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From the Publisher

October is that month that should be the perfect distillation of autumn: cool but not cold weather, the final explosion of color in the leaves, apple-picking.

But all of this gets swallowed up by the corporate mission-creep that involves putting skeletons and witches on display in the drugstores in the last week of August. I understand, you're eager to have something to sell to bring the business in, but can you people understand how much I don't want to think about Halloween when it isn't even Labor Day? How that makes Halloween a fucking chore, rather than a good time? Nothing ruins enjoyment than being told to enjoy something.

But that at least is market-driven. It's the Halloween nerds so eager to caper about in skeletons, that I really can't stand. Especially since you take what could be the oddest, most *memento-mori* of holidays, and dilute it until it's basically Goth Christmas. All so you can have an excuse to watch Tim Burton stop-motion darker a few weeks early. Be more brainwashed.

My therapist says I'm supposed to let these petty frustrations out. I think it makes me sound like an old man who found fresh dog poop in his lawn, but whatever. I guess it helps.

As per last issue's announcement, we did in fact launch a podcast last month, *Shallow & Pedantic*. It was fun, and we knocked off a whole growler in the process. The next episode will be seasonally-related, and come out later this month. Check our Facebook page for further details

To the issue: We have a fine exercise in Cyberpunk Noir in *As Case in the Empire of New Texas*. Merrily existential. Then we get the conclusion to *Cantilever Jones Swings Low*, a story that just keeps going. Then, a filmscript by Alfred Underhill, called *Jonathon Macoon*. It's pleasantly weird. And then, Tygg and Drea return hunting mythical monsters in *The Sword in the Cave*, a sequel to previous stories *The Dying Goddess* and *The Barbarian on the Shore*.

Enjoy.

Thomas Fitz
Publisher

A Case in the Empire of New Texas

by Gern Blanstion

He's a winner. He's always on the right side. He knows the world is actually a simple place. His streams agree with him about what's real and what isn't. Sure, there's other streams, but they're for losers, terrorists, and fake citizens. He gets the real shit straight from the source. He's not sure those other people even know they're being tricked. (Are they people? Like, for real? Like me?) He doesn't think about it too much though. What's the point? It's not like they're worth thinking about, and you can't reason with them, so why bother? He's no fool. Besides, he's got his work. He's got his freedom. His feed confirms it.

He spins the steering wheel of his armor-plated pickup truck, turning into the parking lot of a 7-11. Some losers loitering by the doorway skedaddle when they see him pull up. He curses them under his breath as he puts the truck in park and activates its security system. He dabs at his contact lenses, then blinks. They're sitting better now, so he checks his feeds to make sure they look right. Satisfied, he wipes some sweat from his brow.

Even with the AC blasting at max, he can feel the heat outside in the Empire of New Texas. He adjusts the stiff bulletproof vest wrapped around his torso and switches the safeties off on his guns. He just needs to fuel himself: he doesn't need any bullshit.

There's only a securesec drone inside the store and a bank of TVs hanging from the middle of the ceiling. He sees the green light pop on the front of the drone, thanks to his hunter's badge. He stopped taking the badge off three years ago. (Why take chances?)

The TVs are all tuned to different channels. One of them has his latest job on it: public case 01753681. The individual in question is a high-end clone escaped from captivity. The reward for returning it started out steep, north of \$10M, but it's gone up three times since the case was turned over to the public. (Of course, the catch is you got to bring the thing in alive. If you accidentally kill it, then your ass will be the next public case.)

Risky? Yes. Profitable? Also yes. He figures the clone is probably somebody important's medical backup. He's heard about one or two of those getting out before, but they were somewhere else, like China or Africa; someplace where they don't speak American. American's the only language people are allowed to speak, here, in the Empire. He likes that.

He grabs a couple bottles of Cherry Coke Protein, a sandwich, and a bag of chips. He puts his lunch on the counter, and thumbs through the menus at the checkout terminal. The 7-11 automated pharmacy has all the usual stuff. He doesn't need anything fancy, just some stim patches and a neurobooster. The counter dispenser spits out each of the drugs in slim single packs after he selects them. They'll come in handy for bringing the thing in alive, but he's really getting them in case he runs into competition on the job. He's thinking he probably will; he's actually hoping for it.

After paying up, he's ready to hit the road again. Through the shop's door, he sees one of the losers from earlier creeping up on his truck. (This'll be good) He grins. He switches on his lens's recording function. Sure enough, about a second later a scraggly, homeless-looking guy puts his hand on the truck's door handle. The loser screams and his hair stands straight up as the truck's security system electrocutes him with a few thousand volts.

Guffawing with laughter as he walks out of the store, he pauses to say, "Phew! You stink a whole new way now, dontcha?" He starts laughing again. He got himself saying that on video too. He'll upload it in a minute. Maybe he can auto-tune the guy's screams a little first, or add some filters to the video to make it funnier. He disarms the security system as he looks down at the fried loser. The guy is definitely a little burnt, but he'll probably live. He kicks the prone loser out of the way and gets in his truck.

He plays his new recording back a few times and chuckles to himself. After a few tries, he finds the right falsetto to tune the loser's screams to. He messes with a few filters for awhile. He decides to add an animated pair of testicles that fall to the ground the moment the loser begins getting electrocuted. To finish off the clip, he adds a caption that pops up when the guy hits the ground, that reads: I fucked up.

After playing back the finished product a few times, giggling all the while, he uploads the clip to his personal stream. By the time he's out of the parking lot and back on the road, at least a dozen people have already watched and rated it. Mostly good reviews. He smiles to himself, lets the clip play back again while he's driving and laughs.

* * *

His quarry is holed up in a motel outside of Dallas. The suite of virtual panopticon bots he uses found it for him. Those programs are worth the steep licensing fee for the triple platinum service he buys each year. Those fees ensure that no one – not even other triple platinum members – can use that same suite of bots to track him. It also helps make it harder for bots from other providers to track him too. (Expensive service, but it's as close to invisible as you can get virtually these days.) Maybe someday he'll get picked up for a show and get a sponsorship that'll pay the fees for him. That's every hunter's dream, though, and he has work to do right now.

Five miles from the motel, one of his programs chirps, telling him that a pair of hunters have just arrived. He curses, and guns the engine, weaving between other vehicles as he's checking his competition's progress. His HUD shows him two figures sitting inside what looks like an armored car. They're definitely working together. He curses some more. Additional scans show 01753681 undisturbed inside its motel room. (Doesn't look like it knows about the hunters outside, but there's no way to know for sure, yet.)

One at a time, because he's driving, he opens and applies a stim patch to each arm. They'll just help him do everything he can normally do but faster. He downed the neurobooster right after he got on the road. It's already helping him run the scenarios for about two minutes from now when he'll be at the motel.

So far he thinks surprising the guys outside is the best course. He can't decide whether to ram them with his truck, then get out and finish the job, or if he should approach on foot and put a couple grenades underneath their car. He chooses the latter because he doesn't want to risk his auto insurance going up.

He pulls into the motel parking lot. He finds a space a few rooms down from where his job is holed up in. The pair of hunters is still sitting inside their car. They see him. It's a man and a woman. They're about the same age. They don't look like they're biologically related. (Aww, now ain't that cute?)

He activates the truck's security system and gets out. He touches the brim of his hat and grins at them as he takes a few steps along the sidewalk in front of the motel rooms. Inside his pockets, he pulls the pins out of two grenades.

A quick toss with both hands sends the grenades beneath the hunters' car. He hits the sidewalk before the shrapnel

A Case in the Empire of New Texas

starts flying. He hears the man scream something, but it's cutoff by two loud bangs. He waits in silence with the stink of burning metal in his nose. His HUD cuts through the smoke and shows him a prone figure outside the car and another slumped over the front end of the vehicle. He grins.

Pushing himself up to one knee, something bites his ear. He knows it's a bullet. The right side of his head is getting wet and sticky. He sees the woman hunter duck behind the front passenger wheel of the armored car. He sighs to himself, pulls the pin out of another grenade and lobs it over the car.

She rolls away from the car onto the sidewalk in front of the motel. She crouches low, avoiding the blast. He's ready for her though, and empties the magazine of his automatic pistol at her. She slumps out of her crouch onto the ground.

He switches the filter on his lenses to check her vitals. She's still not dead (tough girl), but she'll probably bleed out before he finishes securing the clone. He looks over at the male hunter lying on the ground: not much for vitals. (Man's either dead or dying.)

He scans both of them and the area around them for weapons. They both still have guns and other shit on them, but neither of them have anything in their hands right now. His ear is still bleeding; she shot a decent chunk of it off. He pulls some Nuskin spray out of a belt pouch and gives his ear the once over. He's standing before the spray dries.

Reloaded, he keeps his gun trained on the woman as he walks up to the motel room door. She's looking at him. Her lips are moving. She's trying to say something, but he can't tell what it is. He glances at the man face down on the pavement. (Looks like he got the worst of the first two grenades.) Maybe he'll call an ambulance if the timing works out.

He checks his bots. 01753681 is still inside the motel room. He turns on the record feature of his lenses and mule kicks the door in from standing next to it. He clears the corners inside the room, ready to fire.

01753681 sits with its back to him on the bed furthest from the door.

"Hey!" he shouts. "You're public case 01753681. I'm apprehending you to officially resolve that case. My hunter's license number is 0038462. Do not resist! Put your hands on the back of your head now!" The mixture of stim patches and adrenaline makes his breathing heavy. (Shit, am I getting old?)

Four seconds pass before the clone carefully puts its hands on the back of its head. It doesn't do anything else.

He pulls a set of handcuffs off his belt as he approaches. He snaps one wrist, then roughly moves it and the other arm down behind the clone's back. He pulls up on the cuffs, indicating to the clone to stand up, which it does. The clone looks like a man that he might've seen before but can't quite place. It looks at him with a blank expression. The whole situation feels eerie to him, so he takes a deep breath before continuing. (C'mon, man! Focus!)

"Let's go," he says, and pushes the clone toward the door and through it, towards his truck. He notes the other two hunters look worse than they did a moment earlier. He uses a program on his HUD to call a cheap ambulance as he walks the clone toward his truck. He disables the security system and opens the armored bed cover to reveal a coffin-like box, which he also opens.

A Case in the Empire of New Texas

"Get in," he says, shoving the clone towards the box. He has to lift the clone up because of the way its arms are restrained by the cuffs. It squirms a bit inside the box, trying to get comfortable before lying still.

"As Patrick Henry said," says the clone, "'Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! — I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!'"

"What did you say?" He says. He wasn't sure until just now the clone could even talk. But it doesn't repeat itself or say anything else. It doesn't look at him when he tries to ask it questions. So he shrugs, shuts the box and the bed cover, and gets into the driver seat. He turns the truck over and begins driving to the collection center assigned to the case.

He doesn't feel how he thought he would after completing this case. For him, it had been close to the perfect job. Well, until that clone ruined his video with whatever the hell it was saying. He's pretty sure he can't use any of the last part of the capture on his channel. He'll probably just have to cut the whole sequence after apprehending the clone. He doesn't have enough time to edit the video so the clone doesn't talk. (Goddamn meat mannequins!) If he waits too long to post the video, his followers will harangue him and maybe leave his stream. If that happens, he'll probably end up with less positive reviews, and he doesn't want that. He tells himself the payday is still huge, but it doesn't make him feel better about the video.

He did get the job done, though. (I mean, of course I did!) He's a winner. He's no fool. And besides, he's got his freedom. **UJ**

Cantilever Jones Swings Low, Part 3

by Albert Kuhawlik

We set the Jones to take off early the next morning. The weather was briefly favoring us, with a run of warm weather that was holding in the north. The reports said that this would hold for another few days, maybe. Or maybe not. I had no faith in it, but Vin did, and I decided to trust his insight.

[What else were you going to do? Program the nav computer yourself?]

Have I told you how helpful you've been on this voyage so far?

[No.]

Weird...

"In the dawn of aviation and star travel," said Vin, "Humans had an idea of flying a large weapons platform with wings from one end of a planet to another. It would take off, fly above the troposphere, and then come down again when it was time to attack. They called it 'antipodal flight'."

"Fascinating," I replied, genuinely.

"So what we're going to do is similar. We'll take off, but not go all the way out of the atmosphere as we normally would. Just above the magnetosphere will do. It will take up about 80% of the kinetic energy of a full launch."

"And then we go back down."

"Approximately 1 degree above the start of the polar zone."

"Sound like a plan."

Vin said nothing for a moment, then said "that's a human idiom intended to convey confidence while downplaying it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because if you express a lot of confidence, that means you don't have any. Plus, it sounds like you're anticipating problems, which tends to make people think the problems will be surmountable."

Vin accepted this insight, and then said "How much of human communication is you convincing yourselves of something you know isn't true?"

"Quite a bit."

“That worries me.”

“Of course it does. We’ll launch in the morning. Thanks for your work on this, Vin.”

“Acknowledge,” he said, and turned away. I stepped down off the ramp onto the quiet tarmac of the spaceport and looked at the collection of stars. I could always tell when I was tired of being on a planet when I actually paid attention to the stars in the night sky. Not as a navigational aid or means of observing my position in the galaxy, just as an experience. When you’re in space, you know the stars are all too far away from each other to matter. They’re just points in 3D space, having no reality but as beacons to find planets. But spend a few days on a planet, and you start seeing what our antediluvian ancestors saw: a holistic heaven, a transcendence.

I’m standing there, absorbing this, pondering what it reveals about my consciousness, when I’m suddenly very aware of a presence to my left. It’s there, but I don’t think it’s hostile, and Norl doesn’t pick anything up either. So I just glance off to my left, and there he is, standing silent as the grave. My friend, Gaflus.

“Evening,” I said.

“And you,” he replied, which was a normal polite greeting on Senel-4.

“Well, we’ll be heading out tomorrow.”

“Where you goin’?” he asked, as if he knew somehow.

“You asking, or confirming?” I said.

“Confirming, I guess. Polar zone?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Because my clients want to go there. They think they can solve your Demon problem.”

“Why?”

“Not sure. But they believe it. Just as you believe there’s some monstrous beast up there. I don’t know myself... but you believe it. So I take it seriously.”

“Huh,” he said.

“Yep,” I said.

[“Yep,” I said.]

“I’m no help at all,” I said.

[Everyone knows that, Rand.]

Ha ha.

“Don’t suppose,” Gaflus said, clearing his throat, “That you’d need an extra set of hands out there?”
I didn’t. Not strictly speaking that is. And for all I knew, he’d be more trouble than he was worth. But still, for him to make that offer, it meant something. Something I could not afford to let slide or ignored. “We leave at first light,” I replied. “Be there and come with us.”

“All right, he said. And then, without a good night, he went away.

* * *

The snow was blue. Long over the great northern mountains, and on the tundra that followed, the powder was deep blue, and lustrous, glittering even though the solar light was covered behind iron-grey clouds. I peered out over the cockpit, as Vin brought us through re-entry and I asked him why the snow was blue. He said he didn’t know. He said it plainly and factually, as if there was nothing more to say. That he didn’t have even enough data for a low-grade speculation worried me.

We set down on some snow and we didn’t sink into it, which meant it was icy and hard. We sat a bit and waited to see if anything greeted us. Nothing did. Finally I turned to Gaflus and said, “better check it out.”

“Yeah,” he said, clearly scared shitless but trying not to be. I could practically hear his violated sense of taboo screaming at him. But he followed me anyway and helped me break into the cold-weather gear: parkas and blast-torches and glare-masks and all the rest. We went to the ramp and met Pale-Face and Dark-Face and the... what was her name?

“What’s your name?” I asked the girl.

The girl stared straight ahead and did not answer.

“What’s your name?” I asked again.

“We have prepared her,” said Dark-Face.

“She needs your understanding,” said Pale-Face.

[Let it Pass...]

I let it pass. “We’re ready, Vin” I said, and with loud creaks and other forms of cavitation the ramp lowered down and the cold bit our faces. I breathed in the cold air deep to acclimate myself and to defy it at the same time, and then I led the crew down.

The weather had held. There was hardly any breeze, and although the iron-grey clouds looked ominous, there was no smell of moisture in the air. We spread out in an arc around the bottom of the ramp and looked around. Other than the blue of the snow, everything looked normal.

Then I felt the air grow even colder than it was, as if ice crystals suddenly formed and crackled in the air. The air grew hard to breath and yet somehow thinner, more of an emptiness. I looked at Gafus, whose eyes were darting to and fro. I tapped him on the arm, and signaled to the blast-torch in his hand. He lit the fuse. So did I with mine. We took a step out in front of everyone on either ends of the arc. The blue on the snow grew even more intense. Almost blinding. Like it was wafting upwards into my eyes...

I let loose a blast with the torch to see what would happen and I saw myself cut a swath through the blue in the air as it rose above the snow. And somehow the blue pulled away as well, I even felt I heard something. Something like a child's cry from far away. I saw Gafus cut through the mist with his blast torch as well, and heard the same sound. But it oose and thickened and swirled, but never quite congealed into anything that you could categorize or grasp. Just something animating the air, but not of it. Moving through it. Around it. The odd tendrils would flow around us like a fragment of a ghost but nothing happened. Just the storm moving and growing.

"Very well," said Pale-Face.

"You may stop now," said Dark-Face.

Gafus looked to me and I nodded. But he did not nod. He kept going, even as the blue kept swirling, it started making large spheres of itself and hurling itself at the *Jones*. The ship seemed to shift and shudder under the weight. I yelled at Gafus to stop, but he wouldn't. Pale-Face and Dark-Face yelled at the *same time*.

[Wierd that you didn't notice that as much at the time...It's kind of a big deal that they actually have individuality]

For them, maybe. Can you please not go meta right now?

[Sorry, sorry...]

Only the girl was silent, standing in the center, with Pale-Face and Dark-Face to her right and left. Her hair flowed in the wind that I didn't really feel but saw moving all around me. Her back was arched and her arms akimbo, spread wide. The big blue balls didn't touch her. Norl, hiding in my hood, gave off a psychic shudder.

Any chance the torch hurt them?

[Annoyed is more like]

Thought so. Help me do something stupid, would you?

[Good idea...]

Norl took off in Gafus' direction and screamed a psychic burst into his mind that cause him to turn the torch in one direction, safely away from everyone. I charged him from behind and tackled him just as a big blue ball with what looked like spikes swept down at him. He fell and his torch, spinning wild, hit the blue ball and dissolved it. So it did have an effect. And I had an idea.

"Vin," I said into my collar com.

Cantilever Jones Swings Low, Part 3

“I want to take off,” said Vin.

“Good. Do that.”

“Now?”

“Now!”

So he did. The rocket boosters made a huge blast and the blue cloud of wispy violence dissipated at the back of the ship and as everyone instinctively dived to hit the dirt the heat made all of it recoil like bacilli in a dish of purging fungus. I bought us some time.

[Hey, you only said one stupid thing.]

I didn't need you for the second one.

[Ha, ha]

The girl is on her knees, and she is droning something I don't fully understand. Something I don't recognize the cadences of, something about spirits and death and coming. It's not real to me. The swirling blue ghosts around us return, but this time they focus straight on her. Electricity snaps in the air. Pale-Face and Dark-Face climb to their knees, and they chant along with her. I do not like any of this.

[It's gonna be fine.]

How do you know?

[I just know, okay?]

Galfus is looking at me and I'm looking at him. I crawl over to the kneeling trinity and he follows me. The blue girls get closer and closer. I wanted to flick the fuse back on and let fly, let the burst of flame tear an even greater course, through the whatever, melting the icy air. I don't. That play has passed. I hear the cry again, but this time it's louder and it seems to come from the girl. I look at her and she is writhing, flailing. I want to help her, but Norl says not too. I trust him.

The swirls go on, filling the wind and the air with blue like a raging fog that destroys your field of vision. I blast with the torch but it doesn't seem to do much good. A distant scream builds in my mind but I let it pass. It's not my job.

A burst knocks me over, knocks the torch clean, and knocks the wind out of me. I fight to breathe but it feels as though there's nothing to breathe. My head swam. I wondered if I was already dead. But I wasn't. Eventually breath returned to me. I staggered up and everything was quiet again.

“It is done,” said Pale-Face.

“It is done,” said Dark-Face.

Cantilever Jones Swings Low, Part 3

The Girl was kneeling and naked and blue. She stood up, and her eyes were the color of iron and suddenly she ran off into the snow that was white.

“Where is she going?”

“She will come back,” said Pale-Face.

“How do you know?”

“We know.” Said Dark-Face.

“Fine,” I said. “Galfus, let’s get a drink.”

“Yeah,” said Galfus. And I called Vin.

* * *

She did come back, after a while, still blue, and still naked and speaking a language that had never been heard before by my ears. Pale-Face related to me that she had apparently eaten the demonic things. Dark-Face added that now her blood could command them. They would return to Brana Prime, study her, and then finish the job here on Senel-4.

“Soon the inhabitants will live without fear,” said Pale-Face.

“What a shame for Lord Calabus,” I said.

“We do not understand,” said Dark-Face, after a moment.

“You don’t need to,” I said.

Galfus drank merrily and I joined him. The Jones, having swung low once, did so again back to Asport, back to our very same docking bay. All went exactly as it should have. Except the girl never spoke an intelligible word again, and when Vin asked me what a demon was, I could not find the words to explain it to him. **UJ**

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Jonathon Macoon

by Alfred Underhill

ACT I: Scene 1

MARGORIE

Harold, have you seen Jonathon? I need to give him a talking to.

HAROLD

I haven't seen much of him since I got home. Something the matter?

MARGORIE

I almost broke my neck on his skateboard again. He left it in the garage right next to where I get out of my car.

HAROLD

That kid. [*sigh*] He's not in his room?

MARGORIE

No, I checked there first.

HAROLD

That's strange. And he's not watching TV?

MARGORIE

No, I checked. He's not out front or in the back yard either. I really want to give him a piece of my mind.

HAROLD

[*Inattentively*] Mmm-Hmm...

MARGORIE

Harold! This is serious! I almost ended up in the hospital, and we don't know where our son is. Put down The Sun and help me find him.

HAROLD

[*Sighing*] Okay, I'll help you find Johnny.

[FOLEY: FOOTSTEPS]

MARGORIE

Johnathon! Where are you? I need to have a word. ...Are you all right?

HAROLD

Come on out Johnny! Your mother just wants a moment. Then you can get back to...well, whatever it is that you're doing.

[FOLEY: DOORS OPENING AND CLOSING, FOOTSTEPS]

MARGORIE

Where on earth is he? Harold, I'm starting to worry. We didn't find him reading those comic books of his or watching Dragnet. I think something might be wrong.

HAROLD

I'm sure Johnny's fine, Margie. C'mon, take a deep breath.

MARGORIE

[BREATHES DEEPLY]

HAROLD

There, do you feel better? Good. Hang on second: there's still one place we haven't looked.

MARGORIE

What? You mean the bathroom? You don't think he's...

HAROLD

He could be. What time is it?

MARGORIE

Half-past eight.

HAROLD

Let's go.

[FOLEY: KNOCKING ON DOOR]

Jonathon Macoon

HAROLD

Johnny? Are you in there? Open the door!

JONATHON

Go away, dad. I need to be alone in here. I'll come out later when I'm finished.

MARGORIE

Jonathon, this is your mother speaking. Come out of there right now, young man! I need to have a conversation with you about the proper storage of skateboards. And what you're doing in there isn't decent!

HAROLD

Listen to your mother, Johnny. We're both very concerned about you.

JONATHON

[*Grunting*] Go away! [*Gasping*] I need to be alone. You don't understand what this feels like.

MARGORIE

If you don't come out right this instant, you'll be grounded for a month! Open the door!

JONATHON

[*Panting*] I don't think that matters right now. I can't help it, mom.

HAROLD

Son, we're worried about you. We just want to make sure that you're okay. How about being a sport and letting us check on you?

JONATHON

[*Grunting and snarling*] I think it's better for me to stay in here. [*Snarl*]

MARGORIE

Jonathon! Don't give in! Don't blind yourself to what's really important!

JONATHON

[*Grunting and snarling*]

Jonathon Macoon

HAROLD

Johnny! Try to stay in control! Think of something else! Anything else! Think of baseball!

MARGORIE

We love you! You're our son no matter what you do in there!

JONATHON

[Emits long wolf howl]

[FOLEY: SCRATCHING AND POUNDING DOOR]

HAROLD

Honey, we have to face the facts: our son is a werewolf.

MARGORIE

I...I know. I was hoping it was just a phase...that he'd grow out of it, or at least keep it out of sight until he turned 18.

HAROLD

Me too. But what can we do? That's the third transformation in as many months. I don't think he's going to grow out of this any time soon.

JONATHON

[HOWLING]

[FOLEY: SCRATCHING AND POUNDING DOOR]

MARGORIE

I think I'm finally going to call Father O'Donnell. I have my reservations, but who knows? Maybe he can help.

HAROLD

What, you mean like an exorcism or something?

MARGORIE

Well, maybe. The Catholics do have a lot of strange rituals and traditions. Maybe one of them could help our boy.

JONATHON

[*HOWLING*]

HAROLD

What the hell. It's worth a shot. I'll try anything at this point.

MARGORIE

I'll go call the parish office.

ACT II: Scene 1

[*FOLEY: KNOCKING, PAUSE, DOOR OPENING*]

FATHER O'DONNELL

[*Irish Brogue*] Ah, you must be the Maccons. Margorie, Harold, and Jonathon. Please, come in.

HAROLD

Thank you for meeting with us Father. We're hoping you can help us.

MARGORIE

I'm so sorry I was so emotional on the phone the other day, Father. We're just at our wit's end. Poor Jonathon!

FATHER O'DONNELL

Not to worry, Mrs. Maccon. There's no doubt in my mind you're having a difficult time of it. I must say, I was a bit...eh, taken aback when you described your son's condition.

Quite unusual. I'm not entirely sure what you think I can do for you.

MARGORIE

Well surely, we could start with an exorcism? Are there any Catholic rituals for dealing with this sort of thing?

FATHER O'DONNELL

An exorcism, you say? That's a...well, that's a bit... well, it's just that the performance of that particular rite is rare these days, I'm afraid.

HAROLD

Please, father! We'll convert! We'll pay a tithe! We'll [*gulp*] go to church every Sunday!

Jonathon Macoon

Please! Just help our son!

FATHER O'DONNELL

Well all right now, Mr. Maccon, no need to get emotional. But you must understand the facts of the matter. Jonathon would have to undergo a rigorous medical examination to rule out mental illness. Then, assuming the examination found nothing, we would need to obtain permission from the bishop to conduct the exorcism. I can't just chant a few words in Latin and poof! Jonathon's all better and you're on your way.

MARGORIE

Oh, Harold! [*Starts crying*]

HAROLD

There, there Margie. Father, is there anything you can do to help us?

FATHER O'DONNELL

Perhaps we could start with me having a word with young Jonathon here, hmm? See where a conversation gets us?

Hey lad, what do you say? Do you mind chatting with an old priest for a few minutes while your parents wait outside?

JONATHON

Uh, okay. Sure.

MARGORIE

Oh, Father, I don't think that's a good idea.

FATHER O'DONNELL

And why is that?

HAROLD

We're just concerned for your safety. Please understand: we were completely serious on the phone. We don't want to be liable if --

FATHER O'DONNELL

Mr. & Mrs. Maccon, in my 38 years as a priest I've seen many strange things, and dealt with more than my fair share of unruly teenage boys. Your son is neither strange nor unruly.

Jonathon Macoon

MARGORIE

But--

FATHER O'DONNELL

Please. Just wait right outside that door there for a few minutes. I'll open it once Jonathon and I have chatted.

JONATHON

It's okay mom, dad. I'll be good.

HAROLD

Very well, we'll be just outside that door.

MARGORIE

Just give us a shout if you need us.

JONATHON

Huh? I'll be fine, mom.

MARGORIE

I was talking to Father O'Donnell, son.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Eh?

HAROLD

Keep your cool, Johnny.

[FOLEY: DOOR SHUTS]

FATHER O'DONNELL

If you don't mind me saying, you're parents are a bit strange.

JONATHON

Yeah. They can be kind of a drag. It's like, there job or something.

FATHER O'DONNELL

I can tell that they love you very much.

JONATHON

I guess. They're always hovering. They never leave me alone for too long. It gets kind of annoying.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Do you think that's related to why you're here talking with me today?

JONATHON

Probably. I've been...changing lately. I don't really know how to deal with it. Most of the time, I just lock myself in the bathroom so I don't bother anyone with it.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Ah, I see. And what happens when you lock yourself in the bathroom?

JONATHON

Well I...I don't know if you really want to hear about this, Father. It's kinda gnarly.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Oh no, it's fine Jonathon. Go ahead. We'll treat it like confession: strictly confidential.

JONATHON

I lock myself in the bathroom when I start to feel this weird tension. I get flush, hot. I sweat a lot when it happens. It's like all of my pores open up at the same time.

FATHER O'DONNELL

I see. And where do you experience this, uh, tension?

JONATHON

Oh, I feel it all over. My whole body throbs. It feels like the earth's moving underneath me.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Go on.

JONATHON

It builds like that for a little while, and then my vision blurs and my hands always seem to grow the hair first--

FATHER O'DONNELL

[Irish Brogue] All right, I think I've heard enough.

JONATHON

But I haven't told you how it always ends--

FATHER O'DONNELL

Believe it or not lad, I think I have a pretty good idea.

JONATHON

No! You don't understand! I--

FATHER O'DONNELL

It's alright, John. I was young man once myself. Perhaps your parents will leave you alone if you just use a sock before you go to bed at night.

JONATHON

You're not listening! You don't understand! You're just like my parents!

FATHER O'DONNELL

Now, now John. It's all right. What you're experiencing is perfectly normal; natural, even.

JONATHON

There's nothing normal or natural about what's happening to me, Father. Don't say I didn't warn you.

FATHER O'DONNELL

Oh saints preserve us! Lad, what's happening to you?

JONATHON

[Growling, snarling]

Jonathon Macoon

FATHER O'DONNELL

Aaaaaah!

[FOLEY: DOOR OPENS]

MARGORIE

Jonathon! What have you done?

HAROLD

Son! Calm down! Come back to us!

JONATHON

RRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrr[*snarling*]

[FOLEY: BROKEN GLASS]

MARGORIE

He's jumped through the window!

JONATHON

[Wolf howl fading into the distance]

FATHER O'DONNELL

[Groaning in pain]

MARGORIE

Father O'Donnell! Are you all right? Speak to me!

HAROLD

I think he's unconscious now, Margie. Poor padre. Those scratches look pretty serious.
Stay with him, I'll call an ambulance.

ACT III: Scene 1

MARGORIE

Oh, thank you for calling us Dr. Spinner!

Jonathon Maccoon

HAROLD

Yes, thank you doctor. What news do you have for us?

DR SPINNER

[*German accent*] Guten Tag Mr. und Mrs. Maccon. It is splendid to be seeing you both again. Can I offer you some coffee, tea, or perhaps an Ovaltine?

MARGORIE

Please, Doctor! Our boy, Jonathon: what is this interesting new development you mentioned on the phone?

DR SPINNER

Well, that's a 'no' to the breakfast drink. It's too bad. I find the day starts rather sluggish without a warm beverage.

HAROLD

Doctor! For crying out loud! We came to Spring Grove this morning because we want to know what's happening with our son. Please, tell us what you know!

DR SPINNER

All right, kommen. This way to the viewing room.

[*FOLEY: DOOR OPENS, STEPS, PROJECTOR TURNING ON*]

DR SPINNER

Ja, so this was filmed the other day. You will recognize your son there, hmm?

MARGORIE

Jonathon! He looks so upset! Oh, Harold! [*sobbing*]

HAROLD

There, there Margie. We have to be strong...for Jonathon.

DR SPINNER

I'm sorry this film is causing you the discomfort, but here we are coming to the important part.

MARGORIE

Jonathon Maccoon

What on earth?

HAROLD

What are those orderlies doing to him? This is outrageous!

DR SPINNER

Ja, so perhaps now you understand, Mr. und Mrs. Maccon? What the condition of your son truly is?

MARGORIE

I don't understand what I'm see, doctor. What does it mean?

HAROLD

I thought the staff here were supposed to help our boy, not--

DR SPINNER

Oh, rest assured they were afraid for their lives when this was filmed. They are very, very brave men to approach your son with him in that state. And as you can see, it took eight orderlies to lay him down on the ground there. He is definitely the feisty one, your Jonathon.

MARGORIE

But why does he look like himself? Why didn't he transform into that, that beast?

DR SPINNER

Once he was sedated, I interviewed each of the orderlies myself. Each of them said that the young man transformed into some sort of frightening wolf-man creature. Yet, as you just saw, Jonathon appears like himself on the recording.

HAROLD

What does this mean?

DR SPINNER

I have a theory. I have heard of something like this happening on occasion in Europe. Men und women who possess an unusual psychic ability. One that makes them faster, stronger, und more resilient. Und they project the image of being transformed into the werewolf directly to the brain of the onlookers.

Jonathon Macoon

MARGORIE

What? You mean--

HAROLD

Our son isn't a werewolf?

DR SPINNER

Nien, das ist richtig. Eh, you are correct Mr. und Ms. Maccon.

MARGORIE

Oh, thank heavens! I always knew in my heart of hearts he was really a good boy. Normal, even. But, now that we know what's really wrong with Jonathon, what do we do about his...ability?

DR SPINNER

Ah, ja, I am glad you are asking this question. I think I have a way to help Jonathon stop triggering his apparent transformation: hypnotherapy. The mesmerization of the patient into a deep relaxed state, where it is possible to implant instructions into the subconscious mind. I will hypnotize young Jonathon, and then instruct him to do something else when he feels the wolf wanting to come out.

HAROLD

Are you sure it'll work, doctor? This doesn't sound terribly scientific.

DR SPINNER

To be sure, Mr. Maccon, this is a somewhat unorthodox method that I am suggesting; however, your son has a most unorthodox condition. We can only imagine the horrors that await him should the hypnotherapy fail. But rest assured, I will conduct the treatment with both stringent controls and scientific rigor!

MARGORIE

Oh, doctor! Please help our son! Whatever it takes, please just heal Jonathon.

DR SPINNER

Ja, that is my goal. Who knows, maybe I get a paper or two out this, hmm? Nurse! Please fetch young master Maccon und bring him to my office upstairs, und post some orderlies outside the door.

Jonathon Macoon

NURSE GRETCHIN

Yes, doctor.

DR SPINNER

Please come this way. We'll head up to my office, und you can see your son before the treatment begins.

[FOLEY: FOOTSTEPS]

MARGORIE

Oh Harold, look! It's him! Our Jonathon!

JONATHON

Hi mom, hi dad. What's going on?

HAROLD

Well son, it looks like doctor Spinner might have a cure for your condition.

JONATHON

Really? You mean it? Like, fix me so I can go home?

MARGORIE

That's right son. If Dr. Spinner's treatment works, you'll be able to pack your bags and come home!

JONATHON

Aww, jeez! That would be swell! The food here sucks, and these orderlies have nooo sense of humor.

HAROLD

Now, now son. Don't get too excited yet. We still have to see if the treatment will work. There's no guarantee it will, but it's our best shot.

MARGORIE

We really hope it works, son. Our home is so empty without you.

DR SPINNER

Ah yes, there's our patient. Right this way Jonathon. Have a seat on the couch. Mr. und Ms.

Jonathon Maccoon

Maccon please step into the room across the hall. I will send the nurse to let you know when the treatment is done.

HAROLD

Thank you, doctor. Be brave Jonathon, but try to stay relaxed.

MARGORIE

We love you so much! We're just across the hall.

JONATHON

Thanks Mom, dad. I'll do whatever the doctor tells me to. I want to come home.

FOLEY

DOOR SHUTTING

DR SPINNER

Okay, Jonathon. You are sitting on the couch, but I need you to lie down now. Good. Keep your eyes open, und focus at my pocket watch as it swings before you, like so. Do not look away or close your eyes until I tell you.

JONATHON

Like this?

DR SPINNER

Ja, that's good. You've got it.

[FOLEY:TICKING POCKETWATCH]

DR SPINNER

Now, you will notice that the sound of the pocket watch has grown louder, und your eyelids, they have grown heavier.

[FOLEY:TICKING POCKETWATCH]

JONATHON

Yes. I feel...sleepy.

DR SPINNER

Jonathon Macoon

Good. You will feel relaxed but you will not sleep. You will enter a place that is like sleep. Your body is heavy und tired, but your mind is calm und open.

JONATHON

Yes.

DR SPINNER

You are now completely relaxed. You will listen to my instructions und do as I say. Understand?

JONATHON

Yes, doctor.

DR SPINNER

Picture yourself standing in the doorway of your home. Outside, it's very dark. Nighttime. Inside your home, behind you, it is very bright. Every light is on in your home. Do you see these things?

JONATHON

I see them. It's so cold and dark outside. My house is so bright and warm.

DR SPINNER

Good, good. Now, you keep standing in the doorway, staring at the dark outside. There, down your street, you see the wolf approaching. He is coming toward you.

JONATHON

[Gasp] Oh God, I see him! I see him doctor! He's heading straight for me!

DR SPINNER

The wolf cannot harm you, Jonathon. You feel no fear at the sight of him. You cannot fear the wolf.

JONATHON

I understand.

DR SPINNER

Good. Now, he is before you. Like a mirror image, like a twin. If you lift your arm, he does the same. He wants to come into your house, but you will not let him. Every time

Jonathon Macoon

he tries to get past you, you push him back outside.

JONATHON

[*Panting*] He's so strong doctor. It's hard to fight him. The more I do, the more I notice how strangely beautiful he is. Surely it wouldn't hurt to let him in just this once?

DR SPINNER

Nien, Jonathon! Dies ist verboten und schlecht! The werewolf is bad und you may not let him in.

JONATHON

[*Panting & grunting*] I'm not sure I can keep him out. He really wants to come in!

DR SPINNER

His strength, is your strength. There is nothing that he can do that you cannot. The wolf cannot be stronger than you unless you let him. He is like the thief in the night, und you are like the watchman stopping him from stealing. Now: turn him away!

JONATHON

[*Grunting, panting*] Get. Out. Of. My. House!

DR SPINNER

Ja, that's it! You are sending him away into the night. You have sent him away, und he will never come back no matter where you are or what you do. Your life, your strength, your mind: they are your own. When you awake, you will forget about the wolf. You will forget he ever existed.

JONATHON

Yes, doctor.

DR SPINNER

Now, I will count to three. When I reach number three, you will awaken. 1. 2. 3.

JONATHON

[*Crying*] Why am I crying? What happened?

DR SPINNER

There, there my boy. Let me fetch your parents. Nurse!

[FOLEY: DOOR OPENS]

DR SPINNER

Please fetch the boy's parents.

NURSE GRETCHEN

Right away, doctor.

MARGORIE

Oh, Jonathon! Are you all right? Here take this, dry your eyes!

JONATHON

Thanks, mom. [blows nose]

HAROLD

There's my boy! How're you feeling Johnny?

JONATHON

Hey, dad. I'm okay. I'm a little confused about what's going on, but I feel really good.
Like a weight's been lifted off my heart.

MARGORIE

Oh, that makes me happy to hear!

HAROLD

Thank you, doctor. It looks like your treatment was a success. How can we ever repay
you?

DR SPINNER

You are quite welcome. It was a most curious ailment that afflicted your son. I relish
the opportunity to treat such an unusual condition. As for thanking me, well, you'll be paying
your bill, yes?

EVERYONE

[Laughing]

The Sword in the Cave

by J.B.S. Cotch

I

"To make a home for men, Boda brought forth the beasts of the earth to be their companions.

Urseth taught them to make tools and to make fire.

And he settled men into tribes, and these became the first kingdoms, ruled by the Speakers, to whom Urseth spoke and gave wisdom."

-The Sacred History of Cevalon, Chapter IV, verses 1-3

The land stretched out before the ship like a monster of the depths. Green thick forests seemed to devour the very beaches, and from within them came a deep and abiding silence. Tygg scanned the treetops for birdsign, tiny flitting movements above, but found none. Other than a wispy cloud or two, nothing flew above the trees. He fingered the hilt of his sword and felt his lip curl.

"Do you know what this means?" said Drea.

"It means we'll be eating lots of fruit," said the new sailing-master, Alorn, a Goldlander whom they'd employed at a boisterous port at the long end of the Spear Islands. Their last sailing master, Ezzon, had been killed by Tygg in a duel for Drea. Drea had been prepared to kill Ezzon herself for the effrontery, but Tygg had been faster, and at any rate all agreed that dying by the sword was a less shameful way to go. Ezzon's opinion had not been consulted.

"If we find any," said Tygg. The voyage here had been long, and some of the men, the live ones, were starting to bear signs of scurvishness. Which meant that they'd rush ashore if left unattended, to meet whatever unseen fate this green inferno had in store for them. Tygg disliked it more and more as he considered it. But Drea had wanted to come.

"No," said Drea, with a strange look to her eyes that Tygg had not seen in a very long time. "It means that the legends are real. This is lost Golcorda."

"All legends are true," said Tygg, and spat.

"Not all," said Alorn.

"Yes, all. What men pass down to their children is truth. The details may twist like the wiggles of a snake, but the truth doesn't die no matter what its buried under. Golcorda was always real."

Drea turned back to him. "So you agree this is Golcorda?"

Tygg squeezed his hilt. "I agree to nothing. Perhaps this is that lost land, perhaps another. Perhaps we'd be best off not finding out."

Drea turned back to gaze on the tall green trees over the soft white beach. "Perhaps," she said.

Tygg snorted. "I'll ready the launch."

Alorn said "But she has not commanded..."

"She does need to. The Dread is hers. Did you want to sail away from the last sight of land in the known world until the men's teeth fall out? Did I? Yet here we are. We did not come for no reason. Ready the launch."

"I thought you were going to ready the launch."

"I'll make you into the launch, if you say one word more, Goldlander. You're the sailing master. Master the sail."

Alorn looked as if he wanted to resent this rudeness, but instead he inclined his head in Drea's direction and turned away to the lower deck.

"Must you be so disagreeable?" said Drea, still staring at the vast dark land beyond.

"I am not kept by you to be agreeable," replied Tygg.

"Is that what I do, Tygg? Do I keep you?"

Tygg spat again, this time at the deck near Drea's feet. "Besides," he said, when she looked at him again, "I cannot let Alorn start thinking he may challenge me. We're not like to find a sailing-master in this hell."

* * *

The launch, rowed by living men all, rescued men all, came ashore with the tide. Alorn and another sailor named Juku jumped into the surf and pulled it onto a promontory beach and then they all disembarked onto the white sand. The sun was warm but not hot upon their backs, even at this hour. The trees seemed as forbidding and close, like a thicket of thin trunks, as it had from the ship. Tygg looked up and down the beach for a moment, waiting to see if anything animal moved. Nothing did. He looked back to Drea, standing in her short dark leather cuirass and her ragged brown tunic, and she looked out of place. But then she always had, as long as Tygg had known her. And as long as that had been, they had wandered the seas and lands, on Drea's hunt. Tygg had always been her right hand, and more. But here, he wanted nothing so much as to forcibly shove her back into the launch and have the Dread sail away on the next tide. He couldn't do that, he knew. Or, in truth, he shouldn't do that. He wanted to, but he knew not why, and that fact brought other, sharper instincts, instincts that did not counsel retreat, first to the fore of his brain. He smelled the salt air and knew what he would do.

Something else came to his nose, in addition to the sea. Something sweet, a fragrance of nectar and of ripeness. As the breeze shifted, it became strong enough so Tygg could almost taste it. Drea stood beside him and said "You smell it too".

Tygg nodded, peered into the foliage. "There's something here. Something..."

"Foul," said Drea.

"Aye. And we're going to go hunt for it."

"We don't have to."

"Sitting on this beach waiting for it to hunt us is no wiser. Let's be off while we still have some light."

So they left Arlon and a couple of lackeys with the launch, and with a troop of four men, Tygg and Drea wandered into the forest. As it turned out, the long slender trees were far enough apart to allow movement through them without much trouble, and the underbrush was minimal. But this relative ease was offset by the discomfort of the setting. It was too silent. No wing flapped and no foot scurried. Not even an insect buzzed. Only the faint smell grew stronger as they moved in, a fragrance that seemed to swell in the air around them.

After a little ways in, Tygg drew a dagger, and marking the nearest tree with a large X, organized the crew into a single file. Each little way so he marked a tree again. No one asked why he did so. No one said a word. They just followed as straight a line as they could manage, stopping to mark the trees, check that the last marked tree was still visible, and pressed on. The light began to fade.

Drea was just about to ask Tygg if it wasn't wiser to turn back when suddenly he stopped, and she stopped too, and so did they all. Tygg began to slowly shift his weight; some instinct telling him of an ambush yet invisible. She crouched with him, reaching around with her mind, asking herself what she was seeing and what she wasn't, asking herself what was there. All that came to her was the scent in the air.

And then, around, she saw them. They were hooded, and seem to appear out of the thick silent air, not breaking that silence as they did so. They were separated, one every fifty feet or so, all around the horizon of trees. Tygg drew his blade and so did the sailors, putting back to back.

Drea felt a different way. Somehow in all she sensed and thought she could see no threat in these strangers, despite their silence and suddenness. She sensed merely a presence, an observation, and without violent intent. Something, at least, was bringing out that feeling in her. And something made her want to trust it. So she took a risk. As Tygg and the sailors stayed in a defensive position, she wandered away from them, and towards one of the strangers. She picked the one that was clearest in her vision, and trusted her intuition.

"Drea," said Tygg, but she gestured him to hold, and with her eyes told him that she understood. She kept walking, with her hands out in supplication, which could turn to something else if need be, if she was wrong. But she wasn't wrong.

As she walked forward, the hooded figure took a step to her as well, and hands emerging from the cloak, reached up and pulled back the hood. The face it revealed was a woman's, smooth and ageless, with ice-blue eyes and hair pulled back into a braid. She stared at Drea with her head slightly cocked to one side. Drea returned her gaze calmly, studying for fear or anger or hunger or anything else. But there wasn't anything. Just her.

The others all around them removed their hoods, and they too were women all, braided all, and all with blue eyes. After the soft flapping of cloth upon cloth the silence returned again with a vengeance. The sailors relaxed from

their fighting stances and one or two even lowered their blades but Tygg did not. Drea found herself considering Tygg's instincts to be as generally good as her own and began to step back but then the woman in front of her raised a hand, motioned her to stop.

"We have waited for you," she said. Her voice was clear, and flowed through the woods like a breeze.

"You have waited... for us?" said Drea.

"Long have we waited. We had begun to fear you would not come. We had almost given up."

Drea peered into those same eyes. "Where is... Where is 'here'?"

The woman drew a long breath before responding "This is Khaz, the far west of great Golcorda."

"The lost land," said Drea, her voice suddenly sharp, "The Road to Beg-Elu, Greatest of the Seven Cities of the First Age of Men."

"Not lost. We have waited. Come, there isn't much time."

II

" 'The wide earth shall be your home,' said Urseth, 'and you shall be masters in your home.

But you are not the only masters, nor is this home for you alone.

The beasts of the earth shall fall to your care, and you shall leave the Kuldar in their place.' "

-The Sacred History of Cevalon, Chapter IV, verses 4-6

As they walked through the darkened forest, the way lit by strange crystals the women wore in their hair, glowing yellow and blue, Tygg found himself looking at the shape of the women who had gathered ranks around his party. Their cloaks were dark and reached down to the ground, so they bizarrely seemed to float along, bobbed by unseen zephyrs, as they went. The strangeness of this left Tygg unable to either assure himself that all was well or to justify his continued battle readiness. He seemed coiled on the inside, yet could not know which direction he ought to strike. Something was missing in this land, of that he felt certain. He kept his hand on his hilts as they marched. Gradually the trees fell away and in a clearing a small village arose. A large stone hearth sat in the heart of the village. The lip of it came to the waist, and more hooded figures awaited around it. The heart was lit and the fire was reaching up to the sky. The strange sweet scent grew as they got closer.

Drea stopped as they approached, and the woman who spoke stopped with her, and so too did everyone else.

"What is this place?" asked Drea.

"This is our place of Meeting," said the woman. "And the day of Choosing. You have come at the right hour."

"What do you mean?"

The Sword in the Cave

"But sit with your companions and watch," the woman replied.

Drea turned and found Tygg and the sailors sitting a little distance from the hearth on an old oak log that looked well used to being a bench. She approached them as the women all gathered in circles around the hearth, one inner and one outer. Then with a sudden gesture, they all let fall the cloaks around them, and the women had nothing else on. Each of them had bodies young and lithe, and in the growing firelight and the rising moon they seemed to glow. And with the grace that shoemakers trained hard to learn, they capered around the flame, the concentric circles moving in opposite directions, as a song rose up in a language they did not understand.

The sailors, enraptured, gazed at this beautiful spectacle without a sound. Tygg sat cross-legged and cross-armed at one end of the log, his eyes half-closed. Drea watched, not so raptly, but still cognizant that something sacred and hitherto unseen was playing out before her eyes, and she consciously felt the need to record moments of it, such as the pitch of the song and its change, such as the way the circles of women intertwined as the dance went on, and they swirled through and around each other. It was a feast of discovery.

Finally, the song raised to a great cry, and the woman who had spoken to Drea leapt to the top of the hearth, and stood, naked, the flames at her back. She raised her arms to the sky and the women stopped in their places and collapsed to the ground, each upon the other. Then, as if a great drum had cracked, silence crashed through the clearing.

"We are Galka," said the woman. "We have no names. We are lost."

The rest of the women stood up, and in one circle, called out "We are forgotten."

"We know not how we came to be here, but here we are, cursed, unremembering."

"We are forgotten," came the return call.

"The Beast has mastered us. The Dragon is our cruel husband."

"We are forgotten."

"We feed him. We serve and attend him. He has taken us."

"We are forgotten."

"And tonight, what does he do?"

Silence greeted this question. Drea looked at Tygg, who had not moved a muscle.

"Tonight, he becomes Golden. Tonight, he takes his cruelest shape. His most pitiless. He becomes a Man."

"Golden One," changed the women.

"And he presents us with the cruelest choice. The bitterest choice."

The Sword in the Cave

"One, or All."

"One, or All," repeated the woman, louder.

"ONE, or ALL," they all shouted at the heavens. Drea felt her heart drop.

"One must go to him," said the woman, "One must offer up her sweet body to him, or else..."

"No," said Drea, out loud. Tygg looked at her.

"ONE, or ALL," they all shouted again.

"No," said Drea, louder. They paid her no mind.

"What shall it be, Galka?"

"ONE, or ALL."

"Who shall it be, Galka?"

"I," said a voice from the crowd, and a woman with redder hair than some of the others stepped out of the crowd. The rest of the women sank to their knees.

Tygg looked at Drea, who was half ready to burst into tears, and he looked back at the scene before him, and he felt the scowl deep inside his form before it emerged upon his face.

"You will be the One?" said the woman on the hearth

"Upon my body I bear our sufferings," said the reddish-haired woman. The rest of the women spread their arms to the sky and another song began among them.

"NO!" shouted Drea, as if it her heart shook within her, and she stalked forward and shouted it again. The women fell silent and turned to her.

"Tell us," said Drea, voice thick, "Show us this Golden One, and we will slay him."

"We will?" said Tygg, but Drea did not hear him. She strode forward into the circle and repeated the claim. Then she added "No more One, or All. The answer is None."

Silence greeted this, as the women with their soft glowing skin and nude bodies looked at Drea. They did not look at each other. Finally the woman standing on the hearth stepped down and came to Drea. "For this we have hoped. For you we have hoped."

"Hoped," said all the women at once.

Tygg looked at the sailors. They were utterly transfixed, their minds performing absurd calculations obvious in their

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scope. They saw opportunity. He did not blame them. Life at sea could do that to a man, blind him to anything but the need. Nevertheless, his scowl deepened.

"Let this Golden One come here," said Drea. "He will learn the true extend of his power."

"We don't know what he is," said Tygg, standing up, "Or who you are, or what his power is over you. We don't know anything, and your ritual made none of it clear."

"We do not know," said the woman. "We know only that we are here, and the Beast demands we serve him."

"Demands how?"

"His anger rises. He would feed upon us all."

"And lose all of his slaves?"

"Tygg," hissed Drea. "It is a mystery."

"I do not wish to fight a mystery."

"We wish we could tell you more," said the woman, "but we cannot. We are here. We do not know how. We serve the Beast. Now he changes, and he will have one of us, or all, unless he is slain."

Tygg sighed. "So this one has volunteered?" he said, pointing to the one that had. "And then what?"

"She goes to the cave," they all said, in perfect harmony.

"His cave?" said Tygg.

"We do not know," said the woman. "But in that cave is a sword. The sword is precious to the Beast. It has some connection to him. Some hold."

"What are you saying?" said Drea.

The woman pressed her fingers to her temple. "It's hard," she said, squinting her eyes, "It's... it's something. It is part of him, it is..." And as she struggled harder at coherence, the other women began to grunt, and hunch over. Some of them sank to a knee and moaned. Tygg looked at Drea, and she at him.

Finally, sweating from the effort, the woman gave a great cry and then stood up again. All the other women stood as well, and the sweat evaporated on their skin and they returned to peaceable expressions.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, "but I just cannot. She will go to the cave. The sword in the cave has power. There is more but..."

"It is all right," said Drea, and she offered up her hands to the woman. The woman took her hands and for a long time she held them, and Drea's eyes fluttered and closed. The other woman's eyes closed as well, and a queer kind of breath passed between them, a luminescence like a white shadow. Tygg grimaced and put his hand on the hilt of

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his sword but did naught else.

After a while a low moan emerged from the woman, and her strength seemed to leave her. She sank to the ground, but Drea would not release her hands. Then the shadow exhaled from her, floated about the assembly, and then vanished.

Drea's eyes snapped open. "It's a Shard."

"What is?" said Tygg.

"The sword in the cave. It's a Shard of the Sword. Every thought and dream and spirit of it is Azodic. Do you know what this means? This truly is Golcorda! We have found what no Cevalese has seen for ages past! Tygg, we have done it."

The other women, still standing, still naked, greeted these words with silence. They could not be expected to know of the Sword of Azod, the Sword that cleaved the World at the Beginning of Days. But still, Tygg did not see an eye dart in any direction, nor hear a breath escape their lips. The one who had held Drea's hands still lay on the ground insensible, and no one seemed to mind or notice. He felt the hairs on his neck rise, that unmistakable signal that somewhere around him, a threat lingered, unseen.

"We will go to this cave."

"I must go," said the woman who volunteered.

"There will be no more sacrifice," said Drea. "We will stop this one, and seize his power over you. You will be thralls no longer."

"Nevertheless," said the volunteer, "I must go."

"Perhaps we can trap him," said Drea.

"What?" said Tygg.

"Let her go to the cave. We will seize this sword and with it, defeat this Beast, whatever it is. This is our Quest." Tygg looked at her and then he looked at his feet, and without another word, walked off, back towards the darkened woods. Drea called after him but he did not reply or even deign to notice. Finally she took off after him, and calling him, as she went, stumbled into the dark.

The brush was as minimal as it had been, and the wood as silent. Drea could hear Tygg tramping on, but she could not see him. She ran on, finally making out a shadow in movement in front of her, she called out again, and the thing stopped.

"Tygg!" she said, and was about to berate him for cowardice, when a growl emerged from the shadow in front of her that was in no way human. Even Tygg at his most bloodthirsty had never made such a sound. Uttering a sudden incantation, she brought forth from the air in front of her a ball of white light, and she could see what she had chased.

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It had something of the shape of a man, but where the head belonged a cruel spiked horn sat instead, and its eyes whirled on grotesque appendages in the place of arms. A maw, glowering with large fangs, gaped at her from its torso. She stared back at the thing in terror when it charged, horn down, as if to run her through. But she had a moment, and a moment is enough for a sorceress. Another spell brought a fiery blaze that enflamed the thing and caused it to beat itself with its eyes. Its howl broke the barrier of sense.

From behind Drea sprang another form, and went past her to the flaming beast. It was Tygg, sword out, keen for the kill. He sliced off appendages, and the unholy shrieks of the dying thing just continued. Then it gradually fell, sinking as the flames consumed it.

III

*"The Seven Tribes of man built the Seven Kingdoms, each glittering and splendid,
each honoring Urseth and Boda with comely worship.
And the Endimm who had been loyal also came among men,
and sang to them, and gave the wisdom and grace.
And men regarded them as gods."*

-The Sacred History of Cevalon, Chapter IV, verses 10-14

For a long time she looked at the flames of the strange beast, smelled the foulness of its ash on the breeze, before they faced each other. Tygg wiped his sword on his oilcloth. Drea recalled the terrible flashes of image and sound from her earlier vision, terrible hunger and dark blood spilled on account of the Sword in the cave. Finally she asked him: "Why did you leave?"

"I do not believe a word of it," he replied, without turning back to her.

"How can you say that?"

"How can you say other? Those women -- if women they be -- put on a mime for us. We arrive, and they happen to waylay us, and speak of how they waited for us, and then they tell us they know nothing? And you volunteer to charge into the dragon's den for them?"

"What mean you, 'If women they be'?"

"They have no names. They have no old ones. They have no children."

"They are prisoners of an enchantment."

"How know you that? They said nothing of that. They said everything and nothing, and you leapt to answer them. Something in that village is wrong."

Drea glared at him. In all their journeys together, he had never quailed at a task. Tygg had charged into battle against fearsome and fell creatures with hardly a regard for his safety. What was different now?

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"Tygg, I saw... I had a vision."

"You saw what they wanted you to see. I don't doubt there's some queer art happening in this land. But who it's being done on, that I wonder about."

"This is all a guess on your part. Some wild flight of barbarian fancy."

"And your trusting them is just part of your quest. You'd drive that ship down a maelstrom if a child told you a Shard was at the bottom of it."

"And if I did, you'd leap to the bottom faster. That's your way. So why stop now? Where has your vaunted courage gone?"

Tygg wheeled on her, and gestured at the burning corpse. "It was here, when you needed it."

"I did not need it. It was dead from my fire. Your theatrics only did it a mercy. I had it down without you."

"Then you'll need me no further." And with that, he strode back through the darkness. She said to his back, "Is it so hard to believe a woman, Tygg?"

"It seems not" he said, without breaking stride. Then it was her turn to scowl.

* * *

Drea and the crew of sailors slept fitfully under strange stars, and woke to a cold breakfast left for them in large brown leaves, a crushed meal of some kind, heated in flame to make a kind of cake. It was filling enough but lacked any kind of flavor. They ate and then they wrapped the remains and waited for the women, who emerged from their huts under a grey dawn. Without bidding their visitors a good morning, they wrapped themselves in their dark cloaks and floated double-file up a pathway between two hills that lead north.

The oldest of the sailors, a man named Gint, offered to take the men to the cave himself, so as to spare the Captain the risk to her life. Drea regarded him silently. He had been aboard the Dread for some time, had shown himself a good bosun's mate. But he was not fooling anyone now. He wanted these women all to himself, and thought it would go better for him if Drea was back aboard the ship.

"No, Gint," she replied. "I am responsible. We will see this thing through." And they set off on the same path, keeping the women in side as they moved over hill and down dale and across sward. The sky, hid by iron-grey clouds, brought them no cheer as they followed, just within sight, the troop of dark cloaks on the horizon. Soon the trees began to wither and then to vanish, an lumps of black obsidian peppered the dry path and the tops of the hills grew long and sharp and snow-covered. The day was ill.

At last the women stopped in front of a cave at the foot of a great mountain. Drea and Gint and the sailors took cover behind an outcropping of rock and watched from a safe distance. They saw as one of the women stepped out of the double-file, came to the front of the others, and disrobed. Again naked, she walked with two others into the cave. A short while later, the two came back out, rejoined the ranks, and as silently as they came, took the road back. They gave no sign of being watched, and soon disappeared the way they had come.

"It's strange," said Gint.

"What is?" said Drea.

"They were double-file as we followed them."

"And they were double-file as they left, Gint," said Harna, a Skian they had picked up on a trip near Gazer's Isle.

"But one went into the cave and did not come out," said Gint.

"Aye, and what of it?"

"Then unless my counting's wrong, they should be one short. Yet the files seemed again equal, as before. I cannot fathom it."

"Gint, you're a hardy fool. Spread not such nonsense among comrades. No doubt these women have a way of walking that hides their true numbers. I've heard of such tricks before."

Gint pressed his lips together and said nothing else. A thin plume of smoke seemed to drift up from somewhere in the mountain. Drea smelled the air in front of her and that scent came again to her, the foul smell, with no perfume to mask it, as on the beach. Something horrid was in that cave. "Come on, she said, and left the outcropping, kicking small bits of obsidian as she managed the rocky path. The sailors followed.

Once they got within sight of the cave, they saw the girl who had offered herself sitting on her knees just inside, her back to them. As they got closer, they saw that she was fastened by a chain of gold to a large black stone that sat just inside. And above the rivet that held the girl fast, a sword had been shoved in.

"How is a sword in a stone?" said Gint.

"Always with the questions," said Turlam, a northern boy from the Stone Dragons. "It's there, isn't it?"

"Aye, but..."

"So let us take it, and her, and whatever else is there." And, heartened by this blunt statement of their purpose, the sailors of the Dread walked forward to do just that. But Drea said "Wait," and they waited for her to explain herself. This she did not do, but instead walked forward to the mouth of the cave, and with a swift incantation, made another ball of white light appear, casting light long against the rock inside. She laid gentle fingers along the black stone, and found it was more obsidian, but strangely damp, almost oily. A bit of queer dark residue came off onto her fingers.

Drea looked at the girl. She stared resolutely ahead, not deigning to recognize Drea's presence. Her eyes were calm and her breathing betrayed no fear. Drea looked at the sword, which was carved with strange runes along the blade, and had a simple handle with no adornment, and barely a guard. As with the stone, it seemed to have an oily sheen

on it. The smell was much stronger.

The sailors had followed her up to the cave. "Harna," she said, "wait here at the mouth and watch her. The rest, with me." And without speaking the sailors fell in behind her, Gint and Turlam and an Islander named Reoda, and followed her light deeper into the cave.

They had not gone far when Drea became aware of a tension, almost a vibration, in the air around her. The smell had held steady, but now a pulse, almost a hum, seems to catch her ears. She stopped, watched her light fade out, and with an incantation summoned a new one. She looked about for what might be causing the hum, but saw nothing but the dark walls of the cave, which had held long in a tunnel shape around them, like a corridor. A strange impulse came to her, and stepping to the wall to her left, she put out a hand and touched it.

Immediately a wave of thoughts, sounds, and visions flooded her mind. They came from nowhere, and were pressed in together, making a chaos of perception, there was blood and screaming and the smell of charred flesh, and beyond that a hunger indescribable. An endless feeding waste that could never be satisfied, only delayed.

"I think we should leave this cave," she said

"Aye," said Gint, and with no more commentary than that, they turned back, steps careful at first, then gradually becoming swifter and less sure as the light at the end of the cave, with Harna and the girl and the Golden Sword illuminated in silhouette. Reoda tripped on a rock and fell on his face, his sailor's cutlass clattering away from him. He groaned.

When Drea got close to Harna, Gint and Turlam had stopped to pull their comrade up. Drea saw that Harna was staring intently at the girl, and she at him. Their eyes were locked like an Aka snake and its prey. Harna's hand, extended, was just above the hilt of the golden sword. Too late, Drea realized something. Too late, she reached out. Harna's hand fell on the sword, and gripping it, he gave it a powerful tug. It did not come loose, but everything else did.

At once, three things happened. First, the very mountain seem to come alive, reverberating to a music beyond mortal ken. The walls of the cave shoved cruelly together, and up and down, and Gint and Turlam and Reoda slipped back by the topsy-turvy sliding back down the cave they had been trying to escape, from which they never emerged while the world lasted. Second, the girl heaved herself forward, sprouted a cruel beak, black leather wings, and talons like daggers, and she tore immediately into Harna, who, still under her spell, made no sound. Third, Drea said to herself Tygg will never let me hear the end of this.

IV

*"The Seven Cities were Folost on the tip of the Great Sea,
Kalavash at the heart of Adorna,
Bur-Tun of the glittering North,
Pasun the Blossom of the South,
Beg-Elu the Golden,*

*Yan-Ko of the Silver Straits,
and Eör the Hidden City.*

And in the great noon of their days, the world had peace and plenty, and men honored the gods."

-The Sacred History of Cevalon, Chapter IV, verses 15-21

Tygg, of course, had not abandoned Drea after all. After she went back to the village, Tygg remained, lurking at the edge of the woods, observing the movements of the women. Everything he saw confirmed his suspicions. They did not eat a meal, nor engage in any kind of mutual activity. They disappeared to their huts without a word, and nearly all at once, the lanterns winked out. There was nothing human in this village. Drea was walking into a trap.

And Gerla help the trap, he thought, expressing the extent of his concern. He knew there was another mystery to unfold here. He further knew Drea could take care of herself. Possibly even take care of the sailors. He would be more useful uncovering the deception that endangered them. So, after the women marched forth, and Drea and the sailors followed, Tygg crept back into the village. The air smelled exactly as it had the previous night, with the same weird scent in the air, and the same coldness. He came to the huts and walked into one of them.

There was bare floor, and a pallet of blankets, and nothing else. Not even trinkets or decorations, nothing that suggested a person called this home. Not even gourds or cups or baskets for gathering, or bows for hunting. There was nothing that a woman might use to survive in the world. Just a floor, and blankets. Tygg kicked the blankets aside, to see if something was hidden. Nothing was.

He repeated this pattern in several of the huts and found the same result. There was nothing, and though this nothing gave credence to his suspicions, they did not give proof. Unable to tell any difference between any huts by size or color to denote a hierarchy, he gave up and came to the hearth where the previous night's ritual had been held. He looked at its brick for some sign or rune but everything was bare. Then he stood upon the lip and looked around him for a better view of the village. He saw nothing of note. He walked around the lip of the hearth, but no matter where he stood, every part of the village looked the same. The same distance of huts greeted him. The doors all facing the same way, turning around him as he walked. Stranger and stranger and yet...

The center.

Tygg walked off the brick and into the oversized hearth itself. He stepped on a few logs, which gave way under his weight, and he kicked a few others, and he grabbed a partially unburnt branch and he began do scrape and kick everything away from the center. The Ash was dark grey and thick but it was soft, and before long Tygg's stick had touched something that was neither ash nor wood. He scraped the harder and then saw a glint of metal. His hand reached down and --

Tygg's head shot up. Before him a pair of eyes in a dark cloak stared with deep and silent menace. He turned his head and saw another, and another. All around the hearth, the women stood.

"Do not speak," said Tygg. "We know each other now. I am a thief and you..."

A strange rumble sounded in the distance.

The Sword in the Cave

"...Are what you are. Come," said Tygg, drawing his longsword. And they shrieked in agreement.

* * *

The cave, Drea understood, was not a cave, and the sword was not entirely a sword. Instead, a monster dimly understood as a kethnod in Dohmite legend had come to inhabit this place, devouring life when active, sitting unobserved when not. Kethnods tended to dominate a region even when doing nothing. Animals flee from an ever-present sense of predation, and humans that remain ... well, the lore wasn't clear, but Drea had other things on her mind at that moment. Like which end of the kethnod was up.

She had discovered that while poor Harna had roused the beast from its torpor by seizing the false sword, She could hold onto it well enough to keep from sliding down its maw as it broke free of the mountain and shoved the world aside in its wake. It's roars seemed to travel in all directions at once, making opening in the rock that closed again just as fast. This could not go on. On top of that, the girl that was now a flying beast that had eaten most of Harna was still flapping about, getting lost in eddies of air, trying to approach her for an attack but not being able to find firm swoop as the earthen monster moved around her. Soon it perched itself like a ravenous bird on the black stone from where the sword stuck out. It cawed at her, a horrible sickening sound, and the sword, which up until now did not seem to be a sword, but part of the deception, wiggled slightly, as though it had a real blade that really cut and was placed there by some enchantment.

The bird-beast inside the earth-beast snapped her cruel beak. Drea reached deep into herself, to a place where darkness had grabbed her soul long ago, and out of it poured a cry that split the air. The bird-girl shuddered and flapped away, the Kethnod paused, as if it heard something it did not know. And the sword slid loose, and fell, and Drea went with it, down and down and down.

The bird-beast descended after her, like a thunderbolt in search of prey. Drea could feel it coming, All else was silent. She closed her eyes and extended the Golden blade almost gently and her enemy fell upon it and shrieked and died. Drea cut the blade free and extended it underneath her. She didn't know what it hit when it fell but when it did everything resolved itself around her like she was the center of all things herself.

* * *

Tygg slashed through the monstrous women like his sword and dagger were themselves wings. He stayed constantly on the move, lunging, slashing, keeping everything at a distance. He did not think about how long he could keep this up. He thought only of how he could kill another furious shrieking monster, and better his odds still. He had put three down so far. That was better than none. But he needed the fourth.

A jump off the hearth, and he brought his sword crashing down on a monster's head. Instead of screaming, it spasmed and fell. Tygg felt hot blood on his face, and it warmed him, but he had to keep running. There were still numbers of them, and they were still... everywhere.

He hacked at a form to the right of him, dim and shadowy, and though he felt the comfortable shudder in his hand of the dagger striking true, again he heard no sound. But stranger than that, was what he did not see. He did not see another enemy in front of him. He did not see the air filled with wings beating the air around him. He did not see anything at all.

The Sword in the Cave

Tygg turned, with his dagger in his right hand, sword in his left, and surveyed the scene that had been behind him. All of the monsters were standing on the ground now, not attacking, flying, or even moving. They stood, with their fearsome talons in the dirt, beaked heads suddenly off-kilter, as though keening their heads for a signal, a warning, some kind of sound. And as soon as that image became clear to Tygg, he heard it: a rumble cutting along the ground, then billowing up into the naked air as a quake, a roar of the earth itself. Tygg turned again in the direction of the sound and saw nothing at first, but then a great column of dust and smoke rose in the distance, exploding at first but then sinking back down upon itself. Then the great noise, spreading itself in great echoes from the mountains to the forest, gradually died out.

And behind him, the bird-beasts that pretended to be women sank gentle as leaves upon each other, whatever tawdry souls animating them vanished from their bodies before they hit the ground.

* * *

Drea walked all the way back down the road alone. Her ears felt stuffed with wool. She did not really know where she was going, but wandered through by dead reckoning. She did not, for that matter, understand how she was alive. So far as she understood, the sword that was not really a sword had cut into the heart of the kethnod, and then the world leapt and sprang about her, and then she understood nothing more. She had found herself lying by an outcropping near what had been the mouth of the cave, but the cave and the sword and her three companions and the monster that had betrayed them were gone. She walked around a bit, silent as a ghost, looking for some sign of what had been, then gave up.

The sun looked ready to drop down over the hills when she reached the village again. She was not surprised to find more of the bird-beasts in the village, and she was not surprised to find them dead. But to see Tygg sitting upon the side of the hearth, holding a golden idol in his hands, this was a surprise, and a welcome one.

When she approached, they regarded each other in wry silence.

"You were right, of course," she said.

"Aye," said Tygg, "but you were not wrong." And he tossed her the idol. She held it in her hands. It was the figure of a head, slaverling with fangs, dripping with cruelty. Its eyes bored forward with deep malevolence. Drea felt sick and dropped it onto the earth.

"You do not want it?" asked Tygg.

"We should take it," said Drea. "I can learn from it. But I do not want it. There are days, Tygg when I do not want any of this. I just want..." and she trailed off, looking at the orange sun.

"Something pure," said Tygg.

Drea nodded, and as the sun went down they marched through the silent darkling forest to where Alorn and the launch waited for them. **UJ**