among the trees. She knew the way through the woods all too well from the adventure of the previous week and led the way once the dusk began to deepen.

The odd pair stopped some yards from the radius of the clearing and crouched down to wait. The Professor, fatigued as he still was, was not long in falling asleep. Luckily he did not snore, so Alice smiled and decided to let him sleep till she heard or saw anything out of the ordinary.

It was about midnight, as they had half-guessed, when Tedrick appeared. He was alone and, like them, clad in black. He showed no sign of noticing their presence. He fumbled in the dark for a few minutes, while Alice gently awakened her mentor. Then both watched as Tedrick set up a small platform and made a peculiar arrangement of candles atop it. These burned strange colors, some greenish, and they cast a baleful light over the scene. The two watchers were made uneasy at the increase in illumination, but they had hung back at a sufficient distance to remain unseen—or so they dearly hoped.

It was now evident that Tedrick's garb was a black robe, probably one cribbed from the Choir College, but this he soon shed, revealing a scrawny body painted over most of its surface with astrological and alchemical symbols. Alice suppressed a titter. At the same time she felt a shudder of disgust and rage, recalling the last time she had seen that naked body, albeit unpainted.

"Look," Dr. Ap-Rhys whispered, "he's taking out a book. That begins to explain how not every common fool who knows the legend has been able to gain his wishes from the Steps. There must be some ritual. I'd advise you not to listen."

But that did not stop the old academic from listening himself. The chant was in Latin, and though Tedrick had a workable knowledge of the Koine Greek of the New Testament, it was clear he had only a passing acquaintance with Medieval Latin. The longer the Professor listened, the more audible snatches he could pick out. Yes, it was a copy of the Gospel of Herodias, the scripture of the Witches' Sabbath. He had to credit Tedrick with one thing: he had certainly done his research well this time.

He felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to the wide-eyed face of the worried Ms. Spenser. "Why aren't we trying to stop him? When are you going to do something, Professor?"

"My dear," he replied as calmly as if fielding a classroom question, "I have already done it, as you shall shortly see."

Tedrick had seemingly come to the end of his chant. He now placed his foot gingerly in the first footprint, and the second, and then he paused, possibly getting the wording straight in his mind, so that his wish would come out right. Finally he took the fateful third step. More fateful than he realized, as it happened, for instantly he seemed seized by an impotent panic. In another second, as inertia carried him down to complete the step, his body seemed to be enveloped in light, then to half-disappear, as if he had passed halfway through a door. As his form stepped or fell completely through, a terrible cry was heard, and the two hidden observers were momentarily blinded by a flash of sulphurous cloud.

"It's all right to stand up now, my dear. There was light, but thank God, no fire, at least not on our side!"

"Where is he, Professor?"

"Where he would have ended up sooner or later in any case: in Hell."

"But, I mean, it was only the third step . . .!"

"In fact, it was not, Ms. Spenser, though like yourself, the late Mr. Tedrick thought that it was. You see, it took no elaborate sorcery to defeat the likes of him. Last week I simply engaged a local sculptor to come up here and camouflage the first step while carving into the ground a fifth footprint. Thus our unfortunate Mr. Tedrick thought to step into the third but actually stepped into the original fourth print. And in the bargain he stepped into Hell where he and his hypothesis belong."

The Laughing Man
C. J. Henderson

"A thing derided is a thing dead; a laughing man is stronger than a suffering man."
- Gustave Flaubert

Edington: 878 AD

Across a landscape all gray and green, darkened by a never-ending drizzle and more blood than most could contemplate, moved eight tired and frightened men, all sharply aware that their time was running out. Keen was the group's growing despair, despite the promise with which their battle had begun. Part of a great Norse raiding force were they, two hundred strong, come to the English shore in the morning darkness to loot a castle and break the back of their enemy's forces. Homeric had been its beginning—tragic was its end.

The eight were the last of the Northmen still drawing breath, and one of them was faltering, wickedly close to leaving his fellows to share what scarce luck they had remaining amongst themselves. Cut off from their fellows by impish fate, they had stumbled across the English lord's store of treasures. Accepting providence, the eight had laden themselves with gold and jewels and headed back to their waiting ship, expecting their fellows to follow in hearty triumph. It did not happen.

Wretched coincidence had turned the battle, as suddenly and sharply as if on the

toss of a god's coin. The Norse forces were obliterated cruelly, all save the octet struggling their way back to the beach. And struggle they did, and massively, for two king's ransoms did they have between them. But, no joy did its weight bring for each step taken through the dreary, bogging countryside sank deeper into the grasping English soil. Slower and slower became their progress, weighed down as it was by sacks and chests of bloody plunder. While at the same time the sounds of pursuit—the clatter of armor, the strike of hooves and the bay of hounds—scrambled along behind, warning them their end was drawing fast near.

Reaching a poor but serviceable road, the refugees fell upon it greedily, giving thanks to Odin to have discovered more solid ground upon which to rest their weary legs. Dirt was it as well, but the very lord they had robbed so cleanly had seen to the trail's being hard-packed and strewn with shale and cinders so that passage of his wagons might be more easily obtained. The eight staggered onward under their mighty load, grim and silent save for their labored breathing—steaming air snorted harshly from bellowed lungs.

After but covering a third of a league, the fugitives reached a gentle but speeding river. Stopping at the timbered bridge leading over its narrowest stretch, the one of them highest in rank dropped the chest he was carrying, cursing the skies and fates and any others who would listen.

"Calm, Birstin," answered another. "Why rage ye here?"

"Fool, see ye not the sign of our folly?" When his fellows answered not, he pointed to the water before them. "Did we make a crossing to reach our English host? No! Then, if we are to return to our boats, to our homes and loves and sons and stock, would this be the direction in which we should travel? Think any of ye that 'aye' be the answer?"

"Perhaps," answered one of the others. Eager for something more concrete to wrestle with than the eminent slaughter snapping at their heels, Birstin turned with a rapid speed to face his fellow.

"What say ye, Olgenson, that I be wrong?"

"No, you are surely right that lost we have become. But besides acting as signpost, this river may also be our salvation from English doom."

"Speak plain," demanded one of the others.

"We be not far from the sea, that we know," answered the man. "Well, follow the river, come to the shore."

The others nodded. Some smiled. Birstin moved his head as well, agreeing in principle. "Aye," he admitted, "your brain be clearer than mine as far as direction lies, but little good it does us."

When the others questioned their leader's words, Olgenson provided the answer for them.

"The English are too close. They'll find we took to the road. When they come to this spot, they'll chase us down to the sea long before we can reach the boats. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" snapped Birstin, desperate for a miracle, even one not of his own making.

Staring down into the thick waters below the bridge, Olgenson followed the river on its way to the sea with his eyes, his brain weighing a decision balancing narrow options. Straight he forced himself to stand, despite the oozing wound throbbing in his side. Grinding his teeth for a moment, he leaned against one of the bridge's support columns.

"Unless," he said, desperate to not betray his rapidly waning strength, "we convince them we have not gone along the river."

The others broke out in a babble of questions, but Birstin quieted them with a wave of his hand. When he asked what Olgenson proposed, the dying man told him.

"If all but one were to drop into the waters and wade downstream for a length, their trail would be much more difficult to discover. With luck, the English would miss the movement and proceed on down the road."

"Why all but one?" asked Firdal, Olgenson's boyhood mate.

"Because if one were to stay behind and defend this spot, it would appear he were attempting to keep the English from crossing after his fellows. Once he be killed, the fools will proceed without thinking, convinced the others have gone down the road that one appeared to be protecting."

It was obvious to all in the desperately small party that Olgenson spoke the truth. Hope surging against the banks of their gloom-cast resignation, the men began to prepare themselves for one last dash for freedom. Not overlooking the obvious as were his fellows, however, Birstin turned to Olgenson.

"And who be this hero who dies for the rest?"

"I name myself," answered Olgenson. "On one condition."

As the others listened, grim and silent, the dying man said, "To be deprived of husband and father will be hard enough for my family. They'll not be deprived of my share of the booty we've won this day. I'll die for us—here, gladly—but only because I'll know that when you reach home, a full half of all taken by our hand will go to my family."

Growls of complaint were heard, but at the same time, the faint sounds of the coming army behind them crackled through the trees, whispering their way through the fog and rain. Birstin, gulping a huge wet breath down into his burning lungs, pulled off his glove and spat on his palm. Then, extending his hand to Olgenson, he waited for the other man to do the same.

"'Tis a thieving bargain," he said with a grin, "but then, 'tis thieves we are this day, and dead men spend no gold."

"Aye," answered the dying man. As the others followed suit, spitting on their hands and joining their grasp to the one before them, the dying man said, "And I would know."

As the others stepped away, Olgenson opened his fur vest enough for the others

to see the savage piercing English steel had inflicted on his side. Pulling the garment fast again to help contain his leaking fluids, he said, "Perhaps if Father Odin's voice were not so loud within my ears, my nobility might not be so fast to surface. But, what man wouldn't die, to see his son a king, eh?"

Harsh laughter broke out from the others. As the sound of the English slithered through the fog to their ears once more, however, Birstin ordered them all over the side of the bridge. Splitting up the plunder Olgenson had somehow managed to carry between those who would survive him, the seven made signs of good fortune for their comrade and then disappeared into the waters below, slogging along under their golden burdens. In but a handful of seconds they were gone, no sight or sound of them remaining. Moving to the middle of the bridge, Olgenson positioned himself as best he could and then began his wait.

Time passed slowly in the fog. The dying man flexed his fingers, looking to see if he could still make them work to his will. They closed, the ten of them, but only after a fashion, and stiffly at that. Leaning against the side of the bridge once more, Olgenson pulled his vest tighter about his weary body. The man could feel his life slipping away, dripping down his leggings, slathering across his boots to mingle with the English mud. His vision was blurring and the images before him constantly doubled no matter how often or how forcefully he blinked his eyes.

"Damn," he whispered to himself as a terrible fang of pain bit through him. "Damn."

You will not die, he told himself. You will not fail your fellows, or your family. You want Friwulf to be a king, don't you? Then stand up and be a man who deserves a king for a son.

Renewing his grips upon the spear and sword he had chosen for his task, he dug the butt end of the spear into the ground so as to use it as a crutch, holding the sword as high as he could with his other hand. He could feel thick bubbles of blood foaming in his throat, but still he hung on, refusing to die, keeping his feet despite the cold and hungry agony tearing through his insides.

Finally the Northman came to a point where his pain was so intense he simply could not feel it any longer. He thanked the gods for that, even though a terrible, heavy weariness began settling upon him in its place. Shoving that aside, he growled fiercely, bloody spittle flecking his lips.

"I will not fail," he vowed. "I will not die. I shall not, I cannot."

Of course you will not fail

Surprise pruned Olgenson's eyes wide. The wind that whispered in the dying man's ear was a thing of steel and red hot courage. It was a female breeze, but one that knew not children or hearth or the moon-brought blood. It was a warrior's sound—an echo of iron that somehow calmed his fears and bolstered his waning spirit. Turning his head in the direction of the words, the Northman smiled in a giddy awe as he beheld a singular shape form in the midst of his double vision.

Tall she was, with hair that flashed from sunlight to hellfire as she walked to-

ward him. Her legs were long and powerful, booted in metal, as were her equally strong hands and torso. The fur of a bear hung as a cloak down her back, placed there as more a thing of decoration than for warmth. Her head was sheathed in a winged helmet, a glorious affair of strange feathers and tiny horns which so held Olgenson's attention that he could scarce drop his vision to the woman's eyes.

What do you see, Kaarl Olgenson?

"I see a woman . . . I, I . . ." and then, thoughts flashed together within the dying man's mind, giving him understanding. Focusing on her silver tipped spear, almost seeing the winged horse pawing the ground behind her, he knew beyond doubt what was happening to him. Still, with all the strength he could muster, he spat, "No—stay back from me. I cannot join you."

Her grim lips parting, the Valkyrie asked softly;

Cannot join me?

"I must stay here. I must defend this spot. I—" A great hacking tore through Olgenson. Thick strings of bloody mucus slobbered free from his nose, splattering against his heaving chest. Dropping his sword, he hung onto his spear with both hands as the terrible spasm emptied his stomach and dragged tears from his eyes. Finally in control of his rapidly failing body once more, he muttered to the woman before him.

"You cannot be here for me. Odin's handmaidens take only heroes from the field of battle."

Heroes only do we take to Valhalla, she corrected. But all the slain do we designate

Olgenson nodded sadly, hope drying within him. The approaching noise of the English put them but a minute or two down the road. The width and breath of the extensive clamor surprised even him. He had expected tens of men, perhaps even scores. But the nearing din bespoke the arrival of hundreds.

Fool, he thought to himself bitterly. His grip on his spear hardening, he asked himself, and how did you think you would ever hold this spot against such a force?

With a warrior's soul, came his answer.

The female form slipped the fallen sword back between the man's fingers, and then she was gone, the light of her no longer forcing aside the dismal gray shroud of morning. Wisps of fog sliding over his frozen body, Olgenson gasped down a final breath and then waited for the inevitable.

* * * *

Down the road, the English came on in strong pursuit. Although the main body of them marched along the rock-dried lane, dozens more moved along to both sides of it as well. It had taken some time to slaughter all the Norse within the castle and its walls, longer still to extinguish the multitude of fires they had set. Eventually, however, the storerooms had been checked, and the theft of the king's treasure had been discovered. Instantly every man who could still draw air through his lungs was pressed into the search for the rogues who had penetrated so far and made off with

so much. Exhaustion or wounds did not matter—there was no choice. The raiders had to found. Finally, at the bridge leading to Devron, it appeared that they were.

There at the mouth of the crossing, his one hand holding a sword in defiance, the other keeping a spear to the ready, stood one of the Norse bastards in question. Holding his hand up to indicate a momentary halt, the captain serving as the column's commander reined in his mount, then leaned down and asked his second, "And what do you make of this?"

"Left behind to slow our progress. Thinks some heathen Charlemagne dubbed him Roland, I suspect."

Eying the silent figure standing before them in the mist, the commander thought for a second.

"Maybe. Quite possibly, even," admitted the leader of the pursuing forces. "But then, bait comes in many flavors. With the fog so heavy about us, who knows what may be hidden in the shadows behind him. And around us. Before we lose more ground this morning, let us see what this quiet fellow has to say."

Understanding, the second-in-command called out in the Norseman's tongue.

"Stand down, brigand. Tell us where the others have gone and you shall be dispatched swiftly and spared the tortures you deserve."

No answer came from the rigid form. As the English looked on, the warrior at the bridge remained motionless, only bits of his fur and cloak moved by the surrounding winds. Again, the Englishman called out.

"Speak, man. If you value your dignity, tell us where the others have gone."

When grim silence remained their only answer, the commander snapped, "Enough of this. If left to hold us at this spot he was, salute his effort, for already has he squandered too much of our most precious time."

With a wave of his hand, the English captain called forth a line of archers. Indicating their target, he ordered the group to fire. Ten arrows were notched, ten strings drawn back and touched to cheek, ten missiles then sent to knock away the single flea blocking the road before them. Eight shafts found their mark, five driving into the dark figure's chest, one its neck, another in its thigh and the last its face. Strong enough to knock down a runaway horse was the force of the barrage, but the pierced form did not topple. Unaffected, it stood on, still holding its ground in fierce silence.

"He makes no sound?" whispered more than one voice.

"He does not fall?" questioned others. "Perhaps he cannot. Perhaps it is only we who may die this day."

Scoffing at the ignorance of those behind him, the captain snarled at their superstitious fears, insisting, "'Tis no man before us, 'tis but a scarecrow from which we cower."

As his nervous troops relaxed somewhat, the commander ordered, "Enough time have we wasted with this heathen trick. Resume the march."

As one, men and horses began their forward movement once more. Despite their

bolstered spirits and their leader's assurances, however, all English eyes remained fastened on the figure still holding the bridge. Stiff and quiet it might be, but still it did not seem a construct to them. None doubted what they saw was a man. Of course, many thought, a man's remains might be used thus, by desperate comrades at the end of their road. Heartened by such notions, the English soldiers continued to move onward against the bridge. And then, the laughter began.

It was a curious noise, a gravelly chortle that dug deeply into the bowels, a thick curtain of angry amusement that slapped at the advancing force with vicious disdain. Those few on horseback found it impossible to force their steeds forward. The mastiffs which had been leading them up until that point shied back as well, their tails low and motionless.

"Attack, I say," bellowed the captain. "Attack!"

His sword drawn from its sheath, the commander tried to force his men forward, but hesitation shattered their lines. Too many wild, discordant thoughts were flooding their minds.

Their foe should have died. He did not. Perhaps he never lived, but then, if that were so, how came he to laugh? Were they doomed? Cursed?

Terror stuck down man after man, the dark specter of the unknown making lead of flesh, riveting them to the ground, their tunics soaking with sweat despite the chill. Knowing that he could not allow the situation to continue unchanged, the captain dug his heels into his horse's sides viciously.

The shocked animal overcame its fear and bolted forward in much the same manner it might have charged back inside a burning stable. His sword to the ready, the commander charged the stolid figure, screaming;

"And now you *die!*"

All eyes stared forward unblinking. Terrible laughter echoed through the trees, swallowing the fog, licking at the men's ears. Horse and rider drew closer, the laughing man moved not. The commander drew back his blade, an army held its breath. The captain reached the upgrade, drawing nearer, his arm swinging, and then, the figure moved.

Suddenly, the arm holding the spear seemed to jerk forward. In an unstoppable flash, the long pike came down before horse and rider, piercing the commander's body, knocking it from his mount. The captain flew away from his steed which then reared up in terror, turning on its heel and running back toward the English lines. None waited to greet it.

With one heart the English turned and fled into the surrounding forest. Reason deserted them as mad screams flew from their lips, mingling with the terrible laughter every man swore he heard all the way back to the castle.

On the beach, the escaping seven heard nothing of laughter, merely the beating of wings and the sound of the heavens welcoming to their great hall and hearth and well-stocked table one of their own with whom they were well pleased.

From Darker Heavens

Stanley C. Sargent

I arrived on the island of Crete in early November along with my Arkham University colleagues and long-time friends, Allan Brentwood and Warren Childers, for the purpose of pursuing some private archaeological research. We funded the entire expedition ourselves, our intent being to investigate rumors concerning the recent discovery of an ancient subterranean tomb in a remote valley of the Dikte Mountains of Crete. I admit that we did not acquire the legal permits necessary for such excavations; we planned to propose an official expedition to the governmental authorities, but only if any important discoveries seemed likely after we had completed our unofficial survey of the site. We were simply not prepared to participate in any dig involving several years' work unless firmly convinced of the find's significance. In such an event, we would then inform the university of our efforts on its behalf.

A few days after our arrival, I was approached by a local lad who for a price agreed to lead us to the site of which we had heard. The lad proved reliable, revealing to us what appeared to be the entry wall of an otherwise buried structure secreted beneath some displaced shrubbery.

The very next day Brentwood, Childers, and I began a cursory survey of the area. To our great astonishment, it became obvious after only a few hours of digging that a large tomb of the classic Minoan period lay just a few feet beneath the surface. Convinced the tomb remained intact and inviolate, we congratulated ourselves wildly. The contents promised to rival those of Egypt's King Tutankhamun in historical, if not monetary, value. The lure of finding answers to innumerable age-old questions lay before us, solutions to riddles even the excavations of Sir Arthur Evans had failed to resolve.

It was Brentwood who first brought to our attention some odd fragments of green stone pressed firmly into the plaster which sealed the perimeter of the tomb's entrance. These fragments possessed a luminescent quality radically unlike anything Brentwood had ever encountered as a trained geologist. The largest piece was affixed with plaster to the proximate center of the door, yet like the other pieces, it didn't seem to fit into any obvious decorative scheme.

While bending down to get a better look at one of these smaller fragments, near the lower part of the entrance, I noticed that a block of the surrounding wall was misaligned by nearly an inch. I tapped the block with my geologist's hammer, then proposed we try moving it. Using various tools as wedges, the three of us managed to slide the stone out from the wall, soon realizing that it was actually a hollow ceramic box that had been faced with stone. To our utter amazement, the box contained several bundles of handwritten scrolls, as well as several loose green stone fragments like those fastened to the door.

Hardly daring to speculate about the worth of such a find, we loaded the heavy

box into the back of our rented jeep and transported it to our lodgings just a few miles away. Once there, I carefully removed the scrolls and chemically treated each to prevent the deterioration their sudden exposure to air would have soon inflicted.

The scrolls were written in three languages and bundled accordingly. I could read those scrolls written in ancient Greek script with a fair amount of ease, despite minor damage to few of the parchments. Other scrolls were written in Minoan Linear A, a code-like script generally thought to have been used exclusively by highly educated members of the royal elite. Only a few examples of the script had previously been found and only rarely on clay tablets, strongly indicating that it was used exclusively for personal communication on more disposable materials. Linear B, according to the Ventris-Chadwick decipherment theory, was a "telegraphic" script, a type of shorthand used only in the compilation of lists, inventories, and tax records, that previously had been found only on clay tablets. The box contained several scrolls in such script, yet I felt sure that any lengthy historical or religious text would be written in archaic Greek, a language the Minoans certainly borrowed for common usage.

I have always been more at ease with the conversational aspects of language than with the written text, including Greek, but Brentwood and Childers both assisted me. Within a fortnight, we were able to strugglingly translate the Greek scrolls, our wonder and disbelief increasing as each line yielded to translation.

When the translation was complete, each of us read through the entire text before expressing any opinion. The scrolls related an incredible tale that was at once horrifying and convincing, and were filled with the direst of warnings. Unfortunately, we saw the latter as a challenge.

The author of the scrolls identified himself as "Minos, son of Zeus and Europa, successor of Asterion, Ruler of the Waves, Ruler of the Island Kingdom of Krete and subjugator of the Athenian city-state."

The following is the text of the scrolls exactly as translated:

Read now this my tale, curious one, that it may stay thy hand from opening this, my vivisepulchre. Attend my warning well, lest you become the source of ruination of all things! I have swallowed noxious pestilence which still awaits within me, forever undying. The very Gods themselves curse and abhor he who dares to break this tombed seal, for the final Dance of Annihilation shall then vomit forth, unrestrained, upon all of creation.

* * * * *

From a blackened sky it came, the night my fleet returned from the Greek mainland—a fulgent spore merely an arm's length in diameter, a silently falling globe of stone. From the columned portico of my palace, I watched it blaze a fiery trail across pitch black skies, squinting at its dazzling brightness along with hundreds of celebrants gathered in the plaza below. Drunk with pride at



Krete's recent triumph over Athens, we hailed the celestial arrival as a heavenly salute to our great victory. I decreed that a temple should be built at the ground on which it might fall, though for three days it radiated a heat greater than the furnace of dog-faced Hecate, preventing all attempts to approach the spot.

The priests proclaimed the unearthly thing sacred, forbidding any but their own number to go near, lest some disrespect be shown to the Gods. I first beheld its curious green and rounded form at the end of three days when it was brought before me, borne upon a shield.

Curious as to the significance of the oddity, I begged an augury from the priests of the Temple of the Holy Dolphin that I might extract a meaning from this omen. To my amazement, my request was declined by the priests of that god in deference to the goddess Herpete's request for audience with me. The protector of Krete, great Herpete is daughter of mighty Yig, the father of all serpents. She is the beloved patroness of household, fertility and immortality. Her request amazed me as it is well-known that Herpete grants audiences only during the direst of times, the last occurring during the time of my father's, father's reign. In each hundred of years the Goddess may speak to man upon only three occasions, and only through a human vessel groomed for such from birth. Having spoken those three times, Herpete must remain silent until century's end, while Her human vessel dies, her life force dissipated.

Without delay I journeyed to Herpete's temple, secreted in the Ilke Mountains, where I was ushered deep into the dark primal cavern of Her innermost sanctuary. I was left alone therein that I might light the sacred flame at the base of a towering stalagmite rising from the center of the limestone floor. In the feeble light of that flame I beheld Herpete's image cut from the very midst of the dripping stalagmite, at a level far above my head. Awed by Her beauty,

I stared at the life-sized goddess and the living serpents clutched in the carving's outstretched hands. Though the statue's bare-bosom dress was of the tight bodice style commonly worn by women of status, the beauty of the image's flounced skirt lay in the strange and unnatural colors it encompassed. Those vibrant hues entranced my mind so that I suddenly gasped, realizing that the idol's head had turned to look upon me. It was no carved image at all, but a living priestess possessed of the deity Herself!

Without further hesitation Herpete spoke in uneven tones:

*"Three of times before this vessel breaks!
Yet three of times I speak for all our sakes!"*

Her pitch and volume altered as Herpete gained ease in using the virgin voice of Her vessel. I strove to grasp the meaning of Her words. She continued, in Her riddling, goddish way, deeming the sky-born thing no gift of gods but of demons. She warned that, lacking physical form, it would seek to possess the bodies of others, were it free. Those bodies would gain immortality in the possession if they were strong enough to bear the nightmarish embrace and still live.

The alien thing had been banished from the black-rimmed darker heavens beyond Tindalos. It was, She said, an evil beyond description, a power able to interweave life and death, blending and distorting all it touched. In shrieking tones She cried out, "Only the skin of the fruit can contain the poison seed."

I shrank back, frightened and confused over the grave meaning of Her words, and nearly fled at the audience's end. Returning to the palace, I forbade even the priests to near the god-accursed sphere as I would take no chance before discerning the full meaning of Herpete's enigmatic words.

* * * *

A few weeks thereafter, I received word that Asterios, the youngest and most favored of my seven children, had received serious injury while practicing the ritual art of the Bull Jump, a sacred sport requiring much practice for its proper and safe performance. To jump the bull, one must rush forward to grasp the horns of a charging bull, flip oneself over its head, alight with one's feet on the bull's back, then somersault again to land on one's feet in the arms of a fellow performer behind the bewildered bull. Many athletes have been maimed or killed while learning the skill, despite their use of the elaborate harnesses designed to ensure the safety of unskilled athletes.

I rushed to my beloved son, fearful of what I would find. My unconscious Asterios still lived, his broken limbs caught amidst the leather ties of the practice harness. The injured bull lay on top of him in such a manner that any effort to free Asterios would involve movement of the bull as well. The bull's

neck appeared broken, but we dared not chance its death by moving it, as none may harm a sacred bull under any circumstance. Unable to bear the pain in Asterios' eyes, I found myself recalling Herpete's words of seeds and fruit and immortality. It came to me that She had meant the sphere contained something capable of bestowing immortality once free of its rounded prison. I ordered terrified priests to fetch the strangely shining sphere at once, place it beside the dying pair, and strike it with hammers made of bronze.

The sphere was thus broken open, allowing a reeking, infernal vapor of indescribable color to escape. The priests immediately fell to the ground dead, overcome by the mephitis pouring from the shattered globe. The odious mist became opaque as it enfolded and infiltrated the bodies of both Asterios and the bull. Its entry into them caused their bodies to writhe and spasm, the disturbed dust creating a veil, obscuring them from sight. Moments later, a living form haltingly emerged from the shielding dust—but I was shocked to see it was not my Asterios. It was his body, yes, but it had been overcome by a deforming coalescence, his shoulders bearing upon them an engrafted distortion of the head of the bull! The eyes seemed truly to be those of Asterios, yet deeper within I detected a gloating, icy glare. The unholy mesh thrust forth its hairy outspread hand-hooves, as if pleading for aid, then commenced to bellow and scream, its bullish throat and tongue proving incapable of the clarity necessary for speech. And before the Gods, I swear, within the din of its ululations I discerned another voice crying out feebly, "Father! Kill me!" Aghast, I fell back as the abhorrence staggered forward and collapsed onto the ground before me as if it were dead.

It was not dead, however, and sickened beyond my ability to relate, I ordered the abomination removed from my sight. Among my people the monster soon came to be known as the "Minotaur"—the taurus or bull of Minos—and none questioned the isolation in which I kept that baleful hybrid for more than a moon's cycle. I locked it in a stone cell deep within an abandoned temple. I could not even summon the strength to order its death, not yet realizing that it was immortal.

For seven days the beast languished in a death-like state, as observers informed me daily. When it finally awoke, it ignored all sustenance offered, obtaining nourishment through some strange means beyond the ken of man. Its days were filled with torturous efforts to force its brutish throat to speak intelligibly, so it pierced the air continually with uncouth guttural cries. Despite the seeming impossibleness of this goal, that repulsive anomaly persisted in its attempts, ceasing each day only when a great profusion of blood gushed from its bovine lips.

Eventually I received reports that the Minotaur had succeeded in articulating a few simple phrases that could actually be understood, though with some difficulty. It demanded my attendance with such ferocity that I felt I must re-



spond, although it meant abandoning my mourning for Asterios.

When it saw me, the demon demanded freedom, a thing I dared not grant. I greatly feared it and what it would do if it were liberated from its prison. I could only compromise by agreeing to create a special edifice for its housing, one larger and more open than the current cell. I hoped that by immuring that living reminder of my irresponsibility, I could also wall up my guilt, least it overwhelm me.

I sent for Krete's greatest architect, Daidalos, son of Metion and Iphinae, who along with his son, Ikaros, agreed to build an inescapable prison for the Minotaur based upon their studies of Egyptian labyrinths. The stylized design of the maze was derived from a pattern that fundamentally extended the configuration of the labrys [the Kretan double-headed axe]. We agreed the labyrinth could most easily be built as an extension of a subterranean cavern recently discovered at Akoteino, near the sea yet some distance from Cnossos. The cavern had served as a crypt for many of Krete's early kings. Kretans

know the dead survive in their tombs, and therefore provide the honored dead with spacious tombs as well as with plentiful stores of grains and wine for their eternal consumption. The overall area of the aforementioned necropolis was large enough that it could be diminished without offending the sanctity of those entombed therein. The largest portion of the cavern lay near the surface and, along with the open-air maze, could be sealed off to imprison and house the Minotaur, leaving the lower chambers of the cavern for the segregated royal mummies. It seemed a proper irony too, that the bullish horror should be locked within a tomb.

Daidalos built the roofless labyrinth with outer walls made of stone of two arm-lengths in thickness. On the rocky hill overlooking the labyrinth, he created a small platform that would allow me to secretly observe the Minotaur in its inner sanctum. The master craftsman and his son supervised every step of the construction so that only they knew the solution to its maze.

Once the structure had been completed, Daidalos and Ikaros insisted they must be the ones to lead the captive through the confounding corridors to an inner central room, its head covered over by a hood that it should not see the way. Once there, they bound it with rope that it might free itself only in time. Fearing this measure insufficient to prevent the Minotaur from following them, and thereby learning the key to escape the labyrinth, Daidalos concocted an ingenious secondary plan. He created two sets of artificial wings and tail, imitating those of fowl, building them out of wood, wax, feathers and even small birds that he tied to a framework. He and Ikaros would depart the open-roof labyrinth by means of artificial flight. Yet even this most innovative of schemes proved to be successful only in part. To encourage his hesitant son, Daidalos took flight first, gliding safely up and over the waters of the adjacent harbor. His view, broadened by elevation, led him to call out a warning to Ikaros that the beast had prematurely escaped its bondage. Ikaros leapt into the air, yet too late to avoid the ruinous grasp of the pursuing Minotaur. In moments he was released, already evilly infected from the bullish grip. Daidalos watched helplessly from a distance as the captive birds dissolved and blended with the very flesh of his son, causing the helplessly screaming youth to fall from the sky into the dark green sea below, where he drowned. Half-mad with grief, Daidalos continued his escape, eventually reaching the distant shore of Sicily, where he cursed my name ever after.

From the hillside vantage I witnessed this tragic scene, cursing the murderous demon to the deepest pits of Avernus. It somehow became aware of my presence, although I remained hidden from its view. In mocking tones the soulless ambiguity bemoaned its lonely isolation, swearing the most terrible deeds would surely result from its suffering. I shouted down, inquiring what, if anything, could soothe its waxing wrath. "Companionship," it sighed, "and nothing less." With feigned politeness, it proclaimed that only the company of

seven youths and seven maids would soothe its growing rage.

I paused in silence, unwilling to condemn even one of my people to such a hellish fate. As if it had read my thoughts, the foul beast then suggested that youths of Athenian birth would suffice as a form of living tribute from the subjugated state. Without responding, I returned to the palace, knowing I must accept the fiend's terms.

Reluctantly, I forced King Aegus to pay the tribute of fourteen lives, that I might pacify the bane that had befallen Krete. The subsequent arrival of the Athenians brought me even greater agony as I looked upon them as little more than children being sent to certain slaughter. Without ceremony, they were escorted to the labyrinth and forced to enter its dark portal, that they might lose themselves amidst the perplexing corridors of the Minotaur's lair. I could only pray their deaths would be swift and painless.

For several days, I allowed no one to peer into the maze from the platform, preferring to remain ignorant as long as possible. I foolishly hoped the sacrifices would end the beast's demands that I might then try to forget its very existence. Nearly a week later, however, I found I could bear the mystery no longer. I sent a servant to the platform who returned with word that the Minotaur had addressed him as if he were expected. It had demanded to speak to me once more.

I felt compelled to go to the labyrinth; it was not within me to refuse. There I beheld the fate of at least a few of the Athenians. My senses recoiled at the vile blasphemies that I beheld—cadaverous bodies blended in unspeakable, agonized amalgamation of torso and limb, both male and female melded into one. One youth had been intimately wed to a wooden column, the lintel displaying a flesh-like surface while the boy's limbs and face were embossed with a wooden grain. All were dead, of course, experiments failed, though I did not realize it then. It was the unbearable revulsion I felt over these charnel house revelations that instilled in me a resolve to discover some means by which I might forever rid my kingdom of the tainted spawn of Hades. A moment later its dreaded voice boomed out from below, insisting an additional fourteen youths be delivered to its den. I left without replying.

I dared not seek further sacrifice from Athens, so I began to prepare myself for whatever consequences might follow. It was then that I received a priestess of Herpete who bade me once again attend the Goddess.

Within the sacred cavern once more, I beheld the priestess I had once mistaken for an idol, her youthful face now lined and heavy with wear, lending Her vessel the appearance of middle age. Her features suddenly grew animated as Herpete chastised me for foolishly and selfishly ignoring Her warnings in freeing the cosmic invader.

She spoke again of darker realms beyond even the Gods' knowing, where star-born beings are more than gods. Those etheric beings thrive within the

void as semi-physical manifestations. Since before knowable time and long before the birth of our Olympian Gods, these malevolent cosmic gods have engaged in both continuous and unending warring among themselves, each seeking supremacy over all others. One of these formless god-beings, that which infected the Minotaur, She dubbed "Qom-maq." This Qom-maq had been defeated by a more powerful being which had swallowed it, imprisoning its vanquished essence within a material sphere that was excreted from within the victor's ectoplasmic form. Then, in an ultimate gesture of defiance and disgrace, the victor shat the spheroid out from its body, flinging it from its own native realm into ours, a realm so distant and insignificant that nothing about it was known to them.



Qom-maq, though infrangible while in its less-than-physical form, can still be contained within and by the elements of the luminous sphere in which it arrived. Seeking physical mobility, it possesses the bodies of others, though few are strong enough to survive its habitation. If the possessed body dies or

is killed, its life essence adds to Qom-maq's strength, although the thing must then flee to the shelter of some nearby organic haven as it cannot long tolerate confinement within a corpse. Unutterable blendings are Qom-maq's method of becoming familiar with our physical matter—experiments of a gruesome sort.

Herpete instructed me to send a message to King Aegeus, telling him all and pleading with him to send his foremost warrior for the sake of both Athens and Krete. In return I would offer Aegus freedom from all further tribute. I was to offer the warrior himself the hand of my daughter Ariadne in marriage, as reward for slaying the Minotaur. Herpete provided me with further instruction for the arming of the warrior that victory might be ensured, and enlightened me of the means by which Theseus might safely entrap Qom-maq within the confine of the dead torso forever.

The next day I sent the proscribed message to Aegeus, who cautiously accepted my offer, sending his own son, the famed Theseus, as his warrior champion. Theseus was to pose as one of fourteen further victims, that the infernal Minotaur should not become suspicious.

I gave unto Theseus a pouch containing a large quantity of green, glowing grains made from Qom-maq's stony sphere. Ariadne instructed him in the use of a ball of woven thread which, if tied at the labyrinth's entrance, would serve to mark the path for his return once the deed was done. He was otherwise presented with a robe washed in dust from the same sphere, that he might bear the lifeless thing out without touching it directly, according to Herpete's plan.

The Athenian youths were ushered to the mouth of the labyrinth with Theseus, concealed among them, vanward. He affixed the thread, then bravely entered, bidding his fellows remain safely just inside the entrance.

I cannot relate with surety the detail of the happenings inside the maze during those anxious hours before the Athenian prince emerged. He neither spoke at length of his combat with the bull nor boasted of his might, so severely was he shaken. Still, upon return he confided that the dust had been his savior. He had tossed the substance upon the unsuspecting creature and as it stood there stunned, he had struck off its head. He then had quickly draped both of its parts within the prepared robe, carrying it back to the Athenians who eagerly awaited his return.

Weakened by the realization that it was Asterios' body that Theseus had been sent to kill, I remained in the palace that I might not witness its further mutilation. Yet despite his solemn oath to deliver the body to Herpete's shrine, the defiant prince was so overcome with hubris at the praise of the gathered crowd that he cast the rigoring parts into the sea.

Sure the evil now was vanquished, the stubborn hero set sail, having claimed Ariadne's willing hand. The treacherous fool sailed to the isle of

Naxos where he abandoned Ariadne, preferring her younger sister, Phaedra, whom he had hidden aboard the ship. Had he known little Phaedra better, he would never have made such unwise choice. For breaking his oath to Herpete, however, his punishment was to prove more grave. Before departing Greece, Theseus had arranged a signal with his anxious father, King Aegeus, relating to the sails of his returning ship. White sails would signal a triumphant return with Theseus unharmed; black sails would signal Theseus' defeat and death. The returning hero, however, forgot the promised arrangement, allowing the darker sails to be raised. Sighting the dark sails, the worry-maddened king hurled himself from a seaside cliff to the rocks below, so the first sight that greeted the returning hero was the body of his drowned father afloat upon the sea.

Despite the optimism of Theseus and my people, I was tortured by the knowledge that the horror could not be extinguished by simply casting the Minotaur's body into the sea. A week later my suspicions were aroused when a boy of tender years drowned in the very place where the Minotaur's corpse had been thrown. The boy's body could not be recovered, and just nine days later my fears were realized when I received report that a monster of half human and half marine visage had climbed out from the sea near where that youth had drowned.

Informants told me this new profanity's torso was only vaguely of human shape, though it bore a scar identical to a scar the drowned boy had borne. Its skin was described as being of an unhealthy pigment, its back covered with fishy scales, and a fin extended the length of its back. A large tentacled squid or octopus perched upon the shoulders, serving as a head for the terrible mutation, and where arms and hands should have been there sprouted two huge pinchers like those of certain crabs. Though apparently eyeless, it did not manoeuvre as if it was blind. It scurried upon four crabbish legs, yet it could briefly bear itself upright despite its lack of tail. All who saw the creature fled in terror, ignorant of its true identity.

This resurrected Qom-maq avoided the palace and the capital of Cnossos altogether. Dared I interpret Qom-maq's avoidance of my proximity to mean it feared me or knowledge I now possessed? I could not allow myself the overconfidence inherent in such beliefs. News soon reached the court that several surrounding towns had been invaded by a demon that devastated their populations in unspeakable ways.

Without bidding, I knew the time for the third oraculation had come with the appearance of Qom-maq's second incarnation. I therefore placed myself a final time before the deity's vessel, noting that all beauty was now gone from her bent and withering form. Immediately she entered a trance state, screaming wildly in tongues unknown to me. The Goddess entered her body, then turned and addressed me. In weakened tones, She continued to reveal Qom-

maq's secrets. It was, She told me, able to divide itself in order to invade a plurality of hosts, though each part would be of lesser power. By extending itself throughout all lands, it would absorb the life from every living thing, continuing until it obtained a strength great enough to scale the highest peaks of Olympus. There it could annihilate even the foremost of Gods and Goddesses, blending Them into one creation of immeasurable power that could launch itself back to its place of origin. Once there, Qom-maq could seek revenge upon its brethren, unmindful of the blighted world it had left behind.

I could not bear the burden of knowing that I alone was responsible for the end of worlds both mortal and divine. I begged Herpete for solution, some means to avert the massacre, regardless of what that might entail. As answer She calmly replied, "The seed in shell must once more be encased!"

I waited for Her to continue, seeing that Her eyes were closing. An endless time passed in silence until, forsaking all hope, I turned to leave in deep despair. In several steps I turned, responding to a feeble sound behind. I strained to hear the final dolorously whispered words:

*"Within thyself create an inner shell,
A demon's prison, living hell.
Centuries on, survive to tell;
Spencer I will lead as well."*

Before I could beg the meaning of these words, the fragile figure began to sway upon its high shelf, then fell in near silence to the ground before me. With hesitance I neared to look upon the sere and hoary corpse, a shattered vessel now totally drained.

I returned to the palace lost in troubled thought. Once there, I gave direction that the Minotaur's necropolis be prepared as a tomb. Walls were felled to avoid the maze, that a place might be made for my residence among the ghosts of the regal dead. I ordered a roof be added to the labyrinth and all the outermost walls and ceilings coated with a solution containing the dust of the sphere. Finally the priests were to personally ensure that within the tomb absolutely no living thing remained that Qom-maq might enjoin.

Upon receiving word that the tomb was complete according to instruction, I dressed myself in a fine shroud and painted my face and body with the dark red of carmine [a traditional funerary dye derived from the island's kermes insect]. Upon my back I strapped a rhyton jug entwined with snake motif and on my hip a sword. After announcing to the court that Herpete had commanded these things, I set out in search of the ichthyic incarnation of Qom-maq.

I traveled the country on foot, leaving behind not only my bewildered family and court but also my personal guard. The first nearby town to which I



came was a small one that had been abandoned. I continued my pilgrimage for two days before reaching the next, larger town, where I beheld the devastation Qom-maq had left in its path. Walking through the empty streets, I noticed an unnatural silence around me, then the overwhelming stench of death. I was sickened at the remains of continued experimentation, recognizing a demented sense of humor at work in many of the obscene hybridizations. In that town and the two beyond, I beheld at times five, six, and more human beings blent into a single twisted mix, each individual's features nearly indistinguishable from those of the others. Numerous human forms were grotesquely combined with domestic animals, pets, lizards, insects, and even plant life. Hundreds of putrefying corpses were strewn throughout hauntingly silent streets as if slaughtered, some displaying familiar faces with hideous expressions frozen upon them. Only patches of wild grass and weeds survived the monster's passing. Soon I would rule a land totally barren of life, yet I could blame only myself and my impulsive, selfish act.

I continued to traverse the land until finally, in a fourth town, I came upon the murderous demon itself. It truly bore little resemblance to man despite the tattered cloak it wore. It detected my presence though I discerned no orb of vision; I assume the ever-spinning tendrils of its face in some manner provided it information. As I approached, it emitted a shrill gibber from its squidish, sharp-beaked mouth, as if attempting to express itself through nearly incomprehensible speech. With great care it formed the semblance of the words, "I am most pleased that the sire of my rebirth should desire to join me."

I responded by moving nearer, throwing a handful of spheric dust upon the thing, which caused it to stagger and drop down upon its several legs. From the slavering mouth it boasted, "Not enough, not nearly enough, father!" It shook off the dust easily, stood upright, and began to move toward me. I stepped back, and pulling a fisherman's net from beneath my robes, I cast it, barely avoiding the crushing grasp of its pincers. Its laughter became a roar of defiance as it allowed the net to drape over its body, then it stumbled and fell. Raising its head, it glared at me as I prepared to pour upon it the liquid from my rhyton. Still confident, its last evilly-spoken words to me were, "Very well, Minos, come and join your beloved son as a part of me!"

But then the contents of the rhyton, a local honey enriched by the sphere's powerful dust, struck the demon's head. As the golden fluid trickled down the length of its body, Qom-maq suddenly realized the error of its overconfidence. Its netted form began to writhe, entangling itself even more deeply within the net as its flesh began a series of chaotic transformations. One moment its composition was nearly all that of a squid, the next more crab, then fish. When a human head solidified out from the morass, I found myself bending over the sweet boyish face of my Asterios.

Softly I spoke to my beloved son's countenance, saying "Come, my child, enter now a safer place, a place you need never leave." With that, I thrust my lips upon his honey-smeared lips, simultaneously thrusting my sword deep into his heart. Feeling the spread of death throughout the body, I sucked the breath out from it into my own along with the bedamned vapor from beyond. What Qom-maq had not known was that, at Herpete's advice, I had consumed naught for days but honey like unto that I had poured upon its amphibious head. The reagent enabled my body to contain Qom-maq's vitriolic essence without being overcome by it.

I cried out in agony at the terrible pollution writhing and struggling within me, nearly falling upon the viscid pile of blurred flesh and deliquescent features squirming like unto a pool at my feet. I staggered back, suffering the thing's hellish fury as it learned to accept that it could neither take nor escape me. Quietly I whispered, "Come, fiend, the dead must be entombed, and surely now we both are truly dead."

Without delay, I returned to Cnossos where I have traveled directly to this tomb where Herpete's priests await my orders. I have bade them seal the entrance after I have entered, for they obey me unhesitantly. These scrolls they shall place within a box secreted near the entry to serve as warning to any who would release that which is interred within. Deep within the gloomy recesses, I shall be seated upon my throne, attended only by worm-riddled mummies of the centuried dead. Should you enter, prepare thyself for the eternal damnation and knowing murder of all men and gods.

[End of Translation]

After reading through the entire text of the scrolls, we were dumbfounded. We believed the fantastic aspect of the tale to be nothing more than a device intended to frighten away those who would desecrate the tomb, for the scroll box could only have been placed outside the entrance for that express purpose. Had the text simply been an allegorical treatise or guide for the deceased, similar to *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, it surely would have been placed or painted somewhere within, or even upon the walls of the tomb.

As scientists we dismiss archaic tales of bogey men, but privately we each felt a certain reluctance toward any further violation of the tomb. I found myself wondering if we had discovered the entrance to the tomb of a 4,000-year-old madman or the gateway to Hades itself. I was most bothered by the ancient document's specific use of a word or name apparently identical to my own. Childers and Brentwood, of course, insisted that it must be a simple error in translation; not for an instant did they consider otherwise.

Early the next morning we commenced further excavation. The entrance proved similar in construct to typical Minoan royal tombs—an initial layer of plaster covering a number of large, flat stones crudely piled on and around one large stone which itself blocked the greater part of the opening. Attaching all of our strength to the key stone's displacement, the three of us cleared the entrance passage to the night-draped necropolis. Our awed whispers echoed endlessly through well-like depths, alerting us to the immensity of the interior.

The air in the windowless crypt proved to be astonishingly breathable. I was reminded of the deadly spores sprouted from millennia-old bread that Howard Carter and others had inhaled upon entering the hermetically sealed tomb of King Tut. There would be no such danger for us here, despite our defiance of a curse more grievous by far than any pharaonic threat. Could the architect who so cleverly incorporated undetectable ventilation shafts into this tomb's design have really been the Daidalos of legend? Whoever he had been, we were grateful to him for the fresh air and the evaporation of accumulated moisture which otherwise would have destroyed the tomb's contents long ago. Yet we knew our mere presence would begin the unraveling of this timeless subterranean world, our body heat, moisture, and

breath escalating the relentless processes of decay.

We assumed that the surface structure we first entered would give way to a large cavern area below, based on the description given in the scrolls. It is well known that the Minoans revered such large caverns both as the birthplace of Zeus and simultaneously as entrances to Hades. I recalled also that Greek mythology describes Minos' shade as a Judge of the Dead. Being familiar with the extended double axe theory mentioned in scrolls as the basis for the labyrinthine design, I confidently led the others through the serpentine complexity. At the insistence of the others, however, I fastened the end of a twine spool to the entrance, unwinding it as we went along—just in case.

The labyrinth's inner walls were totally barren of decoration, giving credence to the text's contention that the maze had simply been a device to keep the Minotaur captive. For over an hour we navigated twisting shafts which eventually opened into a group of large connecting rooms. The atmosphere seemed less ominous in these rooms, due in part to an unbroken series of brightly painted, linked, figure-8 shields running in a continuous mural throughout the rooms. Passing through the last of the larger rooms, we admired incredible portrayals of giant griffins in ominous repose. Nowhere were there any of the wonderful, life-affirming murals that typify other Minoan constructs.

Thereafter our path began to descend through half-choked corridors of damp, primal stone passages occasionally dotted with the huddled remains of royal mummies still reeking of the balsam and honey used in their embalming. Finally we reached a huge natural cavern attached to the rear of the edifice.

We also noted numerous tunnels extending out in an interminable honeycomb from both sides of the cavernous chamber. In the initial tunnels lay massive clay storage jars containing grains and dried foods in vast quantity. The tunnels just beyond were jammed haphazardly with household items, personal effects, and priceless jewelry of breathtaking beauty. We also noted many clay idols representing female mourners placed amidst libation vessels, ceremonial urn-bearing tripods, and the like. Weapons, military trappings, and even a bronzed war chariot were packed into the remaining shafts. I should note that all of these tunnels appeared to have been filled in great haste, the contents displaying little or no semblance of order. I would also add that, as scientists, we left everything undisturbed and intact.

Just beyond these tunnels, the cavern abruptly widened into a cathedral-like grotto of breathtaking proportion. There our light beams unexpectedly reflected upon the surface waters of a pitch-black lake fed by the moisture that endlessly dripped from the tips of a thousand colossal stalactites suspended from a ceiling far above our view. Dozens of mummies in varying states of preservation littered the tiled floor, each positioned as if in full attendance of a throne located in the exact center of the chamber. For several minutes we stood transfixed by the unearthly scene before us, none of us doubting for an instant the identity of the figure seated on that throne. Could King Minos really be alive after four thousand years as prom-

ised? Such a possibility defied everything we had ever known! It simply could not be! If it were true, then before us sat a supernatural being beyond comprehension, a being whose apocalyptic warnings we had recklessly ignored.

Childers courageously took a few initial trembling steps toward the throne, carefully side-stepping the muted corpses that surrounded him. A moment later, Brentwood and I managed to follow, though several feet behind. The mummies were all placed with knees raised to their chins, gold mouthpiece devices preventing their long-dead jaws from dropping open. To our extreme left I perceived the empty ceramic bathtub-shapes of typical Minoan sarcophagi, obviously the source of the mummies.

Childers then raised his light, directing the beam so that it fell upon the shadowed face, clearly illuminating the closed eyes of a long-dead corpse, whereupon we collectively heaved an embarrassed sigh of relief. Still, the body remained in an incredible state of preservation with only the blue-gray tones of otherwise astoundingly life-like skin to distinguish it from the semblance of a living man.

The corpse was dressed in a shoulder-tie cloak of white and the traditional Minoan knee-length apron skirt; the well-defined, bare upper torso was adorned in part with a breastplate of beaten gold. Upraised palms rested gently upon the lap, emphasizing the large golden bracelets encircling both the wrists and upper arms. No crown adorned the black, perfectly braided locks of the head. Leather sandals had disintegrated over the centuries, depositing in the dust tiny golden clasps shaped as mythological beasts.

Childers, standing directly before the throne, carefully reached out to touch the stately figure, perhaps in an attempt to convince himself of its absolute lifelessness. When we heard his sudden gasp, neither Brentwood nor I could discern the cause until Childers stepped back, revealing the figure's arm, now raised with palm out as if halting any further advance. The others kept their lights fixed upon that arm, but I turned my beam, only to reveal the opening eyes of the ancient monarch.

We froze, trying to somehow rationalize the sight before us. Such efforts were tossed aside moments later when we heard a weak, parchment-dry voice whisper to us through time in ancient Greek, "Stay! Lest your souls be forever damned as mine!"

We were struck absolutely speechless, having no concept of what to do or say. Terror gripped each of us, yet we were also burning with a curiosity which irresistibly drew us near.

"Did you not read the scrolls?" Minos continued in a sibilant, powdery whisper. "If so, what measure of fools can you possibly be? Or do you deem Minos a liar?"

Without waiting for response, he continued. "Listen well then, fools, for the fate of more souls than your own depends upon the further lies I tell you now! This rotted form no longer possesses the substance or strength to contain the obscenity imprisoned deep within it. Leave now and you might yet escape safely to immure this evil once again. Hesitate and you embrace an eternity of torment beyond that of any

hell!"

Each of us stepped back, Childers stumbling over an ill-placed mummy. In his attempts to right himself, he fell forward, brushing Minos' upraised arm, which snapped off dryly near the shoulder and tumbled to the floor. The poor fellow screamed when he recognized the bejeweled wrist that lay on the tile next to his face.

Minos' face showed no reaction as first the shoulder stump, then the features of his face, began to crack and crumble, breaking into tiny particles which trickled down in riverlets of a fine russet powder. Century after century hastened to wreak the long-delayed devastation. Within minutes Minos' form sagged upon the throne, shrunk to naught, like a vampire staked and disintegrating into primal ash. Repulsive as the process was, I felt drawn to watch, though slack-jawed with fear and disbelief. Finally only a pyramidal mound of particles remained, splashing from the seat to the floor, accompanied by the ringing noise of golden bracelets spinning in ever-decreasing circles upon the tile. Minos had passed on his burden at last. He had suffered more than any other human being in history, forced to sit for millennium after millennium, rigidly unmoving in an absolute void of darkness, awaiting the arrival of those he prayed would never come.

A smoky phantom began to emerge from the remains on the throne. I called out to the prostrate Childers, shouting for him to come back and away. Turning to discover the cause of my urgency, he instantly began to crawl back toward Brentwood and myself, toppling several mummies in the process. An unearthly shape began to define itself within the haze, twisting into a distended caricature of a human head and torso which slowly reached out for the receding Childers.

We helped Childers to his feet as he reached us, then the three of us turned and ran back toward the cavern's upper rooms, frantically kicking mummies from our path. At the doorway I hesitated, compelled to discover whether we were still being followed. The nebulous apparition was indeed pursuing us, though now shaping into a funnel of commingling hues of orange and purple. It rolled down and away from the throne, over the shattered, desiccated bodies of ancient regents. I watched in amazement as the funnel washed over and through the battered mummies, attracting their dead flesh, broken bone, and tattered rags as if it were some kind of magnet compelling to the fragments. Rattling skulls, cerements, and dead limbs flew upward by the dozens, adhering in mid-air to the unseen and insubstantial surface, eventually defining a rough globe in the air. Continued collisions with the skeletal remains slowed the approach of that oncoming insanity, allowing Brentwood time to catch my arm and pull me away.

As we ran, we heard wrenching, grating sounds as the globe of death forced its tortured form through doorways that were too narrow for its full bulk. We were frightened nearly out of our minds, careening in panic from room to room.

When we reached the rear entrance to the labyrinth, I recalled the twine I had unraveled as we penetrated the maze. I stopped quickly to pick up the spool, causing

Brentwood to fall into me, closely followed by Childers, his momentum slamming him against the wall. I freed the twine, then Brentwood and I and ran on, unaware momentarily of Childers' absence.

Childers had seemed a bit dazed after his impact with the wall, so when we noticed he was not keeping up with us, Brentwood and I forced ourselves to turn and go back for him. But before we could reach him, we heard a desperate scream and, from the doorway, we saw that the cadaverous globe had descended upon our friend and enveloped him.

An interminable time of paranoid insanity followed; Brentwood and I actually ran in opposite directions due to hysteria, thereby foolishly becoming separated. Each of us ran in total darkness without even the wherewithal to use our flashlights. Finding myself suddenly alone only intensified my terror, so that I had to stop finally to compose myself. I was amazed to discover I still clutched the twine tightly in my hand, and I finally realized my flashlight still dangled from my belt.

As I stood against a wall trying to slow my breathing, I heard a sound like that of shuffling footsteps emanating from a nearby and parallel corridor. Swallowing my fear, I called out softly, praying that only Brentwood could hear me. Luckily he quickly gave answer, warning me of Childers' close proximity. We continued to communicate, whispering until we became convinced that our possessed comrade was moving off in some opposite direction.

Encouraged by this, Brentwood suggested I stay put as he was sure he could reach my location easily. I agreed to remain stationary, feeling reasonably calm until I heard a low cry. An entirely new wave of terror roared through me as I wildly shouted Brentwood's name. His soothing response a few moments later reassured me; he had simply tripped over a loose stone. He convinced me that he was very near and would arrive momentarily.

I waited in the dim light of my beam, attempting to control myself enough to stop shaking. I spotted the faint glow of Brentwood's light a moment later. When I actually saw him, I was unable to restrain myself; I threw my arms around him in ecstatic relief. He calmed and reassured me, delighted that I had kept hold of the twine. Now that I was not alone, I felt better able to continue.

Half-way through the puzzling shafts, we heard a sound behind us. We turned about quickly, shining our lights the length of the corridor to where Childers stood gesturing wildly at us. Brentwood grabbed my shoulders and pushed me onward in our previous direction, loudly shouting encouragements that we would soon be safe.

In the excitement, however, I lost my grip on the twine. We had traveled some distance before I managed to alert Brentwood of this new complication. He surprised me by flying into an uncontrolled rage, disregarding the threat that Childers might locate us thereby. Although I understood his anguish, I was disappointed at his loss of control. I reminded him that I had led us into the maze without assistance and, given time, I felt sure I could find the way out, but even this failed to calm him.

I began shining my light along the walls in the hope of orienting myself. Along the wall just a few feet away from us, the beam fell upon something moving. I found myself staring at a large red serpent. Oddly, I stood there, seemingly mesmerized, until Brentwood prodded me roughly.

"Why the hell are you staring at that damned snake?" he asked in irritation.

I felt tongue-tied as my thoughts congealed, but Brentwood continued his frustrated demands for an answer. A final, unnecessarily harsh shove from him caused me to blurt out "Snake!"

"Yes, you idiot, it's a snake. So the hell what?"

I swallowed my rising anger, allowing certain latitude for his uncharacteristic actions due to the situation. I reminded him that just days before our departure for the island, Childers had alerted us to the several varieties of poisonous and non-poisonous reptiles endemic to this area, none of which bore the slightest resemblance to the specimen before us.

"The scrolls! Don't you remember? Herpete's last words to Minos. 'Spencer I will lead as well.' It all makes sense now!"

He looked at me without the slightest sign of comprehension.

"Herpete's symbol is the snake. Somehow She's sent this one to lead us out of here! I know it! Remember, Minos ordered his priests to remove every living thing before they sealed the tomb? It is possible that this snake entered the tomb just since we opened it, but it's unlikely as hell."

Brentwood turned to me with a look that said he was sure my mind was gone.

"Look man, it wants us to follow!" I pointed to the snake as it moved away, then stopped and looked back at us, like a dog wanting to be followed.

"Do what you like then, but I'm following the snake." I turned and began to slowly pursue the slithering reptile, noting Brentwood's reluctant presence behind me.

Miraculously, I was right about the snake, at least to the extent that it led us directly back to the entrance. Whether or not a long-forgotten goddess had anything to do with it is open to speculation, but I have my own opinion.

Just before reaching the entrance and safety, Childers came rushing up from behind, frantically calling my name. Brentwood and I took off at top speed. Brentwood was in such a panic that I found it necessary to shove him to prevent him from crushing the snake underfoot as we overtook and passed it.

We reached the door at last with Childers still several meters behind us. With incredible ease, the two of us were able to move the large stone back into place, although earlier it had been a difficult task for three of us. We wedged a few of the smaller, flat stones in for good measure, then at the last minute, I flung several green stones from the original plaster through an open space. A cry from the other side of the doorway told us I had struck Childers directly with one of the stones I knew to be from Qom-maq's cosmic sphere.

* * * *

Since the nightmare of that day, I have had ample occasion to mourn the loss of my friend and colleague, though it is some comfort knowing that he gave his life to prevent the escape of a force terrible enough to doom all of mankind. Yet even at that, I now fear his death was unnecessary. I even blame myself for it in large measure. But when one must think quickly, it becomes too easy to overlook what ought to be obvious.

Once Brentwood and I felt reasonably safe, we paused to confer, agreeing that the hideous contents of the tomb must be reburied as soon as possible. Priceless though our discoveries were, we could not afford to risk sacrificing the future for the sake of the past. We had seen more than enough to become convinced that even the most apparently outlandish claims of the Scrolls were chillingly factual—more evidence we did not care to see. After a few moments, Brentwood reminded me that back at our lodgings we had sufficient dynamite to dislodge the hillside facing the tomb, thereby reburying it effectively.

Some instinct told me to secret away the Minos Scrolls and our translation, which I did after Brentwood left to retrieve the blasting equipment, even though I had come to agree with his suggestion that all knowledge of this terrible secret must be obliterated. We carried out our resolve immediately upon his return, but the sealed box I tossed near the blocked entrance of the tomb before the explosion did not actually contain the Scrolls.

We were later to learn that the locals interpreted the blast as an earthquake, but in the end, a police investigation of the site revealed the man-made character of the disturbance. Further questioning led investigators to the local youth who had shown us the site, so it was not long before Brentwood and I were taken into custody by the authorities.

At first I laughed at their accusations, understandable as they might have been, that our party had intended to discover and make away with antique treasures rightly belonging to the government and people of Crete. And yet it appeared I was otherwise unable to justify our actions. Brentwood and I were questioned in isolation from one another, and I prayed his fabrications might satisfy the authorities without contradicting those of my own.

Imagine my shock, then, when a Cretan police officer entered the interrogation room and whispered something into my own attendant policeman's ear: Brentwood had implicated the both of us in an international smuggling syndicate, that in return he alone be granted exemption from prosecution!

Only when subsequent verification of his story proved impossible were all charges dropped. I was released for lack of evidence, but in the meantime, Brentwood vanished completely. I remained in the area attempting to take stock of the situation, well aware that the University would require some brand of reasonable explanation for the disappearance of my colleagues, not to mention our seemingly reckless destruction of a potentially valuable archaeological site.

I was convinced that Brentwood would never return to the University; the obvious had registered upon me at last.

It must have been my own panic back in the darkness of the Labyrinth that prevented me from considering that, while Brentwood and I were briefly separated in the labyrinth, he might have been overtaken by the possessed Childers and become the new host of the Qom-maq entity. If Childers had still been energized by the demon, it seems strange that he should not have been capable of resisting our feeble attempts to seal the labyrinth's entrance against his escape—just as strange that despite our exhaustion, Brentwood and I so easily replaced the huge key stone that had earlier required full effort by all three of us. Too late I have realized that at the last Childers had called out my name and mine only, as if to warn me against Brentwood! As for the latter, I now know that it was not for the sake of humanity that he insisted the Labyrinth be destroyed.

He probably planned to eliminate me as well when the opportunity should present itself, perhaps through some convenient "accident" that would leave him free of suspicion, that he might be free to carry on his nefarious plans. Ironically, the unexpected intervention of the police had spoiled that scheme. His secondary plan could only have been to betray me to the police as an art thief, that I might then vanish into the netherworld of Mediterranean prisons where the slightest suspicions are sometimes enough to guarantee an accused foreign national will never be heard from again. I had heard numerous stories of the sort while preparing for the expedition, and so had Brentwood.

Admittedly this is all conjecture, but I must now assume that Qom-maq possesses poor Brentwood, its terrible and cunning intellect dominating the helpless fellow's mind and will. Or perhaps it has abandoned him on some Cretan hillside by now for some other, less conspicuous host.

The rest, however, is not guesswork. I have learned it from a better authority. For in the weeks following my release from the local holding jail, I dreamed. I dreamed as never before, yet for all that, my astral wanderings had a certain element of familiarity about them. In these dreams, I found myself descending into a cavern unlike that of the tomb. At length I became aware of the silhouetted form of a woman with outstretched arms, each hand clutching a winding red serpent. From her shadow-shrouded mouth came the stilted accent of a long-vanished Greek dialect, which I nonetheless understood perfectly. I have no doubt that it was truly the Goddess Herpete, instructing me from a space far removed from time. Her apparition came to me in three successive dreams, willing me upon a path that became more clear each night, until finally even Her dream body became exhausted and was dissipated.

I have learned how to mix the tainted honey, the taste of which describes dark sidereal realms. I have learned to follow the lead of a scarlet snake that now only I can see. I shall not have to follow it far as it leads me to the bearer of Qom-maq. I will then return, the entity imprisoned within me, to a secret portal to the Labyrinth

which Herpete has revealed to me. Therein, God help me, I shall abide in vile darkness throughout inconceivable ages like poor Minos, with "noxious pestilence" incubating within me. I will leave this, my account, beside that of my predecessor, that together they may serve as a redoubled warning to any soul unlucky enough to stumble across the accursed threshold of my tomb.

