



First Person
Liver of Darkness
The Barbarian on the Shore
Ogre Did Nothing Wrong -
A Drunk Rant About Nerds and Nerd Culture
Ulysses & the Fugitive Ch. 5 - 7

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Contents

3	From the Editor
4	First Person
10	The Liver of Darkness
17	The Barbarian on the Shore
27	Ogre Did Nothing Wrong - A Drunk Rant about Nerds and Nerd Culture
32	Ulysses & the Fugitive - Chapter 5
42	Ulysses & the Fugitive - Chapter 6
52	Ulysses & the Fugitive - Chapter 7

From the Editor

Welcome to the second issue of volume 3, dear reader. We're still trying to figure out the submission process, and we're getting closer every day. I've been told by my astrologer that what I really need to do to prepare this whimsical rag for submissions is to learn how to sleep indoors and buy at least one other set of clothing. I thought this was strangely specific advice to receive from an astrologer, yet if it helps us solicit quality work, I'm all for it, even if I don't really get it.

We start this volume with a short story by Andrew Patrick called, *First Person*. It's a symbolic story about a man frustrated by his journey to an important function. Let it never be said that the details of the journey aren't as important as the destination.

Una Slack brings us our second feature, *The Liver of Darkness*. This stylized tale of a chance encounter with a hidden Hollywood Kingmaker made me wonder what parties attended by the elites are really like, and whether or not the attendees are all that they seem to be.

Our third story is a fantasy yarn. *The Barbarian on the Shore*, a sword & sorcery tale whose POV is affected by time travel, which messes with both the reader and the protagonist's perspective about the events within the story. This piece is followed by a rant by Thomas M. Fitz about nerd culture called, *Ogre Did Nothing Wrong*. Readers with strong attachments to fandom(s) may find this hard to read.

Rounding out this volume are the next three chapters of my novel, *Ulysses & the Fugitive*. In these chapters the plot quickens as we learn more about the young lady whom Ulysses met on the playa. Adventure, scene changes, and travel abound.

Alfred Underhill
Editor-in-Chief

First Person

by Andrew Patrick

“Look at this pokey bastard,” John Lagland said as the white Chrysler’s brake lights flashed and its bumper approached his own. “Just look at him.” He could not, however, comply with his own command. The driver of the white Chrysler had hidden himself too expertly in front of the driver’s side seat. Nevertheless, Lagland imagined him with perfect clarity: old, with a country squire hat on, hopped up on Viagra and blood thinners, off to further his golf-course victories and otherwise engorge his wizened frame on the fat of the land.

Grudgingly Lagland stomped on his own brake, glanced into his rearview mirror and scowled. A red minivan, previously at least a car length or two away, had slipped like a thief in the night into his blind spot. “Fuck,” he said, and checked the clock. It was 7:41.

“Fuck,” he said again, and then several more times, savoring the word’s percussive quality. He flared his large nostrils.

The reading began at 8:00. On the dot. McIntyre would insist on commencement simultaneous with his pocket-watch’s announcement of the eighth hour. Lagland hated McIntyre, hated his retro affectations (of which the pocket-watch was easily the lamest and thus most aggravating), hated his delusions of bardic glamour. McIntyre was a prissy little putz who believed himself the second coming of Longfellow, and he knew that Lagland had his number. He’d relish the thought of denying Lagland the right to read the final chapter of his novella. Anyone who was late could not read. Those were the group’s rules.

That meant he had nineteen minutes to go 24 miles. His hybrid Honda Civic could handle that, but would need to be doing at least 70 mph, not screwing around in the low-fifties with this traffic. He’d be at least fifteen minutes late at this rate, depending on how the lights went once he got off the interstate. Being fifteen minutes late would be the end of all things. No reading, no approval of his brilliant *Six Dead Men With My Name* for group publication, and McIntyre’s crap-tastic *Songs of the Long Land* would be the recipient of a full fucking *Kirkus Indie Launch* by summer. Half a year’s work – stressing, conceptualizing, editing, free-writing reams of blather to keep the juices flowing – would be down the toilet.

Lagland flared his nostrils again, feeling the cool air rush to his sinuses, feeling the anger stew, priming his reflexes to do what was necessary. To his left, a tractor trailer cast its long shadow over the other half of the highway. No relief in that direction. To his right, the red minivan had sensed the opportunity and picked up the pace, planning perhaps on a run around both of them into the open stretch of blacktop in front of the Chrysler. He could determine the gender of the minivan’s driver, but her size was ambiguous; she seemed to spread over the seat and absorb it. She was putting something into her mouth.

Carefully he tapped his brakes, to warn anyone behind him of diminishing speed, and prepared to jump into the minivan’s slipstream. Nothing behind her prevented this.

"What are you doing in the left lane, sweetheart? Late for soccer practice? God forbid," Lagland said through gritted teeth. He had a comfortable space between and the ever-putzing white Chrysler, but the lack of forward momentum made him nervous.

The red minivan rolled by, its tinted windows shading the woman's whelps, no doubt numbing their brains to Spongebob Squarepants DVD's, from Lagland's vision. Clicking the turn signal, Lagland returned his foot to the accelerator and shot deftly into the minivan's wake. The speedometer edged up into the middle sixties – a significant but insufficient improvement. As he passed the white Chrysler, he looked over at it, to check his presumptions of the driver, and was pleased. An old man in a vibrant golf cap helmed the vehicle with blissful ignorance of all that went on around him and his triumphant tour of life. Lagland curled his lip and enjoyed his escape.

A new problem loomed. The red minivan's driver had lost her nerve, and Lagland's speedometer crept down toward 60 mph again. "Jesus Christ on a pogo stick," shouted Lagland, "what the fuck is the matter with you? Are you too stupid to know what the goddamn left lane is for? Can that wheeled uterus you drive not make it up to the goddamn speed limit? Fucking wars are fought, goddamn soldiers and civilians die halfway around the world to keep that pseudopod you call a car rolling. So get your face out of the Cheetos for five seconds and put your fat fucking foot on the accelerator and get your size 18 ass out of my way!"

As though reeling from the hostility in the air, the red minivan began to pull away again from Lagland's Civic. Lagland swooped like a bird of prey on the opportunity, and with the white Chrysler now safely behind, shifted rightwards into the next lane and punched the gas. The red minivan flew backwards as though it had been stopped. "Bitch," Lagland muttered, his face still hot with rage, and tried to calculate the amount of fuel that thing went through in a given year, before imagining it striking an IED and sending an explosion of soccer cleats, Shania Twain CD's, and Arby's bags into the immediate vicinity.

The speedometer was now at 78 and rising, and Lagland had an open stretch of blacktop. It was 7:44, and he had 17 miles to go. It could be done, but he had to push it. He hit the stereo, and the six-disc CD changer whirred thoughtfully before selecting Black Flag – The First Four Years. The growling riff of "Nervous Breakdown" filled the air as he let the accelerator find its right speed.

The highway ran underneath him. The trees flowed together into a mass green blur. The tractor trailer was a mile behind and fading. Lagland's rage dissipated to a firm confidence in what was going to happen. He would arrive at just the moment when McIntyre was checking his pocket watch, which he would put away as soon as Lagland strode purposefully into the room. Lagland would unfurl a few curt metaphors about traffic conditions, gags he'd been saving, and the group would laugh courteously, a friendly golf-clap for his wit.

Then he'd launch into his reading, without the usual pause and introductions, just jump into the other side of the cliffhanger where the final chapter began. And he'd just go, burning through the text like a madman, on fire from the scorch of his prose, and he'd ignore McIntyre the rest of the evening. He wouldn't look at him, wouldn't speak to him, would deny him utterly. If McIntyre insisted on coming up to him after the show or offering phony congratulations, he'd treat him like a house-guest who stayed too long. The poser would be erased from the group's existence by unspoken agreement, so profound would be Lagland's triumph.

"You cannot erase what you did not create," said McIntyre's voice from the back of his mind. "You can only efface it."

"Oh, ha ha for you," said Lagland, deciding while the 2-mile notice for his exit flew past that he would have this imaginary argument. "If I give you your nerd points for the day, will you stop trying to one-up everyone in the room?"

"So I should just permit you to butcher the English language in the presence of ladies and make no effort to stop the effusion of blood?" returned McIntyre's voice, which had moved, in Lagland's imagination, into some nether-pocket between the front and rear passenger-side seats.

"Effuse...efface...what, did you sleep on a thesaurus?" The rest of the writer's group in the pub in Lagland's mind laughed at this dull volley. You didn't match elegance with a nerd like McIntyre; you overrode him with loud and obvious groaners, like the bullies did at school. He'd eventually retreat because he had no personality, only the affectation of one.

That wasn't bad, thought Lagland. He'd save it to tell Miranda after the reading: Miranda the unflappable, Miranda the anarchist, Miranda the dirty dirty blonde with the gorgeous smile and, Lagland was sure, geometrically perfect breasts. Miranda would laugh that smooth laugh of hers, just loud enough for McIntyre to hear, and McIntyre would know they were laughing at him, and he would pretend they were not. And as the red wine flowed, Lagland would press his success, show her tickets to a one-woman cabaret at a black box theater he knew of, and they would be on their way to glorious fornication. She would be his.

The Philadelphia Road exit approached like a supplicant: wide open, with nary a car between him and it. He'd shot through ten miles in six minutes. It could be done. If the lights were with him, it could be done.

With laser-nerved control, Lagland stepped off the accelerator and let the Civic coast into the exit, pressing the brakes only as needed to keep control of the vehicle. He thrilled at the centripetal force, the slight lean the Civic took as it shot through the exit fifteen mph faster than the cowardly yellow sign directed. As he rounded the turn, he looked ahead for the color of the light at the corner of Philadelphia and Sardis Lane.

And very nearly ran into a sea of brake lights.

Lagland stared in mute horror at the traffic, locked up before him, tighter than a tanner's drum. For a moment he worked his jaw as though attempting to find words powerful enough to deny what he saw. He needed to get left. He needed to get left very badly. He had but two lanes to cross before he could safely turn onto Sardis Lane. And each of these two lanes was a parking lot.

He swore. He swore in phrases unique, in physical, theological, and even grammatical impossibilities, fragments of expression bound by hate. He vowed eternal vengeance on the karmic conspirator, construction or accident, who had caused this traffic. He demanded with the force of Justice and Reason that the universe explain itself. He turned off the stereo and swore at McIntyre's preposterous hats.

After a few minutes, the traffic began to move, and the denizens of the lanes to the left of him, having achieved the type of Zen traffic awareness that brings about positive road charity, let him merge. Before

another minute had passed, he was safely in the turn lane for Sardis Lane. Before another, he had reached the intersection, and could see the cause of the hold-up.

A black Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows had T-Boned a Buick LaCrosse of the same color laden with groceries, flinging them out of every window and spreading them like Satan's Picnic all over the intersection. Standing next to the LaCrosse, a mother in sweatpants answered questions from a policeman, cheeks red with tears as she watched all her carefully gathered produce ground into the asphalt. A few meters away from the Escalade, an African-American gentleman talked into a cell phone. He wore black dress slacks with a slight sheen to them, a purple shirt with a white collar and matching French cuffs, and a damasked silk tie. His head was bald and his eyes obscured by mirror aviator sunglasses. He appeared nonplussed.

Lagland drove carefully to avoid a recycled grocery bag that looked still stuffed with items, but felt no compunction about being what looked like the fifth or sixth person to drive over a flattened carton of eggs. He wondered if any egg ended up on his paint job, and how soon he would have to clean them off. Past the turn, the traffic flew away from the accident like students on the first day of summer, and Lagland put his foot into the accelerator hard.

No triumph went with this speed, nor sweet dreams of Miranda. His anger settled down like a sleepy bear into the middle of his sternum, hungry and ready for spring. Now McIntyre's voice was right behind his ears, mocking him for his lateness and folly.

"If you'd just let the chapter be, instead of being up all night adding insults against my last few stanzas at the end, just to impress the group, you wouldn't have needed a re-print," McIntyre's voice said. "You wouldn't have overslept. You wouldn't have been rushed all day."

"Shut up," said Lagland, out loud. "You have some nerve accusing me. You were begging me for a response; it's the only reason anyone pays attention to your tedious crap. That whole poem last week was aimed right at me: all that business about Dancing between the persons? Come on! Was I really supposed to ignore that?"

"It's not my fault your ideas are ridiculous," replied the imaginary voice of McIntyre, "Even in verse, you have to make some designation when switching between points of view. You can't just deny that first and third person matter."

"And you can't argue that they do. It's the traditionalist view, so you ape it like you ape the Romantics. All writing is first person, you poser! All of it! All writing is narratorial; all writing is rhetorical; all writing is voice. The distinction between an objective voice and a subjective one is the greatest of all intellectual fallacies. It's. Horse. Shit. If I write 'The dog ran,' and if I write 'I saw the dog run,' I'm saying the same fucking thing. For the love of God, it's the twenty-first century! We've noticed the holes in rationality, you preening, reactionary douche bag! There is No God Damn Objectivity! There just isn't!"

At the end of his rant Lagland had just reached the Salem Commons where sat, squat in its banality, the Arden Pub where the group met. He hit the light just as the green turn signal switched to yellow. The speedometer was just shy of 50 mph.

Lagland saw McIntyre's pale green Prius making a right-hand turn into the same path as his Civic before he recognized it. The fuzzy dice hanging from the mirror clinched it. The Civic wasn't going to merely T-bone McIntyre; it was going to impale him.

Time slowed down; awareness expanded. Not a word passed Lagland's lips as he stomped his brakes and turned hard to avoid the Prius, nor when he jabbed his left foot onto the parking brake in a desperate effort to avoid impact. He succeeded; the Civic and Prius just avoided one another as McIntyre swerved over the curb. But the centripetal force demanded a new path of least resistance. The Civic flipped.

The world crushed in on Lagland. Glass and steel shattered and bent as the laws of physics commanded, tossing and cutting him. The Civic rolled once, twice, three times before landing at the other end of the intersection. Miraculously, it struck no other vehicles. When it came to rest, the engine was silent and the horn did not blow.

Steven Mordred McIntyre emerged from his scuffed pale green Prius and ran to the crushed Civic, dropping his pocket watch amid the debris on the way, but it was too late. John Lagland lay broken across the front seat and made no further comment. Eternity called him on with barely a whisper. **UJ**

Liver of Darkness

by Una Slack

It wasn't a bad party. I knew a few people, and the ones I didn't know were friendly enough. It was neither straitlaced like a political fundraiser, everyone putting their best feet forward in the anxious wish to win the game of thrones, nor completely nose-in-the-shit decadent like a rave or a Hollywood after-party. You could sort-of see Hollywood from the house, built nicely into the hills of Northeast Los Angeles. I heard some idiot call it East Hollywood without irony. I did not talk to that man for the rest of the night.

It was equal parts a letting down of the hair and a schmoozing among possible investors for my equipment company. Business had been strong that year, and I both needed a night off and needed to spread the word around. Helen told me some of the people she knew from Medieval Times - Sound and Lighting guys, not show cast like her - who would be there either had or were starting indie production companies. That's what you do now. You do indie.

And I had a goodish time. There was a civilized mien to the whole thing. Even the coke dealer wore a blazer and a turtleneck and was well-manicured. Nobody stuck their nose into a fishbowl - they went off to the bathroom and did a bump like a grown-up. I did one, just once, more out of a sense of manners than any real urge. Coke can be fun, but it's worse than whiskey for amorous encounters. Which I was also in the mood for.

But I came back from the elegant, faux-vintage 1920's bathroom with its reproduced prints and a set of no-doubt painstakinglyworsted three-volume set of the Works of Sir Thomas Browne - all clearly ordered from Etsy - and I suddenly had no idea where I was. The room looked different and it was as though I'd stepped into the wrong hallway. But it was the same hallway with the Art Deco light fixtures every ten feet. But something was off.

What was in that coke, I wondered.

"The door sprang open and the cops rushed in," said a voice out of a room off to my left. I stopped, not just because I knew the reference - final line of The Wild Party - but because I knew the voice. I walked in passed a set of completely inappropriate beads and in a room with bare oak floors and a zen garden that took up half the room and a set of brown rounded Bauhaus-knockoff chairs sat Ellory Martin.

Ellory was a friend and an initial investor. I'd met him a few years ago when we were dating a set of sisters - twins, actually - and became pals. We worked out at the same gym, had the same general aesthetic in film and art and books and music. We even dressed to a similar aesthetic. Neither of us dated the sisters for long - but the friendship stayed. Once in a while we'd joke about them, and deliberately screw up which sister we were dating. A silently agreed-upon joke.

He was sitting in one of the brown Bauhausettes with his hands in his lap, palms upward, looking like he was trying to attain enlightenment or figure out how to stand up. A bottle of Bulleit Rye sat at his feet with three glasses around it like a display case. One of them had whiskey in it.

"Ellory," I said. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

He looked up and focused his eyes on me. "Hey, Saul," he said "I came here with... Betty."

"Who's Betty?"

"Betty is... Betty."

"Okay. Then why are you in here alone quoting Joseph Moncure March?"

Ellory grinned broad and said out loud,

"So wassha use drinkin'?

Makesh me mad!

Makesh no different how many have had!

Noshir!"

I joined in with him on the last line, quietly. Quoting The Wild Party at each other was a friend habit.

"You okay, man?"

"I dunno, man."

I took a glass and poured myself a whiskey and sat down next to him. I took a sip and tasted the sharpish tang of the Bulliet Rye, followed by that sweetness. I smelled the sand and the oak and the cedar bookshelf behind us. I waited for Ellory to decide he wanted to talk. We listened to the glistened tittering and West Coast Jazz coming from the other room.

"Do I seem fucked up to you?" Ellory asked.

"A little bit," I said. "I think there's something in the coke."

"I don't do coke," Ellory said.

"Man, I've seen you do coke."

"I've seen you do coke, Saul. You've never seen me. I don't do it."

I had a very clear memory of Ellory and I doing a bump at my condo. I remembered the rush of it very well. Did my memory betray me? Had it manufactured a false vision, because I assumed that when I lowered my head on my glass-top table, he had done the same?

"Then what?" I said.

"I don't even smoke weed," said Ellory "All I do is drink, and not much of that. Usually I absent myself at parties like this, just like I'm doing now."

"How come?"

"When I was just out of USC," he said, eyes focused on the zen garden, "I went to this bash. That's the only word for it, a bash. The kind of affair, event, thing, that you can't quite tell about, because ... It's not that people won't believe you, they will, but somehow you're never quite telling it right. Somehow you put it in words, and it doesn't capture it."

"But I try. I keep trying to tell it. I keep trying to let people know. I don't know why. I don't know what it means. But I keep telling it anyway. I feel like St. Paul."

I sipped my drink and let him talk. Sometimes Ellory just liked to talk. He'd keep talking if no one interrupted him. He didn't get self-conscious. He was just letting out this thing that he needed to express - hence the line about St. Paul. So I would drink, and listen, and that would be that. It was why we were friends.

"Anyway, this party I went to - it was like a flash mob, but not. It was planned, but it was spontaneous, like parties are. Someone says 'let's get a bunch of people together at time-space coordinates thus-and-so, and somehow it happens. People want to be around people and do people things together. They want to enjoy each other's company and not have to do anything, I guess.'

"I used to love parties. It was always the anticipation of them, that sense of the unknown, but in a format you were familiar with. You were going to go places and meet people and talk and drink and think and let things out. It would change you. It would change them. And it didn't matter how many times this hope was disappointed. The next time, it would happen."

"This time it did. But..well, let me just tell it."

"I was working for Lorimar, getting feet wet, making connections, you know the drill. And every Monday morning I'd hear a few people whisper about a dragon. I thought it was some hush-hush project, so I didn't pay attention at first. But, then I realized they were talking about a guy who was called Dragon. Which was even dumber. I mean, what was this, *The Outsiders*? 'Stay Gold, Ponyboy'? Didn't make no damn sense. But I kept hearing it, and the weird thing was, no one ever divulged details. It was never 'I partied with Dragon and Snoop Dog gave me a blunt', or 'At Dragon's the girls were all over me.' Always in vague, you-had-to-be-there terms. Like 'Did you hear?' and 'I couldn't believe it.' That shit. If asked anybody what the big deal was, they just shook their heads like it couldn't be put into words."

"And I thought it was bullshit. Like some kind of viral marketing technique. Line around Studio 54 type stuff. But I kept hearing it, and hearing it, so I eventually asked this guy Max I knew, and told me give it to him straight. 'Basically, Ell,' he said, 'It's like a network. You have to work your way in. You perform a task, you get into the Side Party, then you get into the Big One. Then you party with the Dragon.'

"Who is this Dragon' I said."

A clutter of dropped dishes fluttered about outside. Laughs and quips ensued. No one was bothered by it. These were nice people. They understood. I turned back to Ellory and he started again.

"He told me the guy was just someone connected. He was talking about the industry, but the way he said it, it was like the Mafia. Like he was a made guy. Apparently this guy just grew up in it. Parents in the biz, Grandparents in the biz, on the production side, you know, where the money is. Hung out with stars and didn't even need to impress them. A big deal, but no name on anything. Connected on the side. Invested in a bunch of places, silent partner. The guy behind the guy.

"And then he says 'If I'm being honest, though, I've never actually seen him. I'm still Side Party.'

"I was ready to walk away at this point. It sounded like snake oil. But then he said he had a task to do, and he needed a hand, and he would try to get me in if I wanted. I said what the hell. He said he'd get back to me in a couple of days with the go-ahead. I waited a couple of days, wondering about it occasionally, but trying not to act like I cared. But I can admit it now, I was curious. The idea that there was a guy behind the guy, a Secret King of LA, well, who wouldn't want to know if it was true?

"Two days later Max comes to see me. He says it's 80% cool, we just gotta go see the Clearer.

"I'm all, 'The Clearer?'

"He says it's just a thing we gotta do. I say whatever. We leave and drive up to Burbank, of all places, and see this person on the ground floor of this building. And we're in the lobby, and there's Kenny G or some shit playing on the radio, and people are flipping through People Magazine, and I'm sitting there trying to imagine what any of this has to do with going to a party with the greatest guy to throw parties. And then some bored guy in a suit he spent way too much money on condescends to bring us into this office, where this woman is sitting behind a desk in this black outfit, hair pulled back, glasses, indeterminate age. And she's looking at me like I just farted in front of the Pope and won't cop to it. Max told her that I was the guy he needed for the task. She kept looking at me, and she was unhappy. But she relaxed her eyes a moment and said it was fine. Then she handed us a white envelope and said we had until 6pm to make the drop.

"At this point, I felt like I'd just volunteered to mule dope across the border. I said to Max as we walked out that I wasn't into the Scarface scene, but he said it wasn't like that. The task was difficult, not illegal. We just had to do some hauling and driving. I said all right, but this party better be worth it. He said it would be. So we got back in his Mustang and we drove. And we drove. And we drove. I thought for sure we were gonna end up in Arizona, but it was just somewhere in the Valley. I hate the Valley.

"Max pulls his car up and we walk down some dirt road until he stops us. 'There' he says. And we start going through a stand of trees and then he points at a pen at the corner of some farm that has goats. And he says 'Yeah, that'll do.' I say 'What'll do?' 'That,' he says, pointing at the goats. I just looked at him. 'We're getting a goat?' I asked. 'No,' he says, 'We're stealing a goat.'"

I couldn't help myself. I laughed at this. Ellory smiled. "Yeah," he said, "It's funny now. But at the time it was the opposite of funny. I always thought of myself as a cool, fun-loving guy, but I didn't sit in a car for hours for National Lampoons hijinks. I wasn't in college anymore. I said so.

"Max just said to me, 'Are you in or out,' and call it the sunken costs fallacy, but I didn't want to be out. So I played lookout, scanning my eyes over the horizon like one of those Luftwaffe prison guards, you know, Great Escape or something like that, while Max snuck over a fence, and quick as you please, just grabbed this little brown and white goat kid. Naturally the damn thing started bleating, but Max was already running. He was running so fast he fell over and the goat kid got away from him, so I had to jump the fence and get it, too. I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing, I just wanted to get the damn goat and get out of there before some guy in overalls and a shotgun caught us. So the goat runs away from me, and I'm hunched over chasing it, and it finally runs into Max's arms, and we beat feet across the farm back to the fence and back to the car, and we drive back through the valley with this goat. I drove the way back and Max held onto that like it was his baby.

"We get back to the city and head up somewhere in Laurel Canyon. It was a compound, you know, enclosed with a gate. But the guy opened up for us after checking our license plate and ID. He didn't even look at the goat.

"Inside, you see people that look like they're famous, but they aren't. Fancy cars, fancy outfits, trying to stand out. That's how you know they're not really famous. Really famous people don't dress to the nines, they don't have to. I mean, red carpet yeah, but that's different. That's work.

"So we get into the main house, where the actual party is, and I have to admit, it's something out of the Deep End. It's above-average. Top Five parties I've ever been to. Lights up and splashy, but not epileptic, music's bangin' but not raping your middle ear. Decadent but not uncivilized. Like the Playboy Mansion but less lame.

"I mean, there's a girl with a cigar box, in fishnets and a leather bustier, and she is doing a thing with her hips that is hotter than any stripper of all time ever. And I think what really makes it all work is when you look her in the eyes, she's clearly having fun. Ain't no man put a hand on her, every guy wants to buy a cigar, every guy wants her, but she's in command, yeah? Opposite of strippers. Every stripper I ever saw has the same look in her eyes as a waitress on third shift. I never wanted a cigar more in my life. And I don't even smoke.

"But I can't do that, because Max still has this fucking goat. And I'm all 'Dude, who do we give the goat to?' and he's all 'The time isn't right, be cool,' and the goat is taking it all in like it knows exactly what's going on, and nobody even asks us why we have it. I say the hell with this and go get us drinks. I duck and we're through crowds that have obviously pre-gamed with something and flag down a redhead carrying Old-Fashioned on a tray. On the way back the Cigar girl gives me a look. I give her a wink but don't stop. It's on as far as I'm concerned.

"I get back and we sit down on this chaise-lounge and we sit there drinking Old-Fashioneds with our goat like a bad gay joke from the 70's. And before long some other babe comes by with Martinis and we drink those, and a very tan dude with canapés and we eat those and still no one has approached us or told us what to do with the goat. And Max starts feeding the damn thing canapés, which it eats, of course, because it's a goat. And I'm getting bored. Because no one's talking to us, and I feel like we're not really there. Then I catch the Cigar Girl heading down a hallway like she's going on break and I get a lonely impulse of delight, like the poet put it. I tell Max I'm gonna scout around. He's fine, just chilling with his goat. I'm off to figure out what the hell is going on.

"I weave through the crowd of glitter-beards and hipster chicks in draped gowns and I follow my lovely brunette in the bobbed hair and the fishnets at a discrete distance. She slides down a hall and I move cool after her and she's standing there with her arms crossed and her legs wide, smirking. I roll up and we say dumb shit to each other. You know, those pregnant 'hey's? Anyway, in the middle of all this sounding of each other, she says 'you want to know a secret?'

"I say I love secrets. She leans in and puts her lips to my ear and says 'The Dragon is here.'

"I won't lie, that did intrigue me. Not as much as the feel of her hip in the palm of my hand, but I was intrigued. But I played it off and said basically 'Uh huh'. She said she'd show him to me. I said okay, and she took me by the hand and led me down the hall. And then she took me into a bedroom with a whole wall of windows. Kinda like this one, but bigger. Great view of the lights down below. And sitting on the bed, crisp blue suit, one shoe on, one shoe off, sunglasses askew, is this guy. On his right hand is a tiny tattoo of a dragon. He doesn't move or acknowledge us and I think it's a bit weird.

"How you know him?" I asked."

"She says 'We go back,'"

"I roll up to the guy and I wave my hand in front of his face and he's catatonic. Non compus mentus. I look back at her and say 'How do I know you're not pulling my leg?' She grins at me and says 'You don't'.

"I sneer at her and say 'Dragon, my ass. This is supposed to be what, a Side Party?'"

"Then the guy on the bed responds, he says 'Side Party'. Real creepy and weird like he's just repeating it. Like an echo. I say 'What is his deal?' She walks up and puts her hand on his forehead, touches his cheeks. Like there's some kind of connection there, in a weird, almost-familial way. And I just felt odd and out of place. None of this made sense. Here's a guy who's supposed to be the Secret King of L.A. Nightlife, and he's sitting like a mumbling bum in a room where a bunch of people who would break elbows to meet him don't know he's even there. That just couldn't be true. That kind of garbage happens in O.Henry stories, not real life.

"'This is a drag,' I said. And he echoed me again. 'A drag', he said, and then added 'Such a drag,' And then she put her hand on his shoulder, and agreed 'Yeah,' she said, like you would talk to a child 'it is a drag, isn't it?'"

"'A drag,' he agreed. And I'm about ready to run out screaming because I'm not following what's going on. I said, 'There's a whole party out there that you made happen. My friend is out there waiting to be told what to do with his goat. Where's the Main Party? Where's the real deal?'

"'A drag,' he said.

"'Fuck this,' I said, 'he ain't no Dragon,' And I walked out of the room. 'Dragon,' he said, except he said it in a way that sounded like 'Draggin''. It stopped me in my tracks for a moment. But I kept going, out the room, and down the hall. I found a bar and I made myself a shot of whiskey. That tasted good, so I had another. Then I had some more.

"I didn't find Max again and I didn't find out what happened to his goat. I didn't ask anybody about whether they heard if the Dragon was here or not. I just stayed and drank and had fun with strangers. I didn't see the girl again, or the Dragon, if that's who he was. Truth be told, I don't remember a whole lot of what followed, except it was fun. It got moderately wild but nobody called the cops. I woke up in a lounge chair by the pool the next morning and took a cab home.

"Caught up with Max later that week and he told me he had a crazy time. He didn't share about the goat and I didn't ask. He asked me if I had fun and I said it was a pretty good party. He asked if he wanted to do it again and I said definitely, but in the back of my mind I couldn't get that guy saying 'Such a drag' out of my head. It was the way he said it, like a ghost, like something not there, like a husk of a thing that once held a soul but no longer did.

"I don't know if that was the real Dragon or not. I don't know why she took me back there, or why he was there or what he was doing. I'm pretty well convinced the guy's a myth, even if that was him. Like the Great Gatsby: all for show. But even if that wasn't him, those words haunted me. Because no one should sound the way he sounded at a party that good. I don't care what you're on. But he didn't even see it. He didn't see anything.

"I guess it stayed with me. It made me think. I've never woken up some place I didn't intend to fall asleep in again."

He trailed off after that, and though I prompted him to divulge a few more details he responded only with shrugs. Eventually we just fell silent together, slowly sipping poison and knowing that it would get absorbed by the liver and not asking why we bothered. **UJ**

THE BARBARIAN ON THE SHORE

by Andrew Patrick

In the days of Gazer's waning, when she readied to pass herself into the acolyte whom the gods, in all their names, chose, she started to become unstuck in herself. She started to stop remembering herself in all the lives holding all the knowledge that she, as an immortal soul holding court in a multitude of lives, should recall. She kept recalling herself as Falla, the skinny girl from a fishing village on the Warsian coast who had to be rescued by a barbarian.

"What barbarian?" said Fredegunna, her favorite acolyte and dearest friend, who would never have the stamina to be Gazer. That made Gazer very sad. Fredegunna had such wisdom and kindness within her.

Gazer looked out from the Great Stone Spire on the Isle of Long Light, Gazer's Isle, and she could see deep into the bosom of the water. She saw happy fish and great sharks moving in a grand dance of life, and she knew the Great Mother was pleased.

"The barbarian on the shore" Gazer said.

"There's no visitors today. Will there be visitors?" asked Fredegunna.

Gazer smiled. There would always be visitors, so long as the Light came down upon the Isle. The Light that made Gazer Gazer. The Light that showed men how the gods looked down on them.

"This one visited long ago. He has passed on to his small reward by now, and his woman with him. But the thread..."

She felt the time slide and...

Falla's body snapped up like the end of a trebuchet. The dark world swum around her, and she felt like she was spinning. Her mind caught up with her body and she discovered that part of the spinning was due to being in a hammock. The light from a single dirty porthole flashed the sun at her and dazzled her eyes. She felt sick for a moment, but closed her eyes and it passed.

And then she heard a voice behind her.

"We're glad you're unharmed."

She was surprised by this voice, but not unnerved. The voice was friendly, even in a cool, brittle way, motherly. She turned in the hammock and saw behind her a small woman in a dark cloak, with a soft smile on a

pale face.

"Who are you?"

"One who helps those in your position."

"And what is my position?"

The woman merely smiled. "If I told you, you would not understand. They never understand at first."

"I might understand."

"You will. In time."

"When I'm older," she said with a scowl.

"Perhaps sooner than that."

She felt the time slide and...

The girl was running from the Tusk men when one of them hit her with the bone handle of his flint knife. He didn't hit her with the blade, which she knew instantaneously from the fact that the pain was dull and she did not scream. Her mother had screamed when they stabbed her, and her brother had, too. She had not seen her father die, but she had seen his body when she ran out of the house in the light of the early dawn. At that point the sight of his corpse neither added to nor detracted from her shock or her horror. It had become simply a fact.

Father had always warned them to stay away from the shore in the dawn hours. Tusk men, like sharks, owned those twilight times. Tusk men of the Jaw, which sat like the blade of an axe just beyond the horizon. Tusk men who wore cruel masks but who's true hideous butchered faces were ritualistically carved to please

Gunda-Gar, the Great Fish, who lived under the sea, who demanded sacrifice of the unbroken, and when they were not fishing or hunting prowled the shore to seek offerings.

But if you stayed away from the shore in the dawn and in the twilight, Falla's father told her, you were safe.

Father was wrong.

She felt the time slide and...

The Barbarian stood just beyond the surf in front of a rotting pine log. He wore a hauberk of beaten bronze and thick boots and a helmet with a nose guard. He had a short sword on each hip, and one sword had a red jewel on the pommel and the other had a copper pommel carved in the shape of a dragon head. He stood with his hands at his hips and a queer smile on his broad face.

The Tusk men stood and stared at him as the full sun burned behind their boats on the horizon. They stared at the barbarian as though he was of some kind of being they had never seen and whose existence filled them with a fearsome awe. Or perhaps that was just her. She fell or was pushed to the ground, her arms still bound with the frazzled cord that smelled rancid. When she looked up, she saw the barbarian - for such he must be - put a quick glance in her direction. He did not appear concerned about her fate.

A moment passed where the Tusk men simply stood, collectively considering how to respond to his presence. Falla heard herself breathing.

The Time slide and...

A stomping sound on the gangway. She looked up and saw the barbarian coming down. He looked at her and grinned.

"I understand you've met Tygg," said the woman. "My name is Drea, and you are safe here."

She looked out the yellow light of the porthole. "Where are you taking me?"

"Guess, girl," said Tygg.

"How can I guess?"

"Crusher's nuts, Drea, the girl wants to know how she can guess!"

The Time slides and...

Her brother Tollie had woke her up, or perhaps it was the screaming. Her mother was already screaming.

"Run, Falla" Tollie had said. "It's you they want."

The Time slides and...

The Tusk man with the rattles around his furry hood started to move away from the other two, circling towards the barbarian's left.

"I can see you, you horned ass," said the barbarian, in a voice as clear and sharp as a blade. The Tusk man who circled stopped moving, and the other two seemed to shrink.

"And," said the barbarian, "I can cut through the three of you with your flint toys and your bone shirts like I was slicing a cheese. You're not going to get the best of me in a rush. And you're not going to take that girl to feed to your wet demon. Go now, or learn how steel bites."

The Tusk men looked at each other through their horrid masks and they did not attack and neither did they run away.

"Last warning, blubbers," said the barbarian, his eyes narrowing.

Nothing happened. Then nothing happened some more.

"You bore me," said the barbarian, and with a quick drop of his hands he drew both blades and, before the Tusk men had a chance to react, he uttered a war cry that resounded like the depths of hell and he charged.

Time slides...

"Tygg, be kind."

"I am kind as summer."

"As sunstroke..."

She found this conversation odd, because she knew it was about her, but she didn't understand how. But she had an intuition that these two, at least, meant her no harm. Tygg seemed less scared now than when he was standing on the shore, sneering...

That had been him, right?

She heard her brother's voice. It startled her out of her reverie and nearly made her fall to the hammock.

Drea was at her side. "What is it?" she said, and her voice was soft as velvet. "I..." she said, and she looked at Tygg, who regarded her with a bemused eye, but not entirely bereft of concern.

She heard it again, and she put her hands to her ears. The voice was telling her something. Telling her that she was wrong, that there was something wrong with her.

"No," she said "You're dead, You're Dead."

Time slides...

She did not know how Tollie knew that. She never got to ask him. She tore out open a shutter and ran out of their quiet dark cabin nestled up a quiet dark path in the quiet dark woods just as her mother's scream split the air behind her. She froze and in the breath she drew in allowed the enormity of that fact to settle in her heart. She wanted to run and she wanted to scream and she wanted to die, so she just froze there, not ten feet from her house, and looked at the dirty walls of it and did not know what to do.

"You killed the God of Burning," said a voice that sounded like hers. Falla felt sick.

"Falla!" shouted Tollie. "Run, Falla!" And Falla saw her first Tusk man.

Time slides...

Drea put a hand to her. "You hear it, don't you?"

Falla nodded.

"It's what they wanted. It's part of you. They could find you by it. Tusk men are sensitive to certain...

traits in people. As am I."

Time ...

The tallest of the Tusk Men came first under the barbarian's blades. He held out his staff of bone and tooth as if to parry but the barbarian just swatted it aside with one fearsome blow and with another cut through the furry collar around his throat and sent arterial spray in a wide arc. The Tusk man issued a horrible pained gurgle and staggered to his side clutching his hands to his throat and collapsing in front of Falla's eyes. She looked at the black pits where his eyes were and it seemed to her that they were no less terrifying even as she knew that nothing was behind them anymore. Somehow that made them more alien and strange.

The other two Tusk men thought to converge on the barbarian but he moved faster. He knocked the flint spearhead off the one who had thought to circle him and put one of his swords in the Tusk man's chest and left it there to deal with the other one. The Tusk man howled a song of animal despair like a wounded goat and tried to pull the sword from his chest but his strength had left him and he shuffled limply towards the shore before he too fell, dropping forward on his chest and driving the sword even deeper into his chest. She could see the red point sticking through his back.

That left one. The barbarian, smiling, whirred his remaining sword in decorative arcs that may have once been practice exercises but now were clearly done to intimidate. He held the weapon back with the point towards his last enemy and with his other, forward hand, beckoned him to fight.

Instead, the last Tusk man, the smallest, dropped his stone club and ran away, parallel to the shore.

Time...

"Who are you?"

"She is a lady of a Great Family of Dohmite nobility, and I am her butcher," said Tygg.

"You look like a witch."

Drea laughed at this. "What do witches look like?"

"I don't know," said Falla. "Like you, I guess."

"See, girl," said Tygg, "you know how to guess."

"Guess who I am," said Drea.

Time...

"By Gerla's tits," said the Barbarian. He looked back to make sure the others were not moving, and then with a rueful sigh, he took off after them.

Falla heard the footfalls punctuated by grunts and cries fade away into the distance and then she heard the silence of the woods over the dead. She became aware of the rope binding her hands and feet and she saw a bone sticking out from the accouterments of the dead Tusk man in front of her and it looked like it might have a blade on the other end of it. She drew herself up and inch-wormed over to the corpse and smelled the foulness of him and she reached her small fingers around the bone shaft and pulled. It came out easily but there was no blade, only the thin tooth of a shark. But it was better than nothing, so she carefully pointed it down. And dropped it. And picked it up again. And she thought about trying to cut the rope around her feet instead, but she knew she would just have to come back to her hands later. So she tried again.

She was just starting to fray one of the many strands of rope tied around her when she heard footfalls returning. She thought it sounded like the barbarian's heavy trod but her back was turned and she couldn't be sure so she turned the bone-tooth over in a way that might allow her to stab out with it. She thought if the barbarian could kill two Tusk men, she could hurt one. Maybe enough to get away.

The footfalls got closer. She lurched up and with all her strength and a cry that might have been fearsome from her young slashed out wildly with her bone-tooth. It missed the barbarian's leg and she landed on the hard ground again. The tooth went out of her hands and the wind went out of her. Then she was on her back looking into the barbarian's eyes.

Time...

Falla thought about this, and heard her brother's voice again, telling her that he had always known about her. That she had always known. *Do you remember the time you told mother about the deer father killed? It was in the morning, and father didn't get back until night. He tracked the deer all day. But you described his kill.*

You described it perfectly. That's when I knew....that's when I knew.

...

His eyes held a mixture of bemusement and cruel laughter, but compared to what she had seen in the eyes of the Tusk men, it was at least human. He pulled her to a sitting position and with a dagger he had in his greaves he made short work of the ropes.

"Come on," he said, and stood up. She watched him kick over the first Tusk man, grunt something unintelligible, and then find the second one and get his sword back. He was wiping the blade with an oilcloth when he saw that she had not moved. "Come on," he said again.

"But"

The barbarian walked back over to her. He towered over her with his hands on his hips. "Your family is dead, girl. I may have dispatched those blubbers today, but more will come. They know what you are. They can sense it."

"Sense what?"

"Sense you. They came for you. It doesn't matter why. What matters is they'll come back if they think you're going to be here. So you can't be here. I'm taking you where you belong."

...

The words came pouring out of Falla.

"You are the Dread One that rides the waves. You are the Sorceress of the Sword. You killed the God of Burning. You..."

And Falla leaned over and was sick.

Drea cleaned her off. Tygg nodded sagaciously and walked back up the runway.

"You will always know," said Drea. "When Fate marks you, you always know. And you are marked, girl. You are marked for great things."

"I don't understand, said Falla.

"Then look and understand," she said, pointing to the porthole.

And just beyond the horizon, a great stone tower jutted out of the waves, piercing the sky, and a light of peace and warmth burst gently down around it.

...

Gazer saw the thread of children, the bloodline of Tygg and Drea, winding its way through long sleepy centuries and bright bloody ones, through ages of Urseth and of Azod, through rises and falls. She saw it ride south into free lands and claim crowns and slay its enemies and, in a day far far off, throw the Great Destroyer back.

"Yes?" said Fredegunna.

"The thread gets loose. But it endures."

And she smiled to see the barbarian on the shore, with his swords and his sneer and his hauberk of beaten bronze, just beyond the surf in front of a rotten pine log. **UJ**

Ogre Did Nothing Wrong:

A Drunk Rant About Nerds and Nerd Culture

By Thomas M. Fitz

Why the fuck is there a Han Solo standalone movie?

Why does that exist?

Why did someone spend good money to create it? Why did actors and screenwriters and directors line up to take a shot at directing it? Why?

To make art?

Is the Han Solo standalone movie driven by some aesthetic principle? A need to create truth and express it? Or is it driven by something else?

I've asked too many questions. It's rhetorical, and it's off-putting. I could have culled all those questions down to a few. I wouldn't have needed so many paragraph breaks.

But I'm enjoying Deep Eddy Ruby Red Vodka, and I don't care. I'm going to be rhetorical and I'm going to be obnoxious. Go cry, emo kid.

(Incidentally, do you know how many times I had to retype that before the autocorrect stopped changing it to "emotional" or "emoji". Fuck you, 21st Century)

Back to my questions. The Han Solo movie exists because a bunch of coke-addled whores who run a pop-culture sweatshop and several overpriced amusement parks (some of which have no fucking rides. Epcot is a mall you pay \$100 to get into. A MALL!) decided that it would make money. Now, I may disparage these people's life choices and moral stature, but I never would suggest them to be stupid. One does not climb to the top of the greasy pole of our entertainment industry, win the Game of Casting Couches, without having a generous portion of mother-wit, even if it's no more than the college-educated version of a three-card monte

dealer's. So when they decide that a Han Solo standalone movie will make money, I expect events to prove them right.

But why?

Another question. Would you believe me if I said that was the last one? You shouldn't.

I don't believe, based on a sampling of YouTube and Twitter, that anyone in the Star Wars Fanbase was really clamoring for a Han Solo movie. I don't think the Han Solo movie is going to answer any questions, enliven the Star Wars universe, that will improve the enjoyment of the franchise for any fan. You will like Star Wars just as much after seeing "SOLO" as you did before. It serves no storytelling purpose.

In fact, just for a second, let's give Harrison Ford the benefit of the doubt and accept his interpretation of the character he inhabited and admit that there's no fucking there there. The character of Han Solo is basically Captain Kirk without the moral awareness and sense of responsibility (*I'll be coming for the Trekkies soon enough, don't worry*), Indiana Jones without the education. The dumbest thing in the SOLO trailer is Daenerys Targaryen suggesting that there's something more to Han Solo than meets the eye. There isn't. He's a thief with a heart of gold, a trope with a smirk and a blaster. He's not deep. He's not soulful. If Luke hadn't wandered into his life, he'd have remained a smudge on the Empire's history.

Sure, he's fun. Necessary, even. In a movie filled with prophets and warlords and princesses and earnest farm boys who just wanna do the right thing, gosh-golly, Solo's galaxy-weary, shoot-first persona is a welcome leavening. He's the only guy allowed to be deliberately funny in the first SW movie, and that is way more necessary than fanboys get. But we need two hours telling us how he got to the Mos Eisley cantina? Please.

I know that. You know that, even if you don't want to admit it.

But the movie is going to make money anyway.

Because nerds can't help themselves.

That's the thing about nerds, their total inability to let things go. Their complete devotion to a piece of entertainment, to the point of making a religion out of it. There's no reason why people would take the time and money out of their lives to dress up and go to things like Comic-Con, except out of some belief that they will temporarily earn some grace from reality and escape into the world that cynical hucksters (and the odd artist) have deliberately created to insulate them from reality.

Because reality is full of harsh choices and limiting truths. The real world is dark and tends towards collapse. You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake.

Who wouldn't rather be a ninja with a twelve-foot sword?

So, on we go, lining up for one more hit, just one more, so we can ride the Millennium Falcon in the Quidditch Cup and save Vulcan from the Eye of President Snow. That nagging feeling of disappointment will be stored and expressed at a safe time, perhaps three or four years later, when we admit that it is as misguided as *The Phantom Menace* or whoever decided *The Hobbit* needed to be a trilogy. We desperately need to have validation from the suits and power players, who by their choices of what to create concede, at last, that We Matter. Take that, guy who gave me a wedgie in Sixth Grade for still playing Pokemon!

That's where the line still is. The definition. There's a point in your life when you put away escapism and take risks to compete in the real world, and after you do that, you regard as dipshit lotus-eating failures those who refuse that red pill. Say what you will about high school athletics, but those who participate in them have to contribute real blood, sweat, and tears to excel at them in any way, with failure and humiliation constantly in the cards. Getting run over by someone twice your size in a football game hurts on a level that someone calling you a dweeb never will. The jocks know something about actual pain: that it comes no matter what you do sometimes. Nerds still regard it as something that cries out to Heaven for Vengeance.

Everything is important to nerds.

I've lost my thread here, which drunk writing will do for you sometimes. I had something to say on the topic of why Marvel is so annoying. But they aren't really. They're just kind of dumb. Iron Man is Batman with

a magical maguffin (and Batman is the fantasy that the upper classes give a shit about the rest of us).

Spiderman is a willful misreading of how radiation works. The X-Men are {Insert Minority Here}, mixed in with paranoia about the Military Industrial Complex. It's ludicrous to pretend that they're smarter than DC. They've just made better tactical choices in their movie department (not so much in the comics world, though, yeah? Get woke, go broke, dorks).

At some point, I'm going to be accused of not liking comic books or some garbage. I'll have you know that I paid good money to own the final book of the *The Shadow* series from the 80's. Because that thing makes *The Dark Knight Returns* look like Strawberry Shortcake. Any art form is valid, because any art form is the expression of humans observing humanity.

But do I spend waking hours describing it's coolness to others so I can be King of the Edgelords? Do I argue with nerds in comic book stores about whatever goddamn reboot they're doing now basically lacking the awareness of how life works that comics in the 80's had? No, because then I'd be one of those sad bastards who can't accept that the world goes on without you. Fuck the 80's as much as Fuck Now, is my egalitarian motto.

Are you listening, Spielberg? Have you enjoyed crawling up your own asshole to make *Ready Player One*, Spielberg? How did it feel to shove a DeLorean in a movie for no other reason than Remember This? Did it feel weird? Good? Bad? Indifferent?

I told you there would be more questions.

It's time to have a talk, nerds.

It's time to consider that sending death threats to people who don't like Star Wars is not a good idea, nerds.

It's time to consider that no one should be shamed because they aren't interested in reading "Young Adult" fiction, Potterheads.

It's time to accept that your TV franchise was meant for TV and shouldn't, by and large, be made into movies, Trekkies (Whales? You have to resort to a Time Travel Plot Device and Whales to sell a movie, you bites-the-heads-off-chickens geeks?).

It's time to accept that the thing you care about is not that important.

I'll lead the way: *Hitchiker's Guide the Galaxy* is not that important. Amusing, yes. Though progressively less so as Zaphod Beeblebrox was removed from the series. But not important. Nihilism with a smiley face, mostly. It's funny if you've grown up very sheltered and never been exposed to Monty Python.

Also, Monty Python is not that important. Absurdism for its own sake can't be. And unless you're certain that 80% of the people around you have watched enough *Flying Circus/Life of Brian/Quest for the Holy Grail* to know the thing you're quoting, you should stop quoting it. And if 80% of the people around you are aware, then you don't need to quote it, because they're already thinking it, and will only correct you if you quote it slightly inaccurately. Because pedantry is the heart of nerdery.

What else, what else? *The Goonies* is not at all important. It's a dumb movie enlivened by a functional soundtrack and a plot that was significantly cleverer when *Treasure Island* did it in the 18th fucking century. Anyone who handed over the value of their labor to wear a T-Shirt with HEY YOU GUYS plastered on it is way stupider than Sloth. Sloth at least understood the value of what he wore on his chest.

Accept this because your memories are not the same as eternal value.

Accept this because only by transcending the limits of what you in your present state, think of as "cool" can you actually detach from the noise, and become what "cool" reflects.

Accept this because they don't want you to, if you're dumb enough to believe that.

Or don't.

Let me know how the Han Solo movie you didn't ask for turns out. **UJ**

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 5: Wandering

By Alfred Underhill

Ulysses and the young woman walked in silence. Occasionally, she'd meet his gaze with a guarded expression. He thought it might be a good idea to find a different place to sit down. Maybe he could get her to talk a little more, ask her where she was staying.

With these thoughts in mind, he steered them toward the outer edge of the burn. It wasn't always quiet around the perimeter, but it was easier to find space that was. Ulysses mused about their appearance on the perimeter radar: two blips in a sea of blips. Then he considered how weird it was that he hadn't thought about the radar system at all until now, despite having known about it before leaving Denver. The perimeter team used radar to monitor Black Rock's borders and to send out patrols to keep folks from sneaking in without a ticket. Not that they'd wander out of the burn, him and...?

Ulysses grimaced at the realization that he didn't know his silent companion's name.

"Hey, what's your name?" He stopped and looked at her as he said it. The lady also stopped, but her expression was blank. He tried again. "What's your name? Who are you?" He said pointing at her. "My name is Ulysses. Ulysses," he said, pointing to himself.

"Yoolissseees," she responded, pointing to herself.

"No, no. I am Ulysses, and you are?" He gestured to himself when he said his own name then to her. Comprehension flashed across her face.

"Ah, Nehra. Nehra." She tapped her chest slightly while saying her name. "Ulysses," she said, more naturally this time, pointing toward him.

"Yeah, that's right. Great. We know each other's names now." He smiled at her. She returned a much too toothy smile that reminded Ulysses of a shark. He suppressed a grimace, and gestured for her to follow him.

After a long stretch of walking, the pair arrived at the perimeter. Ulysses scanned for a quiet place for the two of them to stop. After a few minutes he found a relatively quiet space, which also had the benefit of being a bit darker. Despite the occasional dust blast, the night sky was clear. He eyed the stars above.

"Nice night, huh?" He said to Nehra, gesturing upward. She looked at him with an expression he couldn't read, but then looked up at the stars. They stood in silence for several minutes.

Ulysses began to worry that the pause was starting to get awkward, when a handful of shooting stars streaked across the sky.

"Woah, those are really bright!" He had seen shooting stars once or twice, but they had been quick flashes in the distance; he'd have missed them if he blinked. These were much brighter and lasted for a few seconds each.

He looked at Nehra with a smile that she didn't return. Her expression was worried, afraid. She said one word to Ulysses: "Go."

"Go? Where do you want to go? Should I take you back to your camp?"

"Go. Go. Go!" She waived him back toward the center of Black Rock.

Ulysses didn't try to hide his confusion. "Okay," he said, walking back the way they came. Nehra walked next to him but kept looking over her shoulder.

+ + +

Nehra wouldn't or couldn't say where she was staying, so Ulysses offered to let her stay with him and Giles. He didn't know if she understood what he was saying, but Nehra followed him into his tent without hesitation. Ulysses figured that Giles and Wendy were either out or asleep judging by the stillness within the tent; the partition was still up, so he couldn't really be sure.

"This is it," he said softly to Nehra. "'Hope you don't mind, but I need to change. I'm trying to keep the dust out of my bed for as long as I can.' He set his flashlight down on top of one of the bins so there was ambient light inside the tent.

Nehra looked at him and then glanced around the tent. Her curiosity was apparent. She sat on the floor, at the foot of Ulysses's bedroll.

He shrugged and turned around. He pulled off his shirt and put it in the trash bag he was using for dirty clothes. He placed his pants on the floor next to the bag. Once he had his sleeping t-shirt on, he closed his bin and turned back to his bedroll. It was immediately clear that Nehra had removed her head scarf and bed sheet, and now sat naked on the tent floor. Her clothes were in a pile next to the containers of dust she brought with her. She looked at him with an expression that said, what?

Ulysses turned back around and mouthed a wow, then began rummaging through his bin. He found a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt, which he extended to Nehra. He said, "I'm not really sure how we want to setup the sleeping situation tonight, but you might want these."

Nehra accepted his clothes. She stood up and pulled the shorts and shirt onto her body. Dressed, she sat back down and looked at him.

Ulysses retrieved a spare blanket from his other bin and spread it out on the floor next to the bedroll. "I've got this spare blanket that I can sleep on. You can have the bed," he said, gesturing.

She looked at the bedding and then at him, before crawling slowly onto it. Nehra stretched out, all the while maintaining eye contact.

Ulysses nodded to her. He wadded up some of his clean clothes to form a makeshift pillow. He switched off his flashlight, then stretched out on the blanket facing away from Nehra. It took him a few moments to get comfortable lying on his side.

"Good night."

Nehra didn't reply. After several minutes, she made a tiny noise, which prompted Ulysses to flip over to face her. She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with one hand. Ulysses sat up and switched on the flashlight. He rummaged through his supplies and retrieved a pack of tissues, then handed them to Nehra.

Nehra held the pack in her hand, examining it through a haze of tears and dim light.

"Uh, here," said Ulysses, pulling the flap open on the tissue pack. He pulled one out and handed it to her. I would definitely like to know where you're from, he thought.

Nehra rubbed the tissue between her fingers for a moment, then began dabbing at her eyes. She sat up and blew her nose with another tissue. After a few minutes she seemed better, and tried to smile her awkward, overly toothy smile but couldn't quite manage.

"Grateful," Nehra said, sounding hoarse. She put her used tissues into the pocket of her borrowed shorts.

"You're welcome," said Ulysses. "I'm going to turn off the light so we can get some rest, okay?" She nodded in response.

With the light off, Ulysses laid back down on his blanket and closed his eyes. He felt Nehra's hand grab onto his. She pulled him over onto the bedroll. "Come," was all she said. Ulysses held his breath and moved onto the bedroll with Nehra.

She rolled onto her side, facing away from him. Ulysses lay with Nehra facing the same direction, spooning her. He put his arm around her. Nehra gripped his hand so tightly he was certain he'd have a bruise in the morning.

"Goodnight," Nehra whispered. Within a few minutes, her breaths were long and even; her grip on Ulysses's hand slackened. Well, good for her, he thought. It was going to take him awhile to fall asleep now.

+ + +

The heat stirred Ulysses from his sleep. He opened his eyes to see Nehra staring at him; her face was inches from his. He felt his heart pound against his sternum.

"Good morning," he said, trying to sound casual. She was still wearing his shirt and shorts; her hair framed her face as she stared at him with an unblinking gaze. The sheet and sleeping bag were under both their feet. He touched Nehra's foot with his and she responded in kind. Ulysses smiled at her.

"I'd love to lie here and play footsie with you all day, but I think the heat might kill us. How about some food?" He gestured putting food into his mouth, and said "food" again, which she nodded to.

"Food," Nehra said.

"That's what I'm talking about." Ulysses sat up and reached for his clothes, then began changing. Nehra did the same. She removed the clothes Ulysses had lent her and stood naked on the bedroll. The young woman gave Ulysses a puzzled look, which he responded to by busily going through the pockets of the jeans he'd just pulled on. Nehra put her hand on Ulysses chin, and made him look her in the eyes.

"What?" She said.

"Sorry. It's just...well, you're gorgeous. I barely know you, and you smell amazing, and I..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's just get dressed and get some food, huh?"

"Food," was all Nehra said in response. She picked up her bed sheet dress-thing and her silver head wrap. Ulysses wasn't sure either article of clothing looked like any fashion he'd ever seen before. Even the material they were made of looked weird; maybe it was just the filtered sunlight inside the tent. She slipped into the dress, and then bent at the waist so that her hair almost touched the floor. She began wrapping her hair into the mottled silver piece of fabric. Standing up straight again, she looked at Ulysses, whose turn it was to stare.

"What?"

"What's with your ears?" He pointed to his own ears as he asked the question. "Did you get them done? Or are they naturally pointed?"

Nehra responded by adjusting her wrap to cover the tops of her ears. Her stomach growled audibly. They both looked down at her midsection. "Food," she said.

"Yeah, food." Ulysses said rubbing his eyes. "Let's get on that. This way." Ulysses escorted his strange bedfellow toward the shade structure.

"G'day, Lee! Oh-ho, did we sleep well?" Giles began grinning at Ulysses the moment he saw Nehra enter the popup covered in shade cloth.

"Morning, Giles" Ulysses said, annoyed at his friend's smile. "This is Nehra. I let her stay with me since I couldn't figure out where she's camped."

"Pleasure," said Giles, "I'm sorry if I was rude to you yesterday when we first met. But I am glad that Lee here was so selfless and gave you a place to sleep. He does snore pretty loudly, doesn't he?"

"Food?" Was all Nehra said in response.

"Oh, right. Yeah, we still got some granola bars, haven't we, Lee?"

"Right here," Ulysses said, shooting Giles a dirty look and handing a plastic wrapped granola bar to Nehra. "You're probably thirsty too. Here's some water," he twisted the cap off a water bottle and handed it to her.

Nehra drank half the bottle immediately. Then she inspected the granola bar, glanced at Ulysses, then raised it to her mouth still wrapped.

"Wait, here." Ulysses said, holding up his own unopened bar. He opened the plastic and peeled it back, then took a bite.

"Ah," Nehra said. She unwrapped her own bar and began chewing.

"Oi, Nerha, was it? Where are you from?"

She looked at Giles, then Ulysses, then at Giles again before closing her eyes. Giles and Ulysses exchanged glances. Nehra seemed to be thinking about something intently.

"I...I am...a foreigner." Nehra said.

"Well yes, obviously. I'm a foreigner as well, dear." Giles smiled at her. "I've never heard an accent quite like yours. Where are you from? What country?"

"Hey, she just got up, man. Let's give her some time to wake up a little before we ask her a bunch of questions." Ulysses could see that Nehra was flustered. He was certain he was more curious than Giles about where she was from, but he had a feeling that he needed to be patient in order to find out.

"Right, sorry," said Giles. "I've just been up for a bit already. I even made coffee."

"You really are my friend. I absolve you of your dickishness," Ulysses said.

"Fuck off," said Giles, giving Ulysses the finger.

"Is there enough left for both of us?"

"Yeah, I think I've had my fill," said Giles, handing a mostly full French press to Ulysses.

"Thanks, Giles."

"Cheers, mate."

Ulysses found a clean camping bowl and poured some coffee into it, then set it aside. After rinsing his travel mug with some of his water he poured the rest of the coffee into it. He handed the mug to Nehra, then picked up his bowl.

"I hope black is okay. We don't really have anything with us for doctoring coffee." Ulysses sipped coffee from the little bowl, reflexively making a satisfied face.

Nehra looked at the mug and sniffed the contents. She gave both Ulysses and Giles a dubious look, then took a sip.

"I think your new girlfriend may not share our passion for the bilious nectar."

"She's not my girlfriend," said Ulysses. Then he looked at Nehra who was still evaluating her sip of coffee. "Just ignore him, okay? If you don't like it, I'll be more than happy to finish it."

Nehra shook her head, and took a few more sips. "Coffee good."

Both men laughed.

"Well, that settles that! Lee, I think I'm going to head out and let you two finish waking up."

"Can we catch up with you later?"

"Sure thing. I might stop by our favorite little playa bar. Probably where you'll find me if you take too long." Giles's tone insinuated a lot more than had actually happened between Ulysses and Nehra.

"I think we'll be wandering soon ourselves," said Ulysses a little too quickly.

"Suit yourself. Tah-tah," Giles said as he walked out onto the playa.

"See ya."

Ulysses turned his attention to Nehra who sat wide eyed with her shark-like grin. She giggled at him and bounced in her seat.

"What's up?" said Ulysses with a grin of his own.

"Coffee!" Was her enthusiastic response.

+ + +

The pair did catch up with Giles at Ron and Sophie's bar camp, but they didn't stay long. Nehra turned down a sloe gin fizz and didn't seem to want to drink anything but water. She asked Ulysses for more coffee, which he managed to find for her in their post bar wandering, but the coffee seemed to only make her more restless. They had walked around for most of the day. Nehra was trying to tell him something, but he couldn't understand what. Ulysses figured all of this had to do with finding her camp. However, he was getting tired, and he needed to rest and eat something.

"Hey," he said, "let's go back to camp, and I'll make us an early dinner. What do you think?"

Nehra nodded. "Need to..." she trailed off, as she had done a few times already. There was some word or phrase she was missing or couldn't translate.

"It's cool. Just keep working on it. Let talk about if over dinner, all right?" He was trying to be patient, despite his fatigue and hunger. The two of them walked back to his camp in silence.

Ulysses cooked them some fake meat fajitas on the camp stove. Neither he nor Giles were vegetarian, yet they both knew that vegan meat substitutes kept for far longer while camping in the desert. It made certain comfort foods easier to have and safer to eat on the playa.

When the food was ready, Ulysses assembled a fajita for each of them and took a big bite. Nehra watched him roll up his tortilla with apprehension, but then followed suit and began eating. She made a pleasant murmur. The two of them otherwise ate their meal in silence.

"Ulysses?"

"What's up?"

"I need you to...take me somewhere."

"Okay," he said, "where?"

"It's...I show you." Nehra leaned over to him and placed her hand on his. She smiled her shark-like smile at him, which he tried reciprocated unsuccessfully.

Ulysses felt the warmth of Nehra's hand on his, which he found strangely relaxing. He liked her, weirdness and all. Looking at her, he realized that his eyelids had gotten really heavy. Probably just the heat and post meal food coma, he thought, as he let his eyes close.

He was drifting above the shade structure, floating in space. I must be lucid dreaming, he thought to himself. Then he began flying very quickly toward the road. He flew over miles of highway and local roads in seconds until he saw an empty patch of dessert. It didn't really look like much of anything.

Ulysses opened his eyes. Nehra smiled at him, but it was a softer smile than before. Suddenly he was very aware of his pulse and very awake.

"Can you take me?"

"How did you do that?"

"I can explain...if we go."

"Okay, but you really need to promise me you will."

"I promise," she said.

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 6: Flight

By Alfred Underhill

Why did it always get so cold in the desert at night? Why was he wearing a t-shirt, again? Why wouldn't the car's soft-top come up? Why did he think it was a good idea to put it down in the first place? Ulysses asked himself these questions, peering at the desiccated landscaped whizzing by. He shivered and pulled at the cuffs of his fingerless leather gloves, like they could somehow stretch up his arms to cover them if he pulled hard enough.

He shook his head, reached for the travel mug, and took a cold swallow of burned coffee. He let out a groan at the taste, which made Nehra stir. She was wrapped in both his hoodie and his blanket. Her eyes fluttered open to give him a quizzical look. Light sleeper, he thought.

"Hey," Ulysses said, "sorry about that. The coffee's no good anymore. It's not even warm." He pointed to the mug. The swaddled waif snatched the cup from its resting place, took a sip, made a face, and muttered something. He still couldn't place her accent.

"Yeah, sorry, I was trying to tell you that it's no good," he said, still hoping to bridge the linguistic gap between them. Nehra just nodded absently and closed her eyes, curling back up in her seat.

The security sticker in the corner of the windshield caught Ulysses's eye. Security, I could use some of that, he thought. He snorted. Yeah man, like you had so much security before you went to Burning Man, dropped acid, and found this lady. He sighed, and glanced at his sleeping passenger.

Look dude, you chose to go with this. It's too late to turn back now. See it through. Just see it through, man, he thought to himself.

Ulysses read an approaching road sign. Only 50 more miles to California. Once they crossed over, they'd be on Route 6 for awhile until cutting over to 395. At least, those were the directions he'd come up with looking at the map. From what he could tell, he was supposed to take his passenger to some place near

Casa Diablo Hot Springs. Hopefully his directions would be good enough to deliver Nehra to her destination.

He couldn't decide if he should drive faster or slow down.

Unable to make a decision, Ulysses decided to keep his current pace. He blew past a billboard, and then cursed as he saw the silhouette of a patrol car behind it. The patrol car's headlights came on followed by the reds and blues as it pulled out in pursuit.

"Shit," Ulysses said.

Nehra looked up at him with an expression that was both quizzical and bemused. She muttered something that sounded like a question.

"I don't know what you're saying. Look, I fucked up and didn't see the cop. We've got to pull over now."

Ulysses signaled and pulled over. He turned off the engine and waited for the cop to start walking up. Maybe he could just peel-out onto the road after the cop got closer, he thought. Nah, nowhere to lose him. Ulysses couldn't run or hide. He would just have to face whatever was going to happen next.

The highway patrolman got out of his cruiser, flashlight held at shoulder height. He walked up to the driver side of the car.

"License and registration," said the officer.

"Here's my license. I can't seem to find the registration."

"Well, I can give you one minute if you want look for it, son."

"All right, thanks."

Ulysses reached past Nehra for the glove box; she stared at the cop with befuddlement. As Ulysses opened the compartment, she asked him something that he couldn't understand.

"Look," he said, "I don't know. I've got to try to find the registration right now." He rifled through the glove box in a panic trying to find the registration for the rental car. Ulysses figured his evening would only get more complicated if he didn't find the registration, but after a few seconds he did.

"Sorry about that, officer. Here you are."

"Thank you," the cop's gaze was lingering on Nehra, who looked coquettishly back at him. The cop then said to Ulysses, "I'll give these back to you in a minute." Ulysses felt his stomach sink.

Nehra said something high pitched and patted his hand. He looked over at her smiling face and shook his head. "No, no this is bad. Bad things could happen here," he said. Ulysses made no attempt to conceal his fear. She chirped something at him in retort, and all he could do in response was rest his head on the steering wheel. She petted the back of his head, like he was a pet dog or something. Ulysses raised his head and sat up in the driver seat.

After a few more minutes the cop approached the car with measured steps. He walked up to the driver's side, leaving enough room for the door to open.

"This car's a rental?"

"Yeah," Ulysses said, "It's a fleet car that belongs to Budget Mountain Rentals. I rented it so my friend and me could go to Burning Man." There was no way this was a good question to be asked by a cop.

"Miss? This is a car that he rented?"

Ulysses was frozen to his seat, yet Nehra was all smiles. She nodded enthusiastically at the cop. The highway patrolman looked at her, blinked, and then looked at Ulysses.

"Can I have a word with you, sir?"

"Uh, sure."

"Step out of the car, please."

Ulysses glanced at his smiling passenger; her big blue-green eyes were playful and she giggled at him. Great, wonderful, he thought to himself. Ulysses unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door.

The cop gestured for Ulysses to walk up the shoulder with him. When both were about thirty feet in front of the car, the cop turned to him.

"Son, what exactly is going on here?"

“Honestly, I have no idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I literally have no idea how I ended up here.”

“Is that car stolen?”

“It shouldn’t be,” Ulysses said.

“Because you rented it?”

“Yep.”

“Where exactly are you two from?”

“Well, I’m actually from Colorado. Her, I...I don’t know where she’s from. She’s some kind of foreigner.”

“Okay, so where exactly are you taking her?”

“Oh, uh, some place in California,” said Ulysses.

“Right. And she doesn’t speak English?”

“Yeah, she does. Just not a lot. I’m not sure why she’s not trying to use what few words she knows right now.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have contact information for anyone at your destination, would you?”

“I uh, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Uh-huh,” said the cop. He took off his cap and rubbed the top of head for a moment, and then took off his glasses to rub his eyes. Ulysses looked at the ground, and let out a long sigh.

“Okay, I’ll level with you officer. See what happened was, I rented that car to go to Burning Man with my friend, Giles. I showed up, started partying, and somewhere in there, I met the lady in the car. She barely speaks English. Whatever her primary language is doesn’t sound like anything I’ve ever even heard before, and I’ve been on six out of seven continents. All I know is that Giles wouldn’t want to leave the burn to give her a ride to California, and I couldn’t just leave her stranded, so here we are.”

"I see," said the cop, "so you're—"

The officer was interrupted by a chirp to the right of them. Both men jumped. It was Nehra. She had come over to join the conversation. "Hoo-boy," Ulysses whispered.

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to wait inside the vehicle." The cop was visibly annoyed at being interrupted and sneaked up upon. He pointed emphatically toward the car.

She answered him in her native tongue, smiling.

"Go back to the car and wait!" He said the words loud and slow.

She answered him with a terse chirp, narrowed her eyes, and placed her hand on her hips.

Ulysses felt sweat trickle down his back. This was not going to end well. He had to think of something.

There was no time. Everything was happening in slow motion.

"Goddamn foreigner! I said, get back in the goddamn car!" The cop grabbed Nehra's elbow, and began dragging her back toward the car.

Nehra let out screech like a bird of prey, as she spun and made a series of jabs with her fist. Her hand moved so fast it blurred in Ulysses's vision. The blows made sounds somewhere between applause and popcorn when they connected.

The cop let go of Nehra and took a staggered step backward. Nehra stood glaring at him. Ulysses thought the cop looked unnaturally still, and then leaped back as the patrolman fell down, stiff as a board. Blood was streaming from the officer's face, his glasses were cracked and bent.

"Jesus Christ! What did you do?!" Ulysses couldn't contain his fear or surprise. This was so not what he had signed up for! He was going to jail for this, he just knew it.

Nehra stood very still, fixing him with her glare. Ulysses had to look away. She said something very fast and when he looked back she was just inches from him.

Ulysses unconsciously took a step backward, but she reached forward and grabbed his hand. With her other hand she held his chin and looked at him, tenderly this time. She said something, then kissed him. I don't know what's going on, but at least she seems sincere, Ulysses thought.

"Officer Scott, what's your twenty?" The cop's radio droned.

They both looked down at the unconscious highway patrolman, and then looked back at each other.

"I can't fucking believe you did that!" Ulysses said.

Nehra pursed her lips into a wide smile, and then began to shake with laughter. Ulysses couldn't help but laugh with her. She pulled him into a sprint back to the car.

Ulysses turned the engine over, put the car in drive, and sped away.

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It was a little after 3:00 a.m. when the pair arrived at the Casa Diablo hot springs. The rest of their trip had somehow gone by without incident. He parked the car in front of a villa. Nehra jumped out before the car had even stopped, taking her tupperware with her. She came around and opened his door for him, grabbed his backpack out of the back seat, and pulled Ulysses along behind her into the desert.

What is she doing, he thought. Why are we here? What the hell is going on? He didn't have answers to any of these questions, no matter how many times he silently asked them. Nehra had promised to explain how she was able to show him this place by touching him. He was hoping she'd also explain why they had come here.

Nehra lead Ulysses over sandy terrain, peppered with scraggly shrubs that he kept tripping over in the dark. She stopped and looked around, and so did he. Ulysses couldn't see much, but he could tell that the land they were on was surrounded by roads on all sides. No one was out at this time of night, and the roads were all at least a half a mile away. Without a light source, no one would see them standing there.

Nehra looked at him and said something softly. She drew him close and kissed him ferociously. His mouth smarted from the force of her affection.

What? Why here in this desert instead of Black Rock? Ulysses thought. But then Nehra abruptly detached herself from him, and handed Ulysses his hoodie and blanket, which she hadn't taken off all evening. Then she turned away from him.

"What's up?" Ulysses said.

She muttered something at him sweetly.

It's like she's trying to reassure me or something, he thought. It was hard for Ulysses to see what Nehra was doing, but he could tell her hands were up by the sides of her head. She unwound the scarf and shook her head a little, like she was trying to shake her hair out.

Nehra wadded up the scarf and threw the cloth ball high into the air, where Ulysses lost track of it against the night sky. None of this made any sense, but he kept watching her. He spotted the scarf as it fell toward the ground, but then there was a blinding light in the middle of his field of vision.

"What the hell?"

He squinted at the brilliant orb as it descended much too slowly toward the ground, roughly forty feet from where she stood. Ulysses thought he saw her look back at him, but he couldn't tell for sure against the glare. The light was too intense, he had to turn around.

After a few seconds it was dark again. Ulysses was blind and knew he would be until his eyes recovered. He held very still and did not turn around.

"Ulysses?" A familiar, yet strange female voice asked him.

He froze.

"Ulysses?" His name in the form of a question came again.

"H-hello?"

"Ulysses, it's me."

"Who?"

"It's me, Nehra. We've been sharing each other's company and traveling together. Surely you haven't forgotten already?" Concern was apparent in her tone. Ulysses didn't understand what was going on, but the voice had to belong to her.

"Nehra?" He said. "Have you been able to speak English this whole time? What was that light? What the fuck is going on?"

"I understand you might be a little... upset about all this. You must be so confused. Please look at me."

"I can't see. The light blinded me."

"Oh, okay, well let me come to you."

Ulysses heard her footsteps shuffle around to in front of him. She must be walking so I can hear her, Ulysses thought, which made him feel a little more at ease.

"Here I am."

"Yeah, that's great, honey. I still can't see you."

"Sorry, I should've done a better job of trying to warn you."

Ulysses legs felt shaky, like he was standing on shifting ground. No, don't pass out now, he thought. But the shaking wouldn't stop, and it grew. He fell over onto a shrub.

It took him a few seconds to realize that the ground really was shifting, and it had been joined by a low rumbling sound. Something very large was moving behind him. Ulysses looked in Nehra's direction, but could only make out a silhouette standing there.

The rumbling ended a few seconds later. He was aware of a light source behind him. It was more subdued than before, possibly because of his impaired vision. Ulysses kept his eyes on Nera's outline until it filled in with features.

She looked more or less the same as before in the dark. Nehra just seemed to be missing her scarf. And then he noticed her ears again.

Nera's ears were tapered, ending in points. They were slightly longer than human ears.

"What is with your ears? Are you like a Vulcan or something?"

"A what?"

"An alien," Ulysses said, "an alien with pointy ears. Like in Star Trek."

"Is that the word your people use to describe people with ears like mine?"

"One of them."

She wore a pout for a moment. "I do not think I like this word."

"Nehra," Ulysses said, "we have more pressing things to worry about, like what is that light behind me?"

"See for yourself," she said, looking past him.

Ulysses followed her gaze to the floating craft behind him.

"Ah, Jesus! Really? A UFO? You *are* a fucking space alien, aren't you? *Goddamit!*"

Nehra's gaze wilted to the ground.

"I'm sorry, Ulysses. I didn't mean to deceive you. I wanted to tell you everything, but learning your language is hard. And I wasn't sure I could just show you like I did with this place." She began weeping. Ulysses found his feet and went to her. He held Nehra.

What am I doing? He asked himself, as she clung to him shaking and wetting his t-shirt with her tears.

"Hey now, it's okay," Ulysses said, stroking her hair.

"Really?" She looked at him, with cartoonishly wide eyes, sniffling.

"Yeah, it's fine, babe. Don't sweat it. Just, uh, well, you've got to understand this is a lot for me to take in so—"

"Come with me!"

"Huh?"

"Come with me," Nehra said.

“To where?”

“Anywhere! I need to get away from this area for a little while. I need someone that knows this planet.

You said that you’ve traveled the world, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve been backpacking in a few countries, but that doesn’t mean—“

“It’s more than I know. Come with me.”

“In that,” he said, pointing at the glowing craft.

“Yes.”

“You know, people will notice that thing flying around, right?”

“No one noticed when I came here. You’re the first person to see my, what did you call it? UFO?”

“I don’t know about this honey. I don’t really know you that well. I dosed a few days before we met.

For all I know, I might still be tripping balls.”

“You know me well enough to kiss me and lust after me; enough to drive me around in a car, potentially stranding your friend; enough to let me defend myself against the police. How is this different?”

He looked at her, at the floating craft. He sighed and shrugged.

“All right, Nehra. Fuck it. I’ll go with you.”

She let out a delighted squeal, and kissed him fiercely. She grabbed his hand and led him toward the side of the craft.

There was a light, like a spotlight, on the ground. Holding hands, they stepped into the light. Nehra said something in her native tongue, and then Ulysses felt a disorienting pop as he was instantly transported inside Nehra’s UFO.

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 7: Siem Reap

By Alfred Underhill

“Where are we?”

“Inside.”

“But it’s like I’m flying or something. Ugh, I feel like I’m going to puke.”

“You’ll get used to it. Traveling like this always feels this way,” Nehra said.

“I can feel the wind pushing past the front of the ship, like it’s my head. Everything’s moving so fast. I don’t even know where we are anymore.”

“Would you like to land?”

“Fuck, yes! For the love of God!”

“Who?”

“Just land this thing!”

“Okay,” said Nehra.

The craft immediately shot downward, sheering through a thick canopy of vegetation, stopping inches from the ground. Ulysses screamed in terror. He could feel himself beginning to vomit somewhere far away. Then he was outside vomiting on the ground.

“Are you okay?”

“Uh, no. But I think I will be eventually,” Ulysses said, after he finished being sick. He stood up and reached into his cargo shorts for his water bottle, took a swig, and spat it out.

Ulysses examined their surroundings as he cleaned himself up. He and Nehra appeared to be in some kind of jungle. It looked like somewhere he’d been before. Judging by the heat of the day, he thought they could be somewhere in south-east Asia, but he wasn’t sure. The only thing he was sure of was the surrounding vegetation and the sound of running water in the distance.

“Do you know where we are?”

"Not quite," he said. "This area looks familiar, but I'm not sure from where."

"Oh," Nehra said, "but I picked a place you had been before. I thought it might be a good place to start."

Ulysses shot her an incredulous look. "Wait, what do you mean you picked a place that I had been to before? And what do you mean by a good place to start?"

Nehra looked at him and cocked her head to the side. "I looked at your memories of your travels, and picked this place as a destination. You have fond memories of this area; I believe you call it Cambodia? You came here with your friends and made more friends here, like Giles. The one you were with at Burning Man when I met you."

Ulysses looked at her, his face drawn up in a scowl.

"How did you look at my memories, Nehra? What else have you looked at, huh?"

"Oh, well, I-lots of things," she said. "I learned a lot about you, Ulysses. That's why I decided to stay with you and ask you to come with me."

He took a step towards Nehra.

"How? Are you psychic or something? In addition to being *a fucking space alien*?"

Her brow furrowed.

"You don't need to shout at me," Nehra said, squaring her shoulders.

"What the fuck else do you expect me to do, huh? You think I can just take all this in stride and not having any fucking problems?"

The two stood facing each other. Ulysses's breath was heavy and Nehra's gaze was cold. They stood like that, staring each other down for several moments.

"Ulysses, I will answer your questions, but no more shouting. Okay?"

"Fine, whatever."

"Yes, I'm what you call psychic. And yes, I've looked at most of your memories. I can experience your surface thoughts with little effort, and I explored the deeper workings of your mind while you were sleeping the other night."

"Great. Wonderful."

"In fact," she continued, "it's through this same ability that you're able to understand me."

"What?"

"It's true", she said. "I'm actually speaking in my native tongue right now. Yet to you, it looks and sounds like I am speaking English."

"How is that even possible?"

"I realized, shortly after my arrival, that human brains have to fill in fairly large gaps in perception to compensate for the performance of the sensory organs. As a result, a goodly part of your perception, including language, is based on pattern recognition and prediction. I use those gaps in your perception so that you see and hear me speaking English."

Ulysses looked at the jungle floor. He couldn't figure out how to feel about everything that had transpired in the last hour. He sat down on the wet ground and propped his head in his hands.

Nehra walked over to him, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

"This is too much, Nehra. It's too much." He said without looking up at her.

"I realize you're shocked, overwhelmed. I just thought I should be honest with you."

She crouched next to him in silence for several minutes in the stifling heat of the jungle.

"I appreciate your desire to be honest with me," he said, still cradling his head in both hands. "But I'm not sure what to make of any of this...or what to do next."

"Perhaps we should eat something." She said gently brushing her fingertips across his shoulder.

"Huh?"

"You know, food?"

"Where are we going to get food? We're in the middle of the Cambodian jungle."

"Actually, we're not far from Siem Reap. We could get food there."

Ulysses raised his head slowly and stared at her. After a few heartbeats, he stood up, brushed himself off, and said, "Okay. If we're near Siem Reap, we can get food. I don't have any riel on me, but I can probably find us a place that'll take dollars. I think some food and a chance to regroup is what I need right now."

Nehra nodded, still crouching next to where he had been sitting.

"Ulysses, are you going to be all right?"

He let out a laugh that sounded strange to his own ears. "Honey, I don't know if I'm ever going to be okay again. Part of me is convinced I'm passed out in my tent at the burn right now sleeping off a serious trip."

He took her hands in his and looked into her blue-green eyes. "But that doesn't matter right now. So which way to town?"

Nehra smiled at him.

"South-East from here. We're within walking distance of the city limits."

"What about your, um, ship?" Ulysses said, gesturing to the conspicuous, oblong craft behind them.

"Oh," she said, "I guess we can't just leave it there, huh?" Nehra turned to stare at her craft thoughtfully. After a moment of staring, she pulled off her strange scarf and held it in her hand, not taking her eyes off of the ship. Nehra's expression grew blank and she became unnaturally still. After a minute or so of silent immobilization, she uttered something that caused a bright flash.

Ulysses was blinded for the second time in less than an hour. He stumbled backwards and swore, rubbing his eyes. When his vision returned to him, he could see that Nehra's craft had vanished once again and that she was patiently waiting for his vision to return.

"You have got to warn me when you're going to do that," he said.

"Sorry," she said with a sheepish grin. Nehra walked over, embraced Ulysses, and kissed him in her semi-feral way. She paused afterward, still in his arms, and said, "I have to put this back on my head" she

wrapped the fabric over her head, covering the tops of her ears. "Also, while I can understand spoken words, the written characters of this world are still beyond me."

"All right, I guess I'll just have to read you the dinner menu."

"That's very kind of you." Her smile at Ulysses was broad.

"One thing I should warn you about before we get into town: public displays of affection are considered extremely rude. We can't kiss, hug, or even hold hands in public, okay? Are you ready?" he asked. Nehra responded affirmatively in her native tongue. "Then let's go."

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They walked into Siem Reap and made a beeline for the part of town that Ulysses remembered from his travels, which was popular with foreigners. He led Nehra to the Krong Lounge, a restaurant that took dollars the last time he'd dined there a few years prior.

The hostess greeted them and showed them to a table. With their menus in hand, Nehra muttered something unintelligible and Ulysses grinned at her to let her know he had no idea what she'd said. Her face drew up in a mow of false recrimination, and they both laughed.

A server brought them water and asked if they wanted anything else to drink. Ulysses ordered he and Nehra a Kingdom Max lager, and asked for more time with the menu. The server nodded with a smile and left to fill their drink order.

Ulysses began reading Nehra the menu. "Let's see here," he said, "we have Chha Kh'nhei, which is a spicy stir fry that usually comes with your choice of meat."

Nehra shook her head and pretended to continue reading her menu.

"Ah, right. You seem to prefer the vegetarian stuff. Ah! There's Mee Kola, which comes with fish sauce, but I'll ask if they can make you some without the sauce."

Their server returned after a moment with their beers. "I take your order?" She said.

"Yes, please. I have a question about your Mee Kola: can it be made without fish sauce?"

"Uh, yes," said the woman, somewhat puzzled by the question. "It take longer, though. That okay?"

"That's perfect. One order of Mee Kola, no fish sauce. I'd like the Chha Kh'nhei with eel, please."

The server nodded, collected their menus, and vanished into the back of the restaurant. When she was gone, Ulysses took a sip of his beer and looked at Nehra. She smiled at him, and lifted her matching drink. They toasted silently and drank. Nehra made a face that betrayed she wasn't sure about the flavor of lager.

"Nehra," said Ulysses, "when we're done here in town, I'd like to ask you why you've come here. Is that okay?" She nodded, her expression more serious than before. "It's just that...well, I need to know the details of why you're here and what you're up to, if we're going to keep doing whatever it is that we're doing. All right?" Again, Nehra nodded in agreement.

Eventually their food arrived, emitting steam and a delicious aroma. The waitress wished them "bon appetit." The pair dug in with gusto. They savored the food in silence until they were ready for the bill.

After settling up, Ulysses took Nehra on a brief tour of the parts of Siem Reap that he knew. After a few hours of walking the city, he asked her if she was ready to find lodging for the night, which she said yes to. Ulysses withdrew his remaining cash from his pocket and counted it. He only had thirty-seven dollars left, not enough for a hotel, but more than enough for a hostel. They made their way toward a place Ulysses had stayed the first time he had come to the city.

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Ulysses and Nehra were shown to a room, by an obsequious chain smoking middle-aged man. Ulysses surveyed the room and made sure the door was locked and the blinds drawn. Then he looked over at Nehra

and smiled. Nehra returned his smile and began removed her pale head-wrap. She tousled her hair a bit and scratched her head.

“So, what do you want to know?” She said, tilting her chin up and down in a stretch.

“Well, I guess I’ll start by asking you why you came here. You know, to Earth?”

“I am a fugitive. I came here to hide.”

“Who are you hiding from?”

“I am hiding from the rest of my people.”

“Why?”

“Because I can no longer live with them,” she said.

“Because?”

“Because of this,” she said holding up the head wrap.

“What, they don’t like your scarf? I don’t get it.”

“This isn’t really a scarf, Ulysses, though it does resemble one currently. Look,” she said holding up the fabric as it seemed to come alive in her hands.

“What the fuck?!” Ulysses shouted as he jumped to his feet.

“Shh,” Nehra said, “it’s okay, it’s dead.” As she spoke the scarf became a small ball in her hands, then a cube, then a cylinder. She smiled at him.

“What is that thing?”

“This,” she said holding it up as it became scarf-shaped again, “was to be my own personal ruler: a parasite that would bend my will to its own.”

“Wait, what?”

“For generations my people, called the notua have been subjugated by the hyssopshebolith. This is a hyssopshebolith corpse.”

“So you killed it?”

"Yes," she said, "but I don't know how. When a notua reaches a certain age, a parasite chooses her and inhabits her. The two are together for the rest of that notua's life. When she dies, the parasite detaches itself and seeks another host. When my time came, I was selected by this one and as it tried to attach itself to me it grew cold and stiff and died."

"And that's why you fled?"

Nehra nodded. "Yes, because I was certain they would kill me."

"How can they hurt you if they can't attach themselves to you without dying?"

"I don't know if that's actually the case for any of them other than this one. But it wouldn't matter even if that were true, because the hyssopshebolith would just have another subjugated notua kill me instead. They might weep openly while doing so, but the parasite would make sure that it was done."

"I see," said Ulysses, "but why would they kill you?"

"Because I was not suitable habitation and because it is the first time a notua has ever killed a hyssopshebolith. All of the hyssopshebolith likely see me as a threat to their existence."

He shook his head. "That is batshit crazy."

"What is?" Nehra said, reaching for his hand.

"Honey, all of it. Like I said earlier, this is a lot to take it in." He looked into her eyes. "So, in addition to being a space alien, you're also a fugitive."

Nehra nodded solemnly.

"Great." He flopped backwards onto the bed and let out a sigh.

"Ulysses? Is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing's wrong," he said, looking at the ceiling. "It's just that I've met this really awesome girl, who's sweet, adventurous, a knock out, and for some reason, she's been spending all her time around me. The only problem is she's a fugitive from another planet."

She looked away from him.

"I'm kidding, Nehra. The fact that you're an alien fugitive isn't really a problem for me," he said smiling and sitting up to put his arm around her. "But I meant all that other stuff."

She grinned at him and then was suddenly on top of him.

"How do you move so fast?"

"I don't really think about it. It just happens," Nehra said, shark-grin in place.

"You don't have anywhere you have to be for a little while, right?"

She shook her head.

"There is a god!"

"A what?"

"Never mind," Ulysses said with a wave.

They kissed with ferocity and fumbled out of their clothes.

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"Tell me this, Nehra: are they coming for you? Your people and their parasites?"

"Probably," she said, "the hyssopshebolith are very meticulous about eliminating threats to their existence and pursuing benefits to it."

"Do you think they're already here?"

She turned away on her side, wrapped in the sweat-soaked sheet. Ulysses adjusted to lay behind her, spooning Nehra and stroking her hair. She was still for several minutes.

"Yes," she said. "I saw them the other night."

"Where?"

"When we were looking at the stars." **UJ**