

# Magebane

By: Grant Graves

## I. Rediscovery

In the opening paragraph of his most famous short story, *'The Call of Cthulu'*, Howard Phillips Lovecraft wrote:

*"The most merciful thing in the world I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We drift on a placid island, amidst black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should journey far. The sciences, each straining in their own directions, have hitherto harmed us little. But the eventual piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad at the revelation, or flee from the deadly light, into the peace and safety of a new Dark Age."*

That time has come. Dr. "Jules" O'Brein pieced it together, dissociated knowledge that is, in a manner that altered the world literally overnight. In one of his many obscure memoirs, *'Natural Correlation of Energies and the State of Reality'*, O'Brein explains at length the ideology that changed the world.

*"Made ignorant by the veil of faulty logic, I had not noticed the similarities and patterns produced in chaos theory through the reactions of physical laws to natural stimulus. How genetics and the simple, but elusive 'eights' that haunt the silicon ideas of the machines that bless our modern world correlate to one another, and how all these things fit seamlessly together."*

*It was that night in my tent, while visiting Dr. Bashjin at his excavation in the barren Sahara wilderness, he presented to me a set of hieroglyphs printed in blood on ancient papyrus. It was the most significant find the camp had made. He was proud of it and figured the ancient cuneiform for fifth century BC.*

*He'd taught me, in my younger years, to read hieroglyphics and I had trouble discerning through the faint light and faded blood print, but then it hit me. They knew. They'd known, but since then it had been lost. It all came together for me, in searing logic, that night in the tent.*

*The Cosmos is a living globular of energy. Essences compose its personality and translate to us. Through our primal beings we share in the energy, consuming the signatures, it affecting us as we it, each personification of the other. Event and spatiality share a likeness with cause and effect that is much different than is obvious.*

*Many things uncovered, locked within our minds, now released. The fact that time is an instrument by man that the Cosmos cares little for. It does not measure in time, but rather event, and does not care to place them in chronological reference.*

*It is hard to put into words the understanding by which we exist. The ideas brought before me shatter reality into renewal and tatter sanity giving it new feel.*

*Cooperation of energy lends to one another, affecting the other through transmogrification. Thoughts and ideas span the planes. Our reactions feed the Cosmos. In return it feeds us back. It is a well-oiled machine of energy, infinite in its complexity. But as we are sentient, so is it, that is the energy; there is a God."*

Dr. O'Brien, in his piecing together of dissociated knowledge, was able to pull from the Cosmos something that had co-existed, as a tool for man, for eons gone by, but had since been forgotten, as man became more "civilized". He pulled from the nature of reality, the art of Flecting; that is to bend reality slightly. Magic as it was called in ancient times.

But as with all great discoveries or in this case, rediscovery the media butchered it, and pop culture assimilated it into its own serving the slabs to the masses.

"Back off bitch, before I immolate your ass," Incubus pointed at Slagfist, his index and middle finger extended forward, thumb back, and hand cocked sideways, as to emulate a gun. His fingers began to glow. Incubus was seventeen. A tall thick-built African-American man with freckled, light brown skin, a gold front tooth, and thick wild dreadlocks.

Slagfist raised his hands slowly and easily, chanting something under his breath in Chinese. The hermetic mage's hands began to glow like fiery embers.

"You sure you want to die up in here today?" Incubus asked, his fingers now glowing brightly in warning. Two others joined him dressed in hooded robes. "Urban Druids mess you up." Slagfist backed away slowly then disappeared behind a row of lockers.

"Punk bitch," Incubus turned to the others. "Yo, you get that formula for invisibility last night?" Incubus inquired with an urban drawl. "Nope," the thin Latino on the left replied. "Damn! What about levitate?" "Nope," the reply. "Damn! What'd you do last night bitch?" "I couldn't get on the net G, little sister surfing on Aristotle or something. Tired to get her off, but moms busted me in mouth for yelling at her. Little bitch lucky I don't bust a cap in her ass, or polymorph her into a frog or somethin'," came the explanation.

"True that Phade," Incubus stacked gang signs. "Yo, check it," the robed Latino was of medium build. Dark brown eyes and a crooked smile cloaked by a thin moustache. He known on the street as Phaderus, Phade by friends. He continued smiling sinisterly from beneath his hood, "you know that magazine rack down at the music store? Well, right next to Guitar Player was this month's issue of Pop-Magik. Came out yesterday. I lifted a copy. It's got a formula for armor in it." "Magicroft's Armor?" "Some new variant. Lets you change the color of the armor, even put symbols on it." "Damn," the reply.

"I meditated last night to focus my chi, entered the mode and Flecting it. Check it out." He shed his robe. Underneath it a pale green plate armor decorated with a large, ancient Gaelic rune on the chest that served as the gang symbol for the Urban Druids. "Skinned it last night. What do you think?" "Damn," the reply from the other two. "You got to teach me that Flect."

“Hey,” Incubus continued, “did you lift a copy of Shock Reality?” “Hell no!” came the reply. Phaderus was an advent reader of Pop-Magik. The two magazines vied for dominance of the pop mage niche. Each had its own devoted readers. “I got to get a copy,” Incubus clenched his teeth tight in exclaimed excitement, “They got a piece on manipulating the metallurgy signature. I want to do a temporary gat that shoots energy.”

“Big deal,” Phaderus replied, “Metallurgy, photosynthesis, and force signatures.” Phaderus was the genius of the clan, capable of flecting impressive feats. He was arguably one of the best, but was getting bored. The only true challenge left for him was the time signature. “Delve metallurgy, link it to weaponsmithing, then...” Incubus interrupted, “One thing genius, I don’t know how to find the metallurgy signature.”

The bell rang for first period. “Where’s Hermes?” the Latino asked. “Probably still in bed, but I got five bucks that says he beats the bell,” Incubus replied. Nobody cared to take the bet. They filed into the school.

In the years that followed the re-discovery of magic, affectionately dubbed Flecting by the media, new philosophies and religions erupted overnight. The streets had created its own use for it. For the most part, the masses didn’t care to stir reality’s flexible laws, but when pop culture explored it through fashion and music it became the newest fad.

Liberal teachings of an interpersonal sensitive society made it easier for the youth to acquire the sensitivities involved with Flecting to the point that simplified verbal and somatic gestures were all that were needed for the newest generation to bend reality beyond its intended stress point. Some of the more eclectic didn’t require the gestures, only mere concentration to flect.

Just as the complexities of computers had baffled the previous generation, creating a gap between them and their progeny so did Flecting today.

Zealots called it witchcraft or devil worship. But in actuality, it was nothing more than concentrating on the energies found commonplace in the universe, then bending them to the will of the wielder. For example, there are many energy signatures that exist for the creation of things. The easiest to tap, however, is the one for photosynthesis.

People have created clothes, food, and even weapons with it. The only problem is, no one has mastered the signature to the point of being able to make the object permanent. The longest recorded photosynthetic tap was used to create a pencil that remained materialized for three days.

Phaderus had achieved this and was obsessed with creating something, anything that would be permanent. He knew the secret lay somewhere in time and how the Cosmos viewed time. But somehow, something in the corner of his mind told him that nothing was really permanent.

Some new age reality hackers have even managed to materialize homework using the photosynthesis signature melded with the free-floating facets of logic of the given subject, only to be caught the

next day when the signature faded, reverting to its original form.

## II. The Challenge

“Punk ass bitch. Diss me out in public. Threatened to immolate my ass right there in front of school,” Slagfist confessed to Priest, Grimslut’s leader.

Priest sat at an old wooden desk. A thin Caucasian with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Tendrils of missed hair hung down over his long face. Cold blue eyes stared into Slagfist’s soul.

Grimslut were new age street followers of Hecate. To them she was a symbol of fertility and death. They considered her a decadent jenni, thus dubbing themselves Grimslut in her name. She was their religion and they prayed to her in masses nightly. On the equinox and solstice they often sacrificed rival gang members to her in return for blessings.

At this time, their greatest rivals, of the school’s dozen pop-mage gangs, were the Urban Druids. Both gangs were small. Grimslut had six members, the Urban Druids only five. It was always more dangerous to threaten a member of a smaller gang, as the disrespect spread instantly through the ranks, spurring immediate retribution.

The nights were just as deadly as they were a generation before, but only now instead of lead bullets, they used ethereal ones.

“Threatened to immolate you, huh?” Priest confirmed tugging at his goatee, “That’s alright. We’ll get them after school. Ryan,” he commanded, “Go send an invite. If they want to tangle, we’ll settle this shit today.”

After first period, the Grimslut known as Ryan found Hermes in the hall. Hermes was turning toward a stairwell to the ground floor when he felt the presence of someone beckoning him. He halted.

Ryan approached, decked out in runic tattoos. T-shirt, denim jeans, and combat boots his signature black. Lanky and strutting he stared dead on through hollow, sunken eyes at Hermes, a clean-cut athletic boy. Ryan’s façade was dreadful. He looked diseased, and probably was. His personal study in flecting focused on a fascination with death. Ryan was a necromancer. These gothic rejects were the bane of the pop magic industry. They were usually angry and misunderstood youths, bent on nihilism and anarchy.

“What’s up maggot feast?” Ryan inquired with bizarre enthusiasm accented with a psychotic grin. A skinny finger came up and stroked Hermes’ face. He smacked it away. Hermes stared angrily into the hollow eyes. They may have at one time been blue, but now were a dull gray. Messing with the wrong signatures always had ramifications.

“Such pretty healthy skin Hermes. I wonder what it’ll look like dried out and stretched across my wall?” Ryan leaned against an old, institutional green radiator. “You won’t share your flects for speed, since

it's your namesake, but I shall know it soon, when I sear it from your soulless corpse."

"Name the place," Hermes snapped back now up in Ryan's face, backing him against the wall. A sign on the wall above him read, 'The use of flecting is prohibited on campus grounds.' "This afternoon, in the lot behind the school," Ryan replied, slipping out and around Hermes. Hermes watched as he walked away. "Ryan?" Ryan stopped. Hermes threw some punches shadowboxing, "Ever been hit twelve times in a second?" he asked boosting the speed of his punches until his arms were nothing more than two blurs.

Ryan smirked grimly, then faded into wraith form, a barely corporeal apparition, walking through those who would not move out of his way. Those he came in contact with jerked with a sudden chill.

Hermes watched until he was sure Ryan was gone. If there was any person in the school he feared, it was the tall, lanky sophomore. But he hid the fear well, at least he thought.

He went on to class, looking for his partners along the way. He saw Grendel and Phaderus. "What's up?" Phaderus asked. "Run in with Ryan. They want to fight this afternoon, after school, in the lot." "Great," Phaderus replied, "we'll be there. Hey, we're going to get high. Want to come?" "Nah, got to be in physics today. I need to learn some new signatures," the reply.

### III. Daisy Premise Nightmare

Phaderus and Grendel sat on a concrete flowerbed in between two rows of lockers outside near the lunch area. Grendel lurched over, tying a hiking boot. The hulk was an expert in animal affinity, his personal niche in the pop mage culture. He'd delved felines, mastering their affinities last summer while school was out. He could summon the claws of great cats, grow fur and fangs, heighten his senses of hearing and sight, and was even capable of invoking the silent walk as well as feats of cat-like agility.

He was only fifteen. He'd just started birds and was hoping to learn the secret of flight before midterms. He was a talented reality hacker, for a six-foot-three brute.

Everybody had a niche they devoted themselves to, everyone but Phaderus. Phaderus was a true genius from the wrong side of the tracks. Half the flects he knew, he'd created himself, or altered someone else's. He could delve into the deepest layers of the fabric of reality, and pull from it whatever he desired.

"You know, those Grimsluts," he'd started a rant. He always started a rant with 'You know'. "They're mooks. They worship this Hecate like she was some goddess or something. Don't they realize that they're merely worshipping an energy signature? It's not even sentient. Well, at least fully sentient. It's probably just the signature for the essence of anger, or dumbassness," he giggled. So did Grendel. He continued, "It probably merely shares a loose connection with the fate signature,

and I guess in some way smiles on them, but in no way is it fully sentient. They're so ancient Greece with that shit."

"How do you know?" Grendel inquired. "Cause man, only the true sentience is the Cosmos." "We're sentient," the reply. "Well, not like that," Phaderus reiterated. "Maybe she isn't either; just a level above us." "Shut up!" Phaderus demanded realizing his faulty premise, "Who gives a shit anyway? I thought we were getting high." Grendel shrugged and relaxed, closing his eyes. Phaderus followed suit.

Each used a different incantation for getting high, depending on the flavor of euphoria. "Man, I haven't mastered this shit yet," Phaderus confessed, "so it takes me a couple hours to come down." One hand up, the other down, his pinkies and thumbs pointed outward. He touched them together, pinky to thumb. Said something in Gaelic and pulled them away from one another horizontally, flipping their positions. He touched his left pinky and thumb together. They began to glow with a pale green hue. He inhaled the luminescence and reality faded away. He could see the signatures clearly, bleeding from the walls. Light took on a new likeness as joyous vertigo overwhelmed him. "What are you on?" Grendel asked, "Daisy Premise," the reply. "And you?" "Tokyo Light Show Renewal." "I hate that one."

"Mister Stephenson!" a voice startled them. They jumped in unison. It was Mr. Swansbeck, Phaderus' Calculus teacher. The frail mid-fifties man stood over them staring through thin, gold-framed glasses. Phaderus' body was growing numb. Mr. Swansbeck's tie was ruining his favorite part of the Daisy Premise high. "Are you on something?" His shrill voice, cutting through infinity, really ruining the buzz.

"Reality," come the reply. "Is that one of your new devil worshipping tricks? I think you two better come with me." He motioned with his finger. Grendel rose and lunged. Large claws rested millimeters from Swansbeck's throat. He moved his face toward Swansbeck's. It turned into that of a tiger. He licked Swansbeck's nose with a barbed tongue, skinning it. The man cupped his hand over his nose and backed away quickly. "What's the matter Swansbeck, you like cats don't you?" came a gravelly inhuman voice, then a smile flashing fangs. Swansbeck disappeared into the building, hand still over his nose. Phaderus and Grendel laughed.

"Hey, I'm going to go get some food. It's almost lunchtime." "Cool," the reply, "catch you fourth period." Grendel went through a different set of doors, toward the cafeteria.

Phaderus relaxed there, enjoying the buzz. Then he felt a cold tap on his shoulder. A chill spread quickly over his body and he was paralyzed. "Phaderus," came a sinister voice from behind. A hand grabbed his throat pulling him backward over the concrete flowerbed. It was Ryan. Ryan slammed him against the lockers. "You're the ace in the hole for the Urban Druids. So, we can't have you fighting this afternoon, now can we." Phaderus was frozen, partly from paralysis, partly from fear. He couldn't get anything off without the ability to

move or speak, not to mention the inability to concentrate due to Daisy Premise.

"I want you to meet some friends of mine," Ryan continued. "I borrowed them from the old section of school. The biology department." Three skeletons, still baring the hooks in their heads where they'd hung for years on rollaway racks rounded the lockers and approached.

A single tear rolled down Phaderus' face, part fear, and part frustration, knowing what was imminent at the mercy of the necromancer. Ryan licked the tear away, "Now, now. You know that will do no good." He smiled evilly and turned to the skeletons, "Kill him," he commanded and walked away.

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She sat at a table, with three other students, in her biology class. She was a pretty, well-kept girl, with a thin, athletic figure. She may have been prettier but she kept her face concealed behind some cheap, dime store, pop-magic flect that made her appear as the frowning face of tragedy, with the tear drop coming out the wrong eye.

The Lady Jester they called her and she was Incubus' girl. She'd gotten her namesake from Phaderus. On her last birthday, he'd gotten her a jester's cap and taught her how to flect the face she wanted.

Her body was adorned with ancient Gaelic runes, symbols of the Urban Druids. The Gaelic word for woman half flashing from under the edge of her black T-shirt. The tattoos weren't real, more illusions, just as her face.

She'd always had trouble settling in with new people. She was an outcast, previously with a mild stutter. The Urban Druids were her family and friends now, but still her flects were solely built around the confused girl that wanted to fit in. Besides the face and tattoos, there was Karmic Glamour, a flect that altered her aura, making others like her. That was basically the sum of her abilities, save the Gat flect Phaderus had taught her for protection.

Then he walked in, Ryan. "You're late Mr. Edmonds," Coach Lebowski scolded, halting his lecture on Gregor. "Sorry teach, business," he took a seat next to Lady Jester. Coach Lebowski continued.

He sat there a minute staring at her as she listened to the lecture. She tried to ignore him, but couldn't, and he knew it. "Why don't you just quit it Christine?" he finally whispered. She ignored him. "You know what's going to happen this afternoon." Still she ignored him.

They'd lived two blocks from each other their whole lives and were playmates when they were kids. He was the first boy she'd kissed. That was a long time ago, but he'd never gotten over it, and somehow thought it was his duty to warn her.

"You know," he continued, "I won't hurt you. I could never lay a hand on you, however..." A bony hand suddenly rested on her shoulder. She jumped looking behind her. It was the class's skeleton.

"Mr. Edmonds," Coach Lebowski interrupted, "is there a problem?" "No sir," the reply, the skeleton's hand fell limp, "just missed that last part there." "I said, 'that most of Gregor's botanical experiments were done at the monastery.'" Lebowski continued.

Still she ignored Ryan. Maybe he was right she thought to herself. She'd put up with a lot of stuff out of Incubus. She was his faithful toy and he really didn't treat her like she deserved. Phaderus' smile invaded. But the attention was good, even though it required occasional group sex.

She'd endured a lot, but was she ready for this? Could she place her life on the line for him? She really didn't know any other flects, save the few Phaderus taught her. Not anything like these guys knew. And this afternoon, they'd dazzle in deadly competition of ethereal wonder. The sights would be beautiful, and several would die.

His smile never left her mind. He was the only one of the guys that always greeted her with a smile. He'd taught her everything she knew about flecting, even how to protect herself.

He was larger than life to her, with his blazing intellect, stunning charm, and that handsome, boyish smile garnished with a thin moustache. But it could never be. When Incubus was finished with her, that would be that and she'd lose contact with the rest of the guys.

She turned, staring into hollow, gray eyes. "Phaderus," she said, "he'll kick your ass and you know it." She knew that the two gang's aces would square off against each other this afternoon. She knew that Phaderus could beat Ryan easily, and she knew he knew it also. "Maybe," the reply, behind the most evil smile she'd ever witnessed in her life. She knew he was hiding something. She didn't need a flect for that. "Maybe he could've," Ryan added.

Lady Jester jumped from her seat and took off out the door, leaving her things. "Miss Andrews," Coach Lebowski prompted, "where are you going? Miss Andrews?" She was already gone.

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The mindless, bone animates approached Phaderus slowly. Then they jumped him. Wired flange fists tore into him, as he stood there helpless, each blow scraping and cutting. He fell to the ground, knocked down from the assault. They kicked and punched mercilessly, with one goal, to fulfill their master's order to kill him.

Pain came on in mild flashes. Luckily Daisy Premise was in full swing and he was numb. Only the heaviest of blows found their ways through the euphoria. But somewhere in his mind the trauma was building and he would surely be beat to death soon. His mind was clear enough for him to realize that death would come as either bleeding to death, or he'd have to wait until the Daisy Premise wore off and the build up of pain would lash him so severely that his brain would shut his system down.

It appeared as though that were already happening, Daisy Premise or not. He could feel

consciousness slip away as his body bobbed helplessly from the blows of Ryan's animates. He saw a heavy, white and orange, clawed hand from somewhere beyond the bone. Then there was darkness.

## IV. Retribution

"Phaderus," he heard his name called. It faded. "Phade," it bade again, sternly. Something tugged at him. The numbness of Daisy Premise had faded, and he hurt like hell. The more it tugged, the more he hurt. "Phaderus," said a feminine voice that rang with fear and concern.

A blast of blurred light filled his vision as pain overwhelmed him. The clearer his vision, the more intense the pain. Then she faded in, the frowning mask of tragedy, a golden ball from her hat covering the wrong-sided teardrop. "Lady Jester," he managed faintly.

He could see beyond the illusion of the mask and knew she was looking at him the same way he was at her. What he hadn't seen was the tears of fear she silently wept behind the illusion. "Oh, Phaderus, you're alive," she put a small, soft hand on his chest. He started to reach for her; then he noticed them, the thick, wild dreadlocks.

"Damn Phade, they messed you up," Incubus said, a gold tooth grin and dark shades coming into picture, distorting the beauty of Lady Jester. Phaderus pushed her hand away, playing off the brief moment of contact as it burned its way into his memory. He tried to get up but the pain kept him down. "Ryan," he said. "Yeah," Incubus looked around at the area strewn with shattered bone and three heaps of bent wire. "Grendel saved your ass." Grendel's head came into view from above. "Lucky for you," he said, "I left my wallet at home and came back out here to bum a couple bucks off of you."

Phaderus grunted as they helped him up. "So what now?" Hermes asked. Phaderus hadn't noticed him standing there. "I'll tell you what now," Incubus' voice grew cold, "They took a shot at our ace, now we take a shot at theirs." "When?" Hermes asked. "Break," the reply, "he always spends breaks by himself. We'll get his ass then. Phaderus, you got any ideas?" Plans were always left to Phaderus.

They skipped fifth period, waiting for the second break between fifth and sixth, to make their preparations. "Alright," Phaderus said, "This is how it's going to go down. Ryan has Physics last period. He'll be coming from English. The other Grimsluts are on the other side of the school last period, so he'll be alone. He should be over there," he pointed toward an awning-covered walkway between two entrances of separate campus buildings. "That's where he hangs out on break between classes."

"So what's the plan?" Incubus asked. "We're going to smoke his ass using Gat," the reply. "That's a nice idea, appealing and all, but won't it make too much noise?" Incubus inquired. "Normally, yes," Phaderus

smiled, "but we're going to silence it." "How?" everyone asked in unison. "We're going to enter the Mode and patch it with the silence signature."

When pop-mages wanted to learn a new flect, or alter an existing one, they have to enter the Mode, the crossover construct between the raw signatures of reality and the final product we view through the Mask.

Phaderus and Incubus were to be the gunmen in the hit. They sat down to the side of the hidden walkway, behind a row of lockers. Lady Jester lit a cigarette and walked over toward a trashcan to act as lookout. Hermes took one end of the lockers, Grendel the other.

The two gunmen sat relaxing Indian-style. Phaderus reached out toward Incubus. They clasped hands and drifted into the Mode. The brick walls, the concrete on which they sat, even the other on which they looked faded, seemingly replaced by flows of energy that represented each. Energy flittered and swirled off every object, barely retaining its corporeal form. Even the rays of sunshine had energy licking off their surfaces.

Phaderus reached deeper. He felt a tug. Instantly he started seeing the patterns. Mathematics and form flowed from everything. Here he would begin. He waved his hand and a field of energy traced behind it, slowly fading. He reached slightly out of view to his left. With his peripheral vision he could see that his hand stretched into infinity. Yet before him he could see where it sat. He searched for a signature.

A flash invaded his thoughts, ballistics. He delved into it. The physics of parabolas, impact angles, and muzzle velocity becoming clear. He unraveled it, pulled it aside and sat it to the right.

He emerged from the idea and searched for patterns of logic. He needed something, 'Energy,' he realized. He flowed with physics toward thermodynamics, pulling ethereal from other quasi-substances, he sat it beside ballistics. The signature lines wove to and from then intertwined with one another, 'Play nice,' he told them.

He searched further, he knew he'd found senses when his body was overwhelmed sensation. He pulled apart hearing and reached for the other end. He went deaf. 'Exactly what I needed,' he thought to himself.

He absorbed the ideologies of nega-sensation, and pulled apart the fundamentals of statistics. As he ripped into it, he could see what he needed to complete the flect. He pulled it. Separating idea and fact, he stretched probability, silence, thermodynamics, and ballistics, recombining them, reshaping the philosophies and functions of reality. All facets of the flect intertwined seamlessly.

He exploded from the Mode, then fed instructions to Incubus on how to make the flect. Incubus had troubles finding the probability signature Phaderus used, but with precise directions eventually found it. Then Incubus erupted from the Mode with a jolt.

"You think it works?" he asked Phaderus. Phaderus pointed at the lockers, his index and middle finger extended forward, thumb back, hand cocked sideways, as to emulate a gun. His fingers began to glow.

He looked at Incubus, then released the charge of ethereal energy. It slammed into a locker, melting the thin metal, leaving a two-inch smoking hole. Save a mild pop when it struck the locker, it made no sound. "Yeah, I'd say we've got it." Phaderus had never failed a flect.

They didn't have much time left before break, Phaderus reentered the mode to teach Incubus how to build the flect for Ignore, one that would cause people not to look at them during the crime. If someone in the area did look in that direction, the person's mind would wander and her brain would never register what she'd seen.

Three minutes before break, Incubus finally asked him, "Hey, can they trace us?" "No," Phaderus replied, dispelling the most ignorant rumor he'd ever heard. He hated the trace myth. It was propaganda designed to keep people who used flects honest. "Are you sure?" Incubus needed reassurance.

"Yes, they can't trace it to us. It doesn't work like that. For example, anger is a natural essence. It's signature lays somewhere out there intertwined with thousands of others forming reality. There is one signature for it. It doesn't fragment itself and share itself with our sentience, but we are linked to it. We go to it, not the other way around. That is how we are all linked together," Phaderus explained. He continued, "Police can trace what reality signatures are used in a crime, but since we share a common link with most of them, they have no way of knowing who accessed the signature. Uncovering us will take good old-fashioned detective work."

"They know we're at war with Grimslut," Grendel added. "Yeah," Phaderus replied, "so are a half a dozen other gangs." "What about this afternoon?" he reasoned. "What about it?" Phaderus replied, "You can't see the lot from the school. Nobody lives near it. Those who might be passing through know to keep their mouths shut."

Ryan walked out the double doors onto the awning-covered walkway. The Urban Druids watched him from a distance. He didn't notice them. He touched a flower in one of the brick flowerbeds. Instantly it wilted, then dried up, turning brown. He smiled. Phaderus couldn't remember if he'd ever seen him smile before. If he had, he'd have to think back to grade school. A time before click association became important.

There it was. He remembered hanging out with Ryan for a while in fifth grade. The blare of warm, solar innocence and gentle breeze of infinite possibility beat down on broken asphalt as they traded video games and collectible cards. The familiar excitement of waiting to get home to try out the newest game title or introduce a new card to the rest of the collection washed over him. A similar breeze blew now. It had brought back the memory, but not those times. They were far away now, in an era before girls, before status. Ryan's smile was straight and back then healthy. And now he would die.

The bell rang. Students burst out the doors with no teachers in sight. Some kept moving while others sat or stood and talked. Phaderus and Incubus waded through the static trying not to look suspicious.

When they reached the last row of lockers, Phaderus looked at Incubus. "Are you ready?" Incubus

tried to read the expression on Phaderus' face, looking for a way out, but there was neither.

"Fifteen seconds on the Ignore flect. That's as long as I can hold it," Phaderus cautioned. Incubus had never killed anyone before, only beat people up. He thought his earlier inquiries on the cops finding out would disrupt any plans, but Phaderus had all the answers. Incubus was the leader, and he had to be crazier than all the rest. "Hey," he finally said. "What?" Phaderus snapped fixing to start the Ignore flect. "Are you sure this will work?" "Incubus, no one will be any the wiser," he said flatly, in a tone that let Incubus know he was tired of reassuring him rather than just reassuring him again.

"Hey," Phaderus said, "Don't be scared man. It'll be all right. Now, we got to do this before he moves on." "Shit, scared?" Incubus paused, breaking eye contact and looking away. "Man, I ain't no bitch," he tried to reassure him. He didn't. Phaderus smirked. "Ready, then?" he asked. "Yeah, bitch. I'm ready," the reply.

They rounded the last set of lockers. Ryan stood just beyond the corner of the building, just beyond most peoples' views. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Phaderus spoke something in Gaelic, then raised his hand level with his head, palm open and fingers together. It was the Ignore flect.

Ryan noticed them about three seconds to late. Small spheres of ethereal slammed into him at nearly four hundred feet per second, because of their soft nega-material, the spheres shattered on impact rather than blasting their ways through his body.

They reached deeply, melting through flesh and exploding muscle in chunks. Charred gore glowing in faint green littered the concrete. Ryan collapsed six smoking holes in his chest of varying depths, one in the right shoulder, and two in the right leg.

## V. Magebane

Phaderus worked with the others the rest of the afternoon in an old building in the abandoned lot near the school. They all expected police sirens at any minute, but none. "So where are the cops?" Incubus asked pacing. "Got me," the reply. Incubus paced more. "You really should be getting ready for the fight," Phaderus suggested.

Grendel sat in the corner concentrating. "Here they come," he said calmly. "The cops?" asked Lady Jester. "No," the reply, "Grimslut." They all looked at him. "I can smell them," he added.

They looked out the window. The whole gang emerged from a thin tree line and started across the rough asphalt toward the building. Slagfist stood next to Priest. Another of the Grimsluts, Venger, a tall thick boy, about the size of Grendel carried Ryan's body, the others in the background. Akumakaze, a thin Japanese boy that specialized in flect heightened martial arts and Brash, a slipstream psycho-punk with little talent and patience who constantly adorned bizarre hair-dos and even stranger clothing.

The Urban Druids filed out of the building, donning their hooded robes. They spread out astern before Grimslut. Grimslut stopped short, still quite a way off.

“Which of you did this to our brother?” asked Priest, his blue eyes full of rage. The wind blew the loose strands of his ponytail wildly. “Hecate weeps and is angered at her loss.” Phaderus stepped forward. “You dumbasses. Don’t you get it? There is no Hecate. You’re worshiping a natural signature of reality, not a sentience. Don’t you understand that the...” “Silence!” Priest demanded. “Which of you are responsible for the death of our brother?” he asked again. “You marked our ace, so we marked yours,” Incubus replied.

Grimslut spread out astern to match the Urban Druids. One at a time, each of them took turns taking a step forward and performed a ceremonial kata to initiate the fight. The Urban Druids gathered round in a group. “Why don’t we just go ahead and kick the shit out of these guys?” Grendel asked. “No. This is good,” Phaderus said, looking in their direction, “they’re just showing us the tricks to look out for.”

Akumakaze was up first. He threw kicks and punches that were surrounded by light blue flames. Then came Venger. A swirl of the light blue anime-like flames spun around his body, then heaved in a wave over his head crashing down to create a translucent, ethereal full body armor that donned clawed hands. “He’s been practicing,” Phaderus said. “Hermes, you take Akumakaze. Grendel, you’ve got Venger,” Incubus said. “Of course, I’ll take Priest and Phaderus...” Phaderus interrupted, “I’ve got my own plans, but you guys will have to cover for me. Give me two minutes and watch their katas. Then stall a little longer if you have too.” “Why?” asked Incubus, “What have you got in mind?” “A new flect I’ve been working on. I call it Magebane.” “What’s it do?” Incubus sounded interested. “Shuts down their powers, only I’m going to try to splice the time signature in to make it permanent,” the reply. “Sounds good, but you’ve been working with time for a year now and ain’t got it to do shit. I don’t think now is the time to be messing with it,” Incubus retorted. “Trust me,” Phaderus smiled behind the thin moustache, “I’ve got it under control. Just cover for me.”

They huddled in front of Phaderus as he entered the Mode. He delved heavily into the fundamentals of reality and their relations to physics. He poured passed signatures and scanned others quickly gathering what he’d need for the flect.

It was Slagfist’s turn. He took a step forward and started a bizarre kata that outdid the others’. Flames of red came on, covering his hands. He blew flames, from his mouth, up into the air. He pulled his hands level, arms outstretched, palms toward the sky. He pulled his arms forward and laced his fingers tight. Grendel saw a smile from behind the translucent flames.

“Man, what’s up with all these fire tricks. I thought he was a hermetic. Shouldn’t he be boiling potions, making LSD or something?” Grendel asked Incubus.

Incubus glanced at Grendel from behind dark shades, then back to Slagfist, “Well Grendel, why don’t you go tell him you’re worried he’s hurting his rep?”

Slagfist pounded the ground and it quaked. The asphalt near him started to melt. A giant hand of ethereal flame burst from the ground, then another near it. Finally, something crawled from the center of the Earth, melting the asphalt.

It was a being, completely composed of hellish fire towering nearly twenty feet tall, a fire elemental. The heat was immense. Everyone backed away from it. Slagfist pointed toward the Urban Druids. The creature turned toward them. Then back to Slagfist. Then it incinerated every member of Grimslut before they could even gasp, leaving less than ash of all of them.

Then it turned toward the Urban Druids moving slowly. Simultaneously, they all shook Phaderus. “Phaderus, wake up!” They screamed their voices barely audible under the roar of the flames. “Wake up!” Incubus got in Phaderus’ face. Their noses touched. “Phaderus! Wake the fuck up!” he pled, his voice desperate and shaky with fear. His sunglasses started to melt.

Time, he saw it there and felt its idea. Cycles of truth and function, and birth and death became clearer as he played with it.

“I’ve felt you before, here in the Mode,” he talked to something out there in infinity. “I’ve never said anything to you though. Are you what we worship, what we perceive as God? Are you God? If you are who I think you are, if you really are real, I need you to help me. Help me to put together that which I have not found before. Give me the piece of time I need to save us from our enemies.”

He presented time, then saw something. He tilted his head at an angle and peered. A different premise blasted its way into his mind. The more he thought about it the quicker it faded, so he left it alone, and went to work. He focused on the other, and it came together seamlessly. He’d done it. He’d mastered the time signature. He looked up to say thanks and saw, somewhere closer to corporeal logic, between the strings for physics and concept, enormous waves of heat much greater than the sun. “What the hell?” he asked and burst from the Mode back into the tangible.

A pulse of energy erupted from his pores, disfiguring reality as the ripple washed over everything. Everyone near Phaderus was slammed to the ground, writhing in pain. As the ripples passed through them, their flects faded and the fire elemental dispersed.

They lay there a moment in silence. Phaderus sat up first. “I did it. I mastered the time signature.” “Al right,” replied Incubus trying not to move.

Lady Jester took on her normal persona. She was much more beautiful than the others remembered. “Lady Jester,” Phaderus looked at her the same way as he had when she comforted him after Ryan’s attack. “Your flect... the mask...” he was at a loss for words. She gave him the same look, but this time was unable to hide it. “You saved us Phade,” she hugged him and smiled.

Grendel and Hermes tried to help Incubus up. He shooed them away. They collapsed drained. "Damn, I'm tired," Phaderus said. "Phade, walk her home." Incubus requested, "I think I'm going to just lay here for a couple of days." Grendel and Hermes didn't move either.

Phaderus walked her home. They stopped behind a grocery store to rest. Their legs hang off a tall concrete wall. He tried to create a rose for her. But nothing happened. "We lost it, didn't we?" she finally asked. "I guess so." "Forever?" she asked. "I don't know," the reply. She reached over and kissed him. He kissed her back then he turned his head uneasy with the whole situation. "Thanks," she said. "For what?" he asked.

"Saving me," she leaned her shoulder into his. "I was saving me too." "That's not what I meant," she wasn't referring to him saving everyone from the fire elemental, but rather from the pop-magic culture. She knew that without the flects, the gang would fall apart, and wouldn't have to run with the other gangs anymore. "I know," he said.

He was tired of the niche also, and had been for a while. The time signature was the only thing that kept him interested. But now he had that too.

She jumped off the wall, her beautiful hair blowing in the afternoon wind. The feeling washed over him again. That familiar excitement that Ryan's smile prompted earlier. He shivered from nerves, even though it was warm out. She started on her way.

"Lady Jester," he called to her. She turned. The way the light hit her brought on the wind a renewed innocence. He had his arms locked supporting his body as he slumped. He shivered more, now noticeable as his arms almost gave away. "Christine," she corrected, "Call me Christine."

"Can I call you later tonight?" he asked. "Yeah," she bit at her lip as she smiled, "I'd like that." She locked her fingers behind her back and stretched them, turned and started away.

"Christine," he said, jumping off the wall. "Yeah?" she spun to meet his lips. He kissed her. She kissed him back.

*This is it, the short story that started the Science Fiction sub-genre known as Cyberpunk. Burning Chrome is a classic work of short science fiction and one of Gibson's masterpieces. This story is required reading for anyone remotely interested in theoretical sciences, technology, or science fiction. If you have ever played games such as Shadowrun, read this story. This is the first glimpse of the Matrix.*

*This story coined the phrase "cyberspace". It is also famous for the vasopressin reference, in which the Alzheimer's "wonder-drug" is used for recreational purposes. This story is arguably one of the best science fiction stories ever written.*

*Personally, Gibson has been my number one inspiration ever since I first picked up Neuromancer. You'll see some of his unique grammatical mechanics in my works.*

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### Burning Chrome

By: William Gibson

It was hot, the night we burned Chrome. Out in the malls and plazas, moths were battling themselves to death against the neon, but in Bobby's loft the only light came from a monitor screen and the green and red LEDs on the face of the matrix simulator. I knew every chip in Bobby's simulator by heart; it looked like your workaday Ono-Sendai VII. the "Cyberspace Seven," but I'd rebuilt it so many times that you'd have had a hard time finding a square millimeter of factory circuitry in all that silicon.

We waited side by side in front of the simulator console, watching the time display in the screen's lower left corner.

"Go for it," I said, when it was time, but Bobby was already there, leaning forward to drive the Russian program into its slot with the heel of his hand. He did it with the tight grace of a kid slamming change into an arcade game, sure of winning and ready to pull down a string of free games.

A silver tide of phosphenes boiled across my field of vision as the matrix began to unfold in my head, a 3-D chessboard, infinite and perfectly transparent. The Russian program seemed to lurch as we entered the grid.

If anyone else had been jacked into that part of the matrix, he might have seen a surf of flickering shadow roll out of the little yellow pyramid that represented our computer. The program was a mimetic weapon, designed to absorb local color and present itself as a crash priority override in whatever context it encountered.

"Congratulations," I heard Bobby say. "We just became an Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority inspection probe. . . ." That meant we were clearing fiber-optic lines with the cybernetic equivalent of a fire siren, but in the simulation matrix we seemed to rush straight for Chrome's database. I couldn't see it yet, but I already knew those walls were waiting. Walls of shadow, walls of ice.

Chrome: her pretty child face smooth as steel, with eyes that would have been at home on the bottom of some deep Atlantic trench, cold gray eyes that lived under terrible pressure. They s-~~i~~d she cooked her own cancers for people who crossed her, rococo custom variations that took years to kill you. They said a lot of things about Chrome, none of them at all reassuring.

So I blotted her out with a picture of Rikki. Rikki kneeling in a shaft of dusty sunlight that slanted into the loft through a grid of steel and glass: her faded camouflage fatigues, her translucent rose sandals, the good line of her bare back as she rummaged through a nylon gear bag. She looks up, and a half-blond curl falls to tickle her nose. Smiling, buttoning an old shirt of Bobby's, frayed khaki cotton drawn across her breasts.

She smiles.

"Son of a bitch," said Bobby, "we just told Chrome we're an IRS audit and three Supreme Court subpoenas. ... Hang on to your ass, Jack." So long, Rikki. Maybe now I see you never. And dark, so dark, in the halls of Chromes' ice.

Bobby was a cowboy, and ice was the nature of his game, ice from ICE, Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics. The matrix is an abstract representation of the relationships between data systems. Legitimate programmers jack into their employers' sector of the matrix and find themselves surrounded by bright geometries representing the corporate data.

Towers and fields of it ranged in the colorless non-space of the simulation matrix, the electronic consensus-hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data. Legitimate programmers never see the walls of ice they work behind, the walls of shadow that screen their operations from others, from industrial-espionage artists and hustlers like Bobby Quine.

Bobby was a cowboy. Bobby was a cracksman, a burglar, casing mankind's extended electronic nervous system, rustling data and credit in the crowded matrix, monochrome non-space where the only stars are dense concentrations of information, and high above it all burn corporate galaxies and the cold spiral arms of military systems.

Bobby was another one of those young-old faces you see drinking in the Gentleman Loser, the chic bar for computer cowboys, rustlers, cybernetic second-story men. We were partners.

Bobby Quine and Automatic Jack. Bobby's the thin, pale dude with the dark glasses, and Jack's the mean-looking guy with the myoelectric arm. Bobby's software and Jack's hard; Bobby punches console and Jack runs down all the little things that can give you an edge. Or, anyway, that's what the scene watchers in the Gentleman Loser would've told you, before Bobby decided to burn Chrome. But they also might've told you that Bobby was losing his edge, slowing down. He was twenty-eight, Bobby, and that's old for a console cowboy.

Both of us were good at what we did, but somehow that one big score just wouldn't come down for us. I knew where to go for the right gear, and Bobby had all his licks down pat. He'd sit back with a white terry sweatband across his forehead and whip moves on those keyboards faster than you could follow, punching his way through some of the fanciest ice in the business, but that was when something happened that managed to get him totally wired, and that didn't happen often. Not highly motivated, Bobby, and I was the kind of guy who's happy to have the rent covered and a clean shirt to wear.

But Bobby had this thing for girls, like they were his private tarot or something, the way he'd get himself moving. We never talked about it, but when it started to look like he was losing his touch that summer, he started to spend more time in the Gentleman Loser. He'd sit at a table by the open doors and watch the crowd slide by, nights when the bugs were at the neon and the air smelled of perfume and fast food. You could see his sunglasses scanning those faces as they passed, and he must have decided that Rikki's was the one he was waiting for, the wild card and the luck changer. The new one.

I went to New York to check out the market, to see what was available in hot software. The Finn's place has a defective hologram in the window, METRO HOLOGRAFIX, over a display of dead flies wearing fur coats of gray dust. The scrap's waist high, inside, drifts of it rising to meet walls that are barely visible behind nameless junk, behind sagging pressboard shelves stacked with old skin magazines and yellow-spined years of National Geographic.

"You need a gun," said the Finn. He looks like a recomb DNA project aimed at tailoring people for high-speed burrowing. "You're in luck. I got the new Smith and Wesson, the four-oh-eight Tactical. Got this xenon projector slung under the barrel, see, batteries in the grip, throw you a twelve-inch high-noon circle in the pitch dark at fifty yards. The light source is so narrow, it's almost impossible to spot. It's just like voodoo in a nightfight."

I let my arm clunk down on the table and started the fingers drumming; the servos in the hand began whining like overworked mosquitoes. I knew that the Finn really hated the sound.

"You looking to pawn that?" He prodded the Duralumin wrist joint with the chewed shaft of a felt-tip pen. "Maybe get yourself something a little quieter?"

I kept it up. "I don't need any guns, Finn."

"Okay," he said, "okay," and I quit drumming.

"I only got this one item, and I don't even know what it is. He looked unhappy. "I got it off these bridge-and-tunnel kids from Jersey last week."

"So when'd you ever buy anything you didn't know what it was, Finn?"

"Wise ass." And he passed me a transparent mailer with something in it that looked like an audio cassette through the bubble padding. "They had a passport," he said. "They had credit cards and a watch. And that."

"They had the contents of somebody's pockets, you mean."

He nodded. "The passport was Belgian. It was also bogus, looked to me, so I put it in the furnace. Put the cards in with it. The watch was okay, a Porsche, nice watch."

It was obviously some kind of plug-in military program. Out of the mailer, it looked like the magazine of a small assault rifle, coated with non-reflective black plastic. The edges and corners showed bright metal; it had been knocking around for a while.

"I'll give you a bargain on it, Jack. For old times' sake." I had to smile at that. Getting a bargain from the Finn was like God repealing the law of gravity when you have to carry a heavy suitcase down ten blocks of airport corridor.

"Looks Russian to me," I said. "Probably the emergency sewage controls for some Leningrad suburb. Just what I need."

"You know," said the Finn. "I got a pair of shoes older than you are. Sometimes I think you got about as much class as those yahoos from Jersey. What do you want me to tell you, it's the keys to the Kremlin? You figure out what the goddamn thing is. Me, I just sell the stuff." I bought it.

Bodyless, we swerve into Chrome's castle of ice. And we're fast, fast. It feels like we're surfing the crest of the invading program, hanging ten above the seething glitch systems as they mutate. We're sentient patches of oil swept along down corridors of shadow.

Somewhere we have bodies, very far away, in a crowded loft roofed with steel and glass. Somewhere we have microseconds, maybe time left to pull out.

We've crashed her gates disguised as an audit and three subpoenas, but her defenses are specifically geared

to cope with that kind of official intrusion. Her most sophisticated ice is structured to fend off warrants, writs, subpoenas. When we breached the first gate, the bulk of her data vanished behind core-command ice, these walls we see as leagues of corridor, mazes of shadow. Five separate landlines spurted May Day signals to law firms, but the virus had already taken over the parameter ice. The glitch systems gobble the distress calls as our mimetic subprograms scan anything that hasn't been blanked by core command.

The Russian program lifts a Tokyo number from the unscreened data, choosing it for frequency of calls, average length of calls, the speed with which Chrome returned those calls.

"Okay," says Bobby, "we're an incoming scrambler call from a pal of hers in Japan. That should help." Ride `em, cowboy.

Bobby read his future in women; his girls were omens, changes in the weather, and he'd sit all night in the Gentleman Loser, waiting for the season to lay a new face down in front of him like a card.

I was working late in the loft one night, shaving down a chip, my arm off and the little waldo jacked straight into the stump.

Bobby came in with a girl I hadn't seen before, and usually I feel a little funny if a stranger sees me working that way, with those leads clipped to the hard carbon studs that stick out of my stump. She came right over and looked at the magnified image on the screen, then saw the waldo moving under its vacuum-sealed dust cover. She didn't say anything, just watched. Right away I had a good feeling about her; it's like that sometimes.

"Automatic Jack, Rikki. My associate."

He laughed, put his arm around her waist, something in his tone letting me know that I'd be spending the night in a dingy room in a hotel.

"Hi," she said. Tall, nineteen or maybe twenty, and she definitely had the goods. With just those few freckles across the bridge of her nose, and eyes somewhere between dark amber and French coffee. Tight black jeans rolled to midcalf and a narrow plastic belt that matched the rose-colored sandals.

But now when I see her sometimes when I'm trying to sleep, I see her somewhere out on the edge of all this sprawl of cities and smoke, and it's like she's a hologram stuck behind my eyes, in a bright dress she must've worn once, when I knew her, something that doesn't quite reach her knees. Bare legs long and straight. Brown hair, streaked with blond, hoods her face, blown in a wind from somewhere, and I see her wave goodbye.

Bobby was making a show of rooting through a stack of audio cassettes. "I'm on my way, cowboy," I said, unclipping the waldo. She watched attentively as I put my arm back on.

"Can you fix things?" she asked.

"Anything, anything you want, Automatic Jack'll fix it." I snapped my Duralumin fingers for her.

She took a little simstim deck from her belt and showed me the broken hinge on the cassette cover.

"Tomorrow," I said, "no problem."

And my oh my, I said to myself, sleep pulling me down the six flights to the street, what'll Bobby's luck be like with a fortune cookie like that? If his system worked, we'd be striking it rich any night now. In the street I grinned and yawned and waved for a cab.

Chrome's castle is dissolving, sheets of ice shadow flickering and fading, eaten by the glitch systems that spin out from the Russian program, tumbling away from our central logic thrust and infecting the fabric of the ice itself. The glitch systems are cybernetic virus analogs, self-replicating and voracious. They mutate constantly, in unison, subverting and absorbing Chrome's defenses.

Have we already paralyzed her, or is a bell ringing somewhere, a red light blinking?. Does she know?

Rikki Wildside, Bobby called her, and for those first few weeks it must have seemed to her that she had it all, the whole teeming show spread out for her, sharp and bright under the neon. She was new to the scene, and she had all the miles of malls and plazas to prowl, all the shops and clubs, and Bobby to explain the wild side, the tricky wiring on the dark underside of things, all the players and their names and their games. He made her feel at home.

"What happened to your arm?" she asked me one night in the Gentleman Loser, the three of us drinking at a small table in a corner.

"Hang-gliding," I said, "accident."

"Hang-gliding over a wheatfield," said Bobby, "place called Kiev. Our Jack's just hanging there in the dark, under a Nightwing parafoil, with fifty kilos of radar jammed between his legs, and some Russian asshole accidentally burns his arm off with a laser."

I don't remember how I changed the subject, but I did.

I was still telling myself that it wasn't Rikki who was getting to me, but what Bobby was doing with her. I'd known him for a long time, since the end of the war, and I knew he used women as counters in a game, Bobby Quine versus fortune, versus time and the night of cities. And Rikki had turned up just when he needed something to get him going, something to aim for. So he'd set her up as a symbol for everything he wanted and couldn't have, everything he'd had and couldn't keep.

I didn't like having to listen to him tell me how much he loved her, and knowing he believed it only made it worse. He was a past master at the hard fall and the rapid recovery, and I'd seen it happen a dozen times before. He might as well have had NEXT printed across his sunglasses in green Day-Gb capitals, ready to flash out at the first interesting face that flowed past the tables in the Gentleman Loser.

I knew what he did to them. He turned them into emblems, sigils on the map of his hustler's life, navigation beacons he could follow through a sea of bars and neon. What else did he have to steer by? He didn't love money, in and of itself, not enough to follow its lights. He wouldn't work for power over other people; he hated the responsibility it brings. He had some basic pride in his skill, but that was never enough to keep him pushing.

So he made do with women.

When Rikki showed up, he needed one in the worst way. He was fading fast, and smart money was already

whispering that the edge was off his game. He needed that one big score, and soon, because he didn't know any other kind of life, and all his clocks were set for hustler's time, calibrated in risk and adrenaline and that supernal dawn calm that comes when every move's proved right and a sweet lump of someone else's credit clicks into your own account.

It was time for him to make his bundle and get out; so Rikki got set up higher and farther away than any of the others ever had, even though and I felt like screaming it at him she was right there, alive, totally real, human, hungry, resilient, bored, beautiful, excited, all the things she was. .

Then he went out one afternoon, about a week before I made the trip to New York to see Finn. Went out and left us there in the loft, waiting for a thunderstorm. Half the skylight was shadowed by a dome they'd never finished, and the other half showed sky, black and blue with clouds. I was s~andsng by the bench, looking up at that sky, stupid with the hot afternoon, the humidity, and she touched me, touched my shoulder, the half-inch border of taut pink scar that the arm doesn't cover. Anybody else ever touched me there, they went on to the shoulder, the neck....

But she didn't do that. Her nails were lacquered black, not pointed, but tapered oblongs, the lacquer only a shade darker than the carbon-fiber laminate that sheathes my arm. And her hand went down the arm, black nails tracing a weld in the laminate, down to the black anodized elbow joint, out to the wrist, her hand soft-knuckled as a child's, fingers spreading to lock over mine, her palm against the perforated Duralumin.

Her other palm came up to brush across the feed-back pads, and it rained all afternoon, raindrops drumming on the steel and soot-stained glass above Bobby's bed.

Ice walls flick away like supersonic butterflies made of shade. Beyond them, the matrix's illusion of infinite space. It's like watching a tape of a prefab building going up; only the tape's reversed and run at high speed, and these walls are torn wings.

Trying to remind myself that this place and the gulfs beyond are only representations, that we aren't "in" Chrome's computer, but interfaced with it, while the matrix simulator in Bobby's loft generates this illusion . . . The core data begin to emerge, exposed, vulnerable.... This is the far side of ice, the view of the matrix I've never seen before, the view that fifteen million legitimate console operators see daily and take for granted.

The core data tower around us like vertical freight trains, color-coded for access. Bright primaries, impossibly bright in that transparent void, linked by countless horizontals in nursery blues and pinks.

But ice still shadows something at the center of it all: the heart of all Chrome's expansive darkness, the very heart..

It was late afternoon when I got back from my shopping expedition to New York. Not much sun through the skylight, but an ice pattern glowed on Bobby's monitor

screen, a 2-D graphic representation of someone's computer defenses, lines of neon woven like an Art Deco prayer rug. I turned the console off, and the screen went completely dark.

Rikki's things were spread across my workbench, nylon bags spilling clothes and makeup, a pair of bright red cowboy boots, audio cassettes, glossy Japanese magazines about simstim stars. I stacked it all under the bench and then took my arm off, forgetting that the program I'd brought from the Finn was in the right-hand pocket of my jacket, so that I had to fumble it out left-handed and then get it into the padded jaws of the jeweler's vise.

The waldo looks like an old audio turntable, the kind that played disc records, with the vise set up under a transparent dust cover. The arm itself is just over a centimeter long, swinging out on what would've been the tone arm on one of those turntables. But I don't look at that when I've clipped the leads to my stump; I look at the scope, because that's my arm there in black and white, magnification 40 x.

I ran a tool check and picked up the laser. It felt a little heavy; so I scaled my weight-sensor input down to a quarter-kilo per gram and got to work. At 40 x the side of the program looked like a trailer truck.

It took eight hours to crack: three hours with the waldo and the laser and four dozen taps, two hours on the phone to a contact in Colorado, and three hours to run down a lexicon disc that could translate eight-year-old technical Russian.

Then Cyrillic alphanumerics started reeling down the monitor, twisting themselves into English halfwa down. There were a lot of gaps, where the lexicon ran up against specialized military acronyms in the readout I'd bought from my man in Colorado, but it did give me some idea of what I'd bought from the Finn.

I felt like a punk who'd gone out to buy a switchblade and come home with a small neutron bomb.

Screwed again, I thought. What good's a neutro-bomb in a streetfight? The thing under the dust cover was right out of my league. I didn't even know where to unload it, where to look for a buyer. Someone had, but he was dead, someone with a Porsche watch and a fake Belgian passport, but I'd never tried to move in those circles. The Finn's muggers from the burbs had knocked over someone who had some highly arcane connections.

The program in the jeweler's vise was a Russian military icebreaker, a killer-virus program.

It was dawn when Bobby came in alone. I'd fallen asleep with a bag of takeout sandwiches in my lap.

"You want to eat?" I asked him, not really awake, holding out my sandwiches. I'd been dreaming of the program, of its waves of hungry glitch systems and mimetic subprograms; in the dream it was an animal of some kind, shapeless and flowing.

He brushed the bag aside on his way to the console, punched a function key. The screen lit with the intricate pattern I'd seen there that afternoon. I rubbed sleep from my eyes with my left hand, one thing I can't do with my right. I'd fallen asleep trying to decide whether to tell him about the program. Maybe I should try to sell it alone, keep the money, go somewhere new, ask Rikki

to go with me.

"Whose is it?" I asked.

He stood there in a black cotton jump suit, an old leather jacket thrown over his shoulders like a cape. He hadn't shaved for a few days, and his face looked thinner than usual.

"It's Chrome's," he said.

My arm convulsed, started clicking, fear translated to the myoelectrics through the carbon studs. I spilled the sandwiches; limp sprouts, and bright yellow dairy-produce slices on the unswept wooden floor.

"You're stone crazy," I said.

"No," he said, "you think she rumbled it? No way. We'd be dead already. I locked on to her through a triple-blind rental system in Mombasa and an Algerian comsat. She knew somebody was having a look-see, but she couldn't trace it."

If Chrome had traced the pass Bobby had made at her ice, we were good as dead. But he was probably right, or she'd have had me blown away on my way back from New York. "Why her, Bobby? Just give me one reason..."

Chrome: I'd seen her maybe half a dozen times in the Gentleman Loser. Maybe she was slumming, or checking out the human condition, a condition she didn't exactly aspire to. A sweet little heart-shaped face framing the nastiest pair of eyes you ever saw. She'd looked fourteen for as long as anyone could remember, hyped out of anything like a normal metabolism on some massive program of serums and hormones. She was as ugly a customer as the street ever produced, but she didn't belong to the street anymore. She was one of the Boys, Chrome, a member in good standing of the local Mob subsidiary. Word was, she'd gotten started as a dealer, back when synthetic pituitary hormones were still proscribed. But she hadn't had to move hormones for a long time. Now she owned the House of Blue Lights.

"You're flat-out crazy, Quine. You give me one sane reason for having that stuff on your screen. You ought to dump it, and I mean now."

"Talk in the Loser," he said, shrugging out of the leather jacket. "Black Myron and Crow Jane. Jane, she's up on all the sex lines, claims she knows where the money goes. So she's arguing with Myron that Chrome's the controlling interest in the Blue Lights, not just some figurehead for the Boys."

"The Boys,' Bobby," I said. "That's the operative word there. You still capable of seeing that? We don't mess with the Boys, remember? That's why we're still walking around."

"That's why we're still poor, partner." He settled back into the swivel chair in front of the console, unzipped his jump suit, and scratched his skinny white chest. "But maybe not for much longer."

"I think maybe this partnership just got itself permanently dissolved."

Then he grinned at me. Tjie grin was truly crazy, feral and focused, and I knew that right then he really didn't give a shit about dying.

"Look," I said, "I've got some money left, you know? Why don't you take it and get the tube to Miami,

catch a hopper to Montego Bay. You need a rest, man. You've got to get your act together."

"My act, Jack," he said, punching something on the keyboard, "never has been this together before." The neon prayer rug on the screen shimmered and woke as an animation program cut in, ice lines weaving with hypnotic frequency, a living mandala. Bobby kept punching, and the movement slowed; the pattern resolved itself, grew slightly less complex, became an alternation between two distant configurations. A first-class piece of work, and I hadn't thought he was still that good. "Now," he said, "there, see it? Wait. There. There again. And there. Easy to miss. That's it. Cuts in every hour and twenty minutes with a squirt transmission to their comsat. We could live for a year on what ~he pays them weekly in negative interest."

"Whose comsat?"

"Zurich. Her bankers. That's her bankbook, Jack. That's where the money goes. Crow Jane was right." I stood there. My arm forgot to click.

"So how'd you do in New York, partner? You get anything that'll help me cut ice? We're going to need whatever we can get.~~

I kept my eyes on his, forced myself not to look in the direction of the waldo, the jeweler's vise. The Russian program was there, under the dust cover.

Wild cards, luck changers.

"Where's Rikki?" I asked him, crossing to the console, pretending to study the alternating patterns on the screen.

"Friends of hers," he shrugged, "kids, they're all into simstim." He smiled absently. "I'm going to do it for her, man."

"I'm going out to think about this, Bobby. You want me to come back, you keep your hands off the board."

"I'm doing it for her," he said as the door closed behind me. "You know lam."

And down now, down, the program a roller coaster through this fraying maze of shadow walls, gray cathedral spaces between the bright towers. Headlong speed.

Black ice. Dont think about it. Black ice.

Too many stories in the Gentleman Loser; black ice is a part of the mythology. Ice that kills. Illegal, but then aren't we all? Some kind of neural-feedback weapon, and you connect with it only once. Like some hideous Word that eats the mind from the inside out. Like an epileptic spasm that goes on and on until there's nothing left at all...

And we're diving for the floor of Chrome's shadow castle.

Trying to brace myself for the sudden stopping of breath, a sickness and final slackening of the nerves. Fear of that cold Word waiting, down there in the dark.

I went out and looked for Rikki, found her in a cafe with a boy with Sendai eyes, half-healed suture lines radiating from his bruised sockets. She had a glossy brochure spread open on the table, Tally Isham smiling up from a dozen photographs, the Girl with the Zeiss

Ikon Eyes.

Her little simstim deck was one of the things I'd stacked under my bench the night before, the one I'd fixed for her the day after I'd first seen her. She spent hours jacked into that unit, the contact band across her forehead like a gray plastic tiara. Tally Isham was her favorite, and with the contact band on, she was gone, off somewhere in the recorded sensorium of simstim's biggest star. Simulated stimuli: the world all the interesting parts, anyway as perceived by Tally Isham. Tally raced a black Fokker ground-effect plane across Arizona mesa tops. Tally dived the Truk Island preserves. Tally partied with the superchic on private Greek islands, heartbreaking purity of those tiny white seaports at dawn.

Actually she looked a lot like Tally, same coloring and cheekbones. I thought Rikki's mouth was stronger. More sass. She didn't want to be Tally Isham, but she coveted the job. That was her ambition, to be in simstim. Bobby just laughed it off. She talked to me about it, though. "I-Iow'd I look with a pair of these?" she'd ask, holding a full-page headshot, Tally Isham's blue Zeiss Ikons lined up with her own amber-brown. She'd had her corneas done twice, but she still wasn't 20-20; so she wanted Ikons. Brand of the stars. Very expensive.

"You still window-shopping for eyes?" I asked as I sat down.

"Tiger just got some," she said. She looked tired, I thought.

Tiger was so pleased with his Sendais that he couldn't help smiling, but I doubted whether he'd have smiled otherwise. He had the kind of uniform good looks you get after your seventh trip to the surgical boutique; he'd probably spend the rest of his life looking vaguely like each new season's media front-runner; not too obvious a copy, but nothing too original, either.

"Sendai, right?" I smiled back.

He nodded. I watched as he tried to take me in with his idea of a professional simstim glance. He was pretending that he was recording. I thought he spent too long on my arm. "They'll be great on peripherals when the muscles heal," he said, and I saw how carefully he reached for his double espresso. Sendai eyes are notorious for depth-perception defects and warranty hassles, among other things.

``Tiger's leaving for Hollywood tomorrow.~~

"Then maybe Chiba City, right?" I smiled at him. He didn't smile back. "Got an offer, Tiger? Know an agent?"

"Just checking it out," he said quietly. Then he got up and left. He said a quick goodbye to Rikki, but not to me.

"That kid's optic nerves may start to deteriorate inside six months. You know that, Rikki? Those Sendais are illegal in England, Denmark, lots of places. You can't replace nerves."

"Hey, Jack, no lectures." She stole one of my croissants and nibbled at the top of one of its horns.

"I thought I was your adviser, kid."

"Yeah. Well, Tiger's not too swift, but everybody knows about Sendais. They're all he can afford. So he's taking a chance. If he gets work, he can replace them."

"With these?" I tapped the Zeiss Ikon brochure.  
"Lot of money, Rikki. You know better than to take a gamble like that."

She nodded. "I want Ikons."

"If you're going up to Bobby's, tell him to sit tight until he hears from ~

"Sure. It's business?"

"Business," I said. But it was craziness.

I drank my coffee, and she ate both my croissants. Then I walked her down to Bobby's. I made fifteen calls, each one from a different pay phone.

Business. Bad craziness.

All in all, it took us six weeks to set the burn up, six weeks of Bobby telling me how much he loved her. I worked even harder, trying to get away from that.

Most of it was phone calls. My fifteen initial and very oblique inquiries each seemed to breed fifteen more. I was looking for a certain service Bobby and I both imagined as a requisite part of the world's clandestine economy, but which probably never had more than five customers at a time. It would be one that never advertised.

We were looking for the world's heaviest fence, for a non-aligned money laundry capable of dry-cleaning a megabuck online cash transfer and then forgetting about it.

All those calls were a wasted finally, because it was the Finn who put me on to what we needed. I'd gone up to New York to buy a new blackbox rig, because we were going broke paying for all those calls.

I put the problem to him as hypothetically as possible.

"Macao," he said.

"Macao?"

"The Long Hum family. Stockbrokers."

He even had the number. You want a fence, ask another fence.

The Long Hum people were so oblique that they made my idea of a subtle approach look like a tactical nuke-out. Bobby had to make two shuttle runs to Hong Kong to get the deal straight. We were running out of capital, and fast. I still don't know why I decided to go along with it in the first place; I was scared of Chrome, and I'd never been all that hot to get rich.

I tried telling myself that it was a good idea to burn the House of Blue Lights because the place was a creep joint, but I just couldn't buy it. I didn't like the Blue Lights, because I'd spent a supr~mely depressing evening there once, but that was no excuse for going after Chrome. Actually I halfway assumed we were going to die in the attempt. Even with that killer program, the odds weren't exactly in our favor.

Bobby was lost in writing the set of commands we were going to plug into the dead center of Chrome's computer. That was going to be my job, because Bobby was going to have his hands full trying to keep the Russian program from going straight for the kill. It was too complex for us to rewrite, and so he was going to try to hold it back for the two seconds I needed.

I made a deal with a streetfighter named Miles. He was going to follow Rikki the night of the burn, keep her in sight, and phone me at a certain time. If I wasn't there, or didn't answer in just a certain way, I'd told

him to grab her and put her on the first tube out. I gave him an envelope to give her, money and a note.

Bobby really hadn't thought about that, much, how things would go for her if we blew it. He just kept telling me he loved her, where they were going to go together, how they'd spend the money.

"Buy her a pair of Ikons first, man. That's what she wants. She's serious about that simstim scene."

"Hey," he said, looking up from the keyboard, "she won't need to work. We're going to make it, Jack. She's my luck. She won't ever have to work again."

"Your luck," I said. I wasn't happy. I couldn't remember when I had been happy. "You seen your look around lately?"

He hadn't, but neither had I. We'd both been too busy.

I missed her. Missing her reminded me of my one night in the House of Blue Lights, because I'd gone there out of missing someone else. I'd gotten drunk to begin with, then I'd started hitting Vasopressin inhalers. If your main squeeze has just decided to walk out on you, booze and Vasopressin are the ultimate in masochistic pharmacology; the juice makes you maudlin and the Vasopressin makes you remember, I mean really remember. Clinically they use the stuff to counter senile amnesia, but the street finds its own uses for things. So I'd bought myself an ultraintense replay of a bad affair; trouble is, you get the bad with the good. Go gunning for transports of animal ecstasy and you get what you said, too, and what she said to that, how she walked away and never looked back.

I don't remember deciding to go to the Blue Lights, or how I got there, hushed corridors and this really tacky decorative waterfall trickling somewhere, or maybe just a hologram of one. I had a lot of money that night; somebody had given Bobby a big roll for opening a three-second window in someone else's ice.

I don't think the crew on the door liked my looks, but I guess my money was okay.

I had more to drink there when I'd done what I went there for. Then I made some crack to the barman about closet necrophiliacs, and that didn't go down too well. Then this very large character insisted on calling me War Hero, which I didn't like. I think I showed him some tricks with the arm, before the lights went out, and I woke up two days later in a basic sleeping module somewhere else. A cheap place, not even room to hang yourself. And I sat there on that narrow foam slab and cried.

Some things are worse than being alone. But the thing they sell in the House of Blue Lights is so popular that it's almost legal.

At the heart of darkness, the still center, the glitch systems shred the dark with whirlwinds of light, translucent razors spinning away from us; we hang in the center of a silent slow-motion explosion, ice fragments falling away forever, and Bobby's voice comes in across light-years of electronic void illusion. "Burn the bitch down. I can't hold the thing back!"

The Russian program, rising through towers of data, blotting out the playroom colors. And I plug Bobby's homemade command package into the center of Chrome's cold heart. The squirt transmission cuts in, a pulse of condensed information that shoots straight up, past the thickening tower of darkness, the Russian

program, while Bobby struggles to control that crucial second. An unformed arm of shadow twitches from the towering dark, too late.

We've done it.

The matrix folds itself around me like an origami trick.

And the loft smells of sweat and burning circuitry.

I thought I heard Chrome scream, a raw metal sound, but I couldn't have.

Bobby was laughing, tears in his eyes. The elapsed-time figure in the corner of the monitor read 07:24:05. The burn had taken a little under eight minutes. And I saw that the Russian program had melted in its slot.

We'd given the bulk of Chrome's Zurich account to a dozen world charities. There was too much there to move, and we knew we had to break her, burn her straight down, or she might come after us. We took less than ten percent for ourselves and shot it through the Long Hum setup in Macao. They took sixty percent of that for themselves and kicked what was left back to us through the most convoluted sector of the Hong Kong exchange. It took an hour before our money started to reach the two accounts we'd opened in Zurich.

I watched zeros pile up behind a meaningless figure on the monitor. I was rich. Then the phone rang. It was Miles. I almost blew the code phrase.

"Hey, Jack, man, I dunno what's it all about, with this girl of yours? Kinda funny thing here..."

"What? Tell me."

"I been on her, like you said, tight but out of sight. She goes to the Loser, hangs out, then she gets a tube. Goes to the House of Blue Lights "

"She what?"

"Side door. Employees only. No way I could get past their security."

"Is she there now?"

"No, man, I just lost her. It's insane down here, like the Blue Lights just shut down, looks like for good, seven kinds of alarms going off, everybody running, the heat out in riot gear. . . . Now there's all this stuff going on, insurance guys, real estate types, vans with municipal plates...."

"Miles, where'd she go?"

"Lost her, Jack."

"Look, Miles, you keep the money in the envelope, right?"

"You serious? Hey, I'm real sorry. I "I hung up.

"Wait'll we tell her," Bobby was saying, rubbing a towel across his bare chest.

"You tell her yourself, cowboy. I'm going for a walk."

So I went out into the night and the neon and let the crowd pull me along, walking blind, willing myself to be just a segment of that mass organism, just one more drifting chip of consciousness under the geodesics. I didn't think, just put one foot in front of another, but after a while I did think, and it all made sense. She'd needed the money.

I thought about Chrome, too. That we'd killed her, murdered her, as surely as if we'd slit her throat. The night that carried me along through the malls and plazas would be hunting her now, and she had nowhere to go. How many enemies would she have in this crowd alone? How many would move, now they weren't held back by fear of her money? We'd taken her for everything she had. She was back on the street again. I doubted she'd live till dawn. Finally I remembered the cafe, the one where I'd met Tiger.

Her sunglasses told the whole story, huge black shades with a telltale smudge of flesh tone paint stick in the corner of one lens.

"Hi, Rikki," I said, and I was ready when she took them off.

Blue, Tally Isham blue. The clear trademark blue they're famous for, ZEISS IKON ringing each iris in tiny capitals, the letters suspended there like flecks of gold.

"They're beautiful," I said. Paintstick covered the bruising. No scars with work that good. "You made some money."

"Yeah, I did." Then she shivered. "But I won't make any more, not that way."

"I think that place is out of business.~~"

"Oh." Nothing moved in her face then. The new blue eyes were still and very deep.

"It doesn't matter. Bobby's waiting for you. We just pulled down a big score."

"No. I've got to go. I guess he won't understand, but I've got to go."

I nodded, watching the arm swing up to take her hand; it didn't seem to be part of me at all, but she held on to it like it was.

"I've got a one-way ticket to Hollywood. Tiger knows some people I can stay with. Maybe I'll even get to Chiba City."

She was right about Bobby. I went back with her.

He didn't understand. But she'd already served her purpose, for Bobby, and I wanted to tell her not to hurt for him, because I could see that she did. He wouldn't even come out into the hallway after she had packed her bags. I put the bags down and kissed her and messed up the paintstick, and something came up inside me the way the killer program had risen above Chrome's data.

A sudden stopping of the breath, in a place where no word is. But she had a plane to catch.

Bobby was slumped in the swivel chair in front of his monitor, looking at his string of zeros. He had his shades on, and I knew he'd be in the Gentleman Loser by nightfall, checking out the weather, anxious for a sign, someone to tell him what his new life would be like. I couldn't see it being very different. More comfortable, but he'd always be waiting for that next card to fall.

I tried not to imagine her in the House of Blue Lights, working three-hour shifts in an approximation of REM sleep, while her body and a bundle of conditioned reflexes took care of business. The customers never got to complain that she was faking it, because those were real orgasms. But she felt them, if she felt them at all, as faint silver flares somewhere out on the edge of sleep. Yeah, it's so popular, it's almost legal.

The customers are torn between needing someone and wanting to be alone at the same time, which has probably always been the name of that particular game, even before we had the neuro-electronics to enable them to have it both ways.

I picked up the phone and punched the number for her airline. I gave them her real name, her flight number. "She's changing that," I said, "to Chiba City. That's right. Japan." I thumbed my credit card into the slot and punched my ID code. "First class." Distant hum as they scanned my credit records. "Make that a return ticket."

But I guess she cashed the return fare, or else didn't need it, because she hasn't come back. And sometimes late at night I'll pass a window with posters of simstim stars, all those beautiful, identical eyes staring back at me out of faces that are nearly as identical, and sometimes the eyes are hers, but none of the faces are, none of them ever are, and I see her far out on the edge of all this sprawl of night and cities, and then she waves goodbye.

## If This Be Hell...

by John A. Gilmore

I die.

But what really galls is that irritatingly superior smile on the face of my best friend Wyglif as he twists the knife. The last thing I see is that damnable smirk. The last thing I hear is Wyglif's smug laugh. The last thing I feel is the certain dread of having to face him again.

I live again. And as certain as Allah is merciful, there it is, that grating, irking smirk. It hangs in a fuzzy brown and pink cloud that gradually condenses into Wyglif's face. "You, Abdallah," the big Northman says as he shakes his shaggy, ginger-colored mane in disgust, "are a miserable excuse for a warrior." Can there be any doubt Allah is punishing me? I have been sentenced to eternity in this Hell these Nordic demons call Valhalla.

The slave girl Wyglif himself gave me at my funeral centuries ago, thrusts a huge drinking horn at my face. Groping, I finally manage to grab it and half drain the hollowed-out auroch bull's horn before I draw the second breath of my newly restored life. Before I came to these barbarians in their frozen, northern homeland, my palate was better acclimated to those more subtle, if illegal, beverages of the Mediterranean. At first I hated the blunt, powerful, honey-based home brew they call mead, but after nearly eleven hundred years, I must admit I have developed a fondness for it. My debauchery knows no bounds. May Allah, in all his mercy, forgive me.

"Thank you," I say to my slave girl. Wyglif snorts mockingly. He does not believe slave girls require any such courtesies. I smile at her as I hand the empty drinking horn back to her. The well-defined muscles in her heathen body ripple as she hoists the strap of the horn over her back. How much she reminds me of my lost Miral. Until I see her eyes. Those disturbing blue eyes smile playfully at me over her shoulder as she glides away between the boulders scattered around this place. I shudder. In my homeland, old ladies tell their grand children stories of the Stealer of Souls, Shaitan. They say his eyes are blue like those I now peer into longingly. Indeed, once, I saw a painting of the Dark One. The same haunting blue eyes I saw that day, lock onto mine now and I am unable to turn away. Allah forgive me, I do not want to turn away. I am a sinner beyond redemption. Allah was right to condemn me to this place.

Now Wyglif is slouched forward, one finger trailing in the dank sea sand between his monstrous boots. Wyglif slowly lets out a sigh. "Do you know something, Abdallah? Wodin knows I have tried every thing I can think of to turn you into a real warrior, to get rid of all that softness you brought with you from the south. I have failed and there is no one to blame but me. I fear you will embarrass yourself on the Plain of Vigrid."

"Would that be that last battle you speak of sometimes?" I ask. "The one where gods and demons and dead people and ghosts and everything else, fight? The one where everybody dies?"

"Yes."

His disappointment in me hurts more than the knife he plunged into my heart just a few hours before. Stalling for time, I allow the potent

drink to burn the last taste of death from my mouth and then settle to a slow boil in my stomach. Real warriors are supposed to know their craft by the time they reach Valhalla, the peculiar Nordic Hell-like version of Paradise. They hone their combat skills during the day by hacking each other to pieces. Then their corpses are reassembled at twilight so that they can wallow in sin together all night. I have been fighting and dying for centuries and still a simple ruse like grabbing a knife hidden in a boot killed me today. All these centuries of post-mortem combat should have taught me that there are few rules in a fight to the death and these Northmen are nothing if not tricky devils. I turn my own eyes down to study the cold salty sand at our feet, anything to avoid looking at Wyglif. This sand is so unlike the sand of my native Baghdad. The sand of my home is as warm and pure as Allah's love for his faithful. This sand reeks of the cold, haunted, supernatural sea it borders. Wyglif makes a lewd sound like the passing of gas as he blows out his breath between his tightened lips. I steal a quick glance. His massive frame slumps so sadly.

I owe him much for what few moments of peace I experience here. When I arrived, I had practically no combat skills. I spent every conscious moment being hacked to pieces by the blue eyed demons in this place. I was truly alone. I prayed desperately, to Allah for some relief, though I knew I deserved none. Allah sent Wyglif. When he arrived, he took me under his tutelage. He did not have to do so. I have been a constant burden to him since. I wonder sometimes, if I am his punishment. We are already in eternity, but these few moments seem to drag. The irony is not lost on me.

The cold of this forsaken place creeps into my bones. The old neck wound Wyglif gave me several centuries back with that enormous battle-axe of his, begins to ache. I rub my arms and legs and stamp my feet to stay warm. Not for the first time, I wish I had known how cold Hell really was. I would have lived a much less sinful life. "Hoorah!" a voice booms. I welcome the opportunity to stand and search for the source. I spy a hulking behemoth of a Norse warrior on the sandy, grass covered hill above us. As he sees me, his jaw drops but he pushes his way toward us. His eyes are locked on me. The intensity is unnerving. Perhaps I have, in some way, offended him or his in the past. I have never been able to understand the entangled blood feuds of these Northmen; much less what starts them. As the largest man I have ever seen comes to rest directly in front of me, I scour my memory. He stares at me. Yet I am certain I have never seen him before. I just hope this creature remembers that even such a forsaken place as this has its rules. It speaks, after a fashion. "You..." He begins. I wait, enthralled, for his next word to form but Wyglif understands immediately and finishes the question for him, "... are black?" "Yes," the giant responds though his eyes remained fixed on me.

"May I help you?" I ask, trying to keep the fear in my heart out of my eyes and voice. I note that despite his size, this massive Northman is little more than a child. In this light he presents an odd mix of the innocent child and bloodthirsty demon. This titan looks me up and down.

"This I was told but would not believe," the massive youth finally mutters to himself, but with a timidity that belies his bulk. He almost stammers as he speaks. I am unaccustomed to seeing this from these ferocious barbarians. "I am called Lars. I have come to ask a question of you."

"Of course," I answer, as if I could stop him.

"May I?" he asks tentatively and reaches out to me, indicating he wants to touch my hair. Yes, I have forgotten. I have grown accustomed to being with Wyglif, who has also grown accustomed to me. When they first meet me, they need to touch my skin to see if the color rubs off. But especially, they need to feel my hair. I extend an arm. Lars is curiously gentle as he rubs it, as if some evil genie will issue forth from me. Then he reaches for my head. Somewhat dubious because it is a vulnerable position, I finally lean forward. His fingers tickle as he feels my scalp. After some time I ask, "Is that all you wish?"

"No, I have questions." He crooks an eyebrow as if to ask permission. The innumerable questions. But I see no alternative. I nod. "I was told, and now I can believe, that you are from a land far away." "Yes, My home is Baghdad." "And that your land has different gods?"

"No," I reply. Lars looks surprised, but not Wyglif. "We do not have different gods. There is only one God. Allah; all-powerful, all knowing and everywhere. He is even here, though you don't realize it." This Lars looks confused, like all these pagans do when I speak to them of Allah and The Truth. They seem unable to grasp the concept. I suppose it is too much for simple barbarians, especially those already condemned to Hell. Like most of the others, he deals with his confusion by pretending he has not heard me.

"How is it that your God allowed you to come here?"

That is the question, is it not? How did an African who is a devout follower of Islam, end up in Valhalla, the Hell these Northmen believe is a reward for dying in battle? My stomach lurches. I am again forced to remember that I am forever denied the bliss of being in the presence of Allah. I cannot recall how many times I have died in this forsaken, frozen form of Perdition, but none has ever come close to the pain I feel every time I ponder the gulf that I have created between sweet Allah and me. My grief, more massive than these boulders around us, crushes me. I slap my head repeatedly, to drive the shame out of my mind. I cannot speak. Lars, embarrassed and not knowing what to do, shuffles from foot to foot. Once again my old friend Wyglif comes to my aid. "His answer will surprise you, whelp." He laughs and, thankfully, this hulking youth takes no notice of Wyglif's mild insult. Allah above, but these Northmen can find mortal insult in the most obscure and benign places. "My friend," Wyglif continues, "believes he is being punished by his gods for some great evil he has done." Wyglif's sincere, yet blasphemous comment stirs me from my stupor. He knows me well enough that perhaps he calculated it to happen that way. "No! My gods are not punishing me! Allah, in his wisdom, is punishing me! And Allah does not belong to me. All of us are his creations. We belong to him."

"I see," the giant Lars answers, though clearly he does not see. "And what great evil has Abdallah here done, you ask?" Wyglif continues, as if I have not spoken. "As far as I can tell, nothing."

"This is not so!" I interject. "I have imbibed wine until I..."

"A drink like mead," Wyglif explains to the perplexed young warrior, "though not as potent, or so I have been told. Abdallah is saying he drinks too much. After you've been around him a while, you begin to understand his strange way of speaking."

"Is drinking too much a sin?" Lars asks.

"It seems this is possible in civilized places like where Abdallah is from," answers Wyglif. "Thank Wodin I am a barbarian." Lars nods in agreement.

"I have committed adultery many..." "Had sex with women he was not married to," Wyglif continues to translate. "I have killed." "Defeated his enemies in battle." "I have been gluttonous." "Eaten too much." "For these and other sins too numerous to name, I deserve to be sent here to be punished."

"How..." Lars begins, pauses, rewords his question and starts again. "But how can this be? You are here to be punished. We are here to be rewarded. We are all in the same place. I do not understand." Lars mutters as he begins to rub his temples. Wyglif smirks back.

"Yes," Wyglif laughs. "It has been too long since last I heard this tale. I would like to hear it again. But we must also eat and drink. Come my friends, we will finish this after we have eaten." As we clear the field of boulders, the place Wyglif calls Wodin's Marbles, Wyglif smiles and raises his free arm. He points toward our destination. Ahead and aloft Valhalla hovers. If such things are possible, this massive drinking hall menaces the rest of Asgard. We climb the sand hills, cross a narrow plain, and ford the bone-chilling Dismal River, which guards the approach to Valhalla's great oaken gates. These twin portals, each three spans wide and six times as tall as a man, have been stained black by centuries of mead and smoke and sweat and blood and sin. We pass through and I peer down into a world illuminated only by the golden flicker of firelight. The scene below is a smoky, chaotic, pagan, and carnal celebration of the damned. I am too ashamed to describe what I see. Nevertheless, I cannot tear my eyes away from the debauchery and depravity. I know I will succumb to temptation once more. May Allah forgive me, I long to plunge headfirst into this depravity. At the moment, I do not care to recount to Lars how I came to my current shameful state. I take one glance at Wyglif and Lars, then plummet from grace. Centuries ago I gave up all pretenses at the cleanliness and moral rectitude my parents tried to instill in me. I take wicked joy in gobbling the flesh of roasted swine using nothing but my own unwashed hands. I gulp cupfuls of mead until it rolls down my face and defiles the silk blouse my mother's pure and blessed hands had embroidered for me. My mother. Her sad face wafts through my imagination as my impure hands may grope the naked flesh of these hot demons pretending to be slave girls. I purge her visage by abandoning myself to all forms of depravity.

Wyglif's huge hand grabs my neck and brings my revelry to an abrupt end. "Let's find a place less noisy," he shouts above the din as he grabs a huge barrel of mead, shoves it upon one massive shoulder and wedges three drinking horns between the fingers of the same hand. Wyglif wades into the sea of sin and half turns back to see if we follow. He need not worry. I have already been yanked into his wake. The young mountain of a warrior follows. I had hoped once we started our celebrations, these two would forget about my past shame. However, it appears I will have no choice. Wyglif gently pulls me along with his booming stage whisper and with good-natured tugs from his free hand on my poor hair and ears. We settle in an unoccupied nook. Wyglif breaks open the oak cask with one blow of his prodigious fist. Heedless of splinters or the filth on his hands, he dips the cups into the brew and hands one to each of us. I quickly drain my drinking horn, taking pains to strain the splinters between my clinched teeth and pass it back to him to be refilled before I begin my tale of infamy.

"It must be almost eleven hundred years ago now," I sighed. I look at the two Northmen. Lars is already listening raptly. Even Wyglif props his huge head between his massive fists as he prepares to listen to a story he has heard at least a hundred times. These people love their stories, no matter how many times the stories are told. After an uncomfortably long pause, I begin again. "I was very happy in Baghdad, my home city far to the south, even if I was a source of great shame to my family. My father is... no, my father was proud of his African heritage. However, because he was best friend and military advisor to the Caliph, he had to be especially sensitive about the way he and his family observed his faith. He was a paragon of Islam. He demanded no less from his family. He considered me his problem child. I remember him saying that often."

"I can see why," Wyglif offers unnecessarily.

"Wine was my first love," I continue, darting an irritated but useless glance at Wyglif, "but I grew to love Miral even more."

"Miral?" Lars asks, unfamiliar with the names people give each other in the south lands.

"Some woman," Wyglif answers as he teases me with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

"Ah," says Lars, as if he understands.

"Not some woman!" I snap at Wyglif. "She was the love of my life."

"My apologies," Wyglif says. I don't believe he is sincere but I continue. "I must confess I was bedazzled. She was favored with many admirable traits. First, was her womanliness, with which she had been more than amply blessed. Second, was her passion for the fruit of the vine, which rivaled my own. Third was the... skill with which she used her ample blessings to persuade me to help finance her passion. We were a match and spent many a blissful moment wrapped immodestly in each other's arms, floating in a white alcoholic cloud, in her chambers, located above my favorite coffee house.

"I have no idea how long things went on in such a sinful state, but I do recall one day hearing her whisper float to me through that fog. At first, I could not comprehend what she was saying, but after several attempts I came to understand that we two were soon to be three. I am ashamed to admit my first reaction was less than honorable. I was greatly distressed when she suggested we should marry. I was particularly alarmed at what my parents might think. However, after two more delightful bottles of ambrosia and an exceptionally creative and athletic reminder of her ample blessings, I warmed to the idea. At her suggestion, I resolved to inform my parents immediately of my unshakable decision to make Miral my wife. I stumbled boldly out of her chambers. My resolve was only momentarily shaken by my need to return to her chambers so that I might gather sufficient clothing to avoid instant arrest.

"Miral would not have been my parents' first choice as my wife. To be honest, Miral would not even have been their last choice as my wife. Those very qualities, which I found most endearing in Miral, seemed, somehow, to disqualify her in my parents' narrow view. Despite my best arguments, my parents remained adamant. Finally, I declared I would marry Miral no matter what my parents thought or did. I was quite proud of my brave show as I delivered my ultimatum,

turned and left the room. Fool that I was, I did not anticipate my parents' resolve might be greater than my own. Especially, I did not appreciate what my father was capable of in his zealousness to steer me back to the path of righteousness.

"He must have spoken with the Caliph about my potentially embarrassing behavior. Together, they must have decided what would be best for me. It so happened that the Caliph had already decided to send another troublesome young man named Ahmad Ibn Fadlan on an embassy to the far north. They decided that I would accompany him on this mission, which was certain to take at least a year. In the meantime, my ardor for Miral was meant to cool. At the very least, Miral and my as yet unborn child would be comfortably situated in some frontier town, the location of which would remain undisclosed to me.

"Now this," says Wyglif, interjecting his unwelcome opinion, "is one part of your story I don't understand."

"Wyglif!" I declare, warning him not to interrupt, but one might as well try to hold back a desert sandstorm with one's bare hands.

"It looks to me like your father found a perfect solution," he continues. "The woman and her child are taken care of and you are free to pursue manly glory and a woman more befitting your station."

"But I didn't want another woman. I loved only Miral!"

"Well you can still find pleasure in other women," says Lars.

"I meant I must remain faithful to the woman I marry."

"But you did not marry her."

"But I wanted to marry her."

"I do not understand," Lars says as he turns a baffled face toward Wyglif, looking for a translation. Wyglif shrugs in reply. I am very irritated at Wyglif. He is deliberately toying with me again.

"My point is," I answer, "that it is a sin for anyone to engage in the act of intercourse outside the sacred boundaries of marriage."

"What?" asks Lars.

"Sex," Wyglif translates again and again the giant Northmen exchange looks of disbelief and confusion. "Abdallah thinks it is evil to have sex with anyone but his wife." "Being already in Hell," I reply haughtily, "I am not surprised you would be bewildered by questions of morality." "But you are in Hell with us," Wyglif points out rudely. I hate him when he gets like this. "And you were not wed to this Miral," he notes maliciously.

"But I wanted to marry her," I argue.

"And you are to remain faithful even then?" Lars asks.

"Yes!" I answer triumphantly, hoping that I have at least gotten through to Lars. But Wyglif pounces. "If you are so faithful to this Miral, why can't you keep your hands off the slave girls?"

"May we speak of this at some later time?" I beg, giving up in frustration. A sharp pain has developed between my ears. "I thought

you wanted to hear about how I came to be here.” Wyglif smirks but nods mercifully.

“Where was I?” “Your father’s plan,” says Wyglif. “Yes, thank you.” I pause to gather my wits. “The first glimmer I had of my Father’s plan, was when his personal guards burst through the door of Miral’s private chambers. Without regard for our modesty, they wrenched me from her clutching, totally nude arms and dragged me out the door. With every step, Miral wailed and reached out for me. She was mostly disheveled and heedless of her state of undress as she struggled against the clutching hands of two of my father’s men. I recall being incensed that they were just a little too familiar in their attempts to restrain her. I was also a little puzzled that she didn’t seem to take offense to their wandering hands. I have since come to the conclusion she was too concerned for me to notice their untoward behavior. Now Lars is smirking too. Barbarians are incapable of understanding the sacrifices true love can make. I ignore their lewd expressions and continue my narrative. “Unfortunately, I did not know that vision of Miral would be my last. I confess that I have often secretly pulled out that last specter of my beloved Miral to help keep me warm during these cold and lonely nights.

“The guards seemed to be enjoying themselves as they pushed and shoved me through the streets of Baghdad. Apparently already aware of my reputation, my desperate pleas for help only brought laughter from passersby. When we arrived at my father’s house, I was hauled directly into the central courtyard garden through a gate reserved for the lowest of servants, animals and the removal of household refuse. I protested the indignity loudly but they ignored me. I made a mental note to report their conduct to my father as soon as I was able, but I should have realized my father’s guards would not have behaved so badly unless they knew something.

“I was surprised to hear my father immediately call to me from the third floor balcony. I squinted up at him. Though he seemed to be in good humor, his smile did not reach his eyes. Standing discretely behind her husband, I could discern my mother weeping behind her hijab, her modesty veil, as if a close family member had just died. Beside my father stood my younger brother Yakut. I always thought of him as “The Rat” because he enjoyed my discomfiture whenever I was caught in one of my little transgressions, but carefully feigned shock and sadness when my parents were watching. I have no doubt Yakut did well in my rightful place at Court.

“His fierce little grin did not worry me nearly as much as my father’s pleasant smile. I sensed great danger and reasoned that a properly respectful attitude was safest. ‘Father,’ I said to him, ‘I had hoped I might have time to properly prepare myself before coming to you.’

‘You have been with that woman again,’ my father said very deliberately and too quietly. I sensed his monumental effort as he choked back the words he really wanted to say. Nevertheless, a new thought seemed to cross his mind, and this time the smile touched his eyes. A chill swept through me despite the burning Persian air. I knew I needed to act swiftly. ‘Father, I am glad for this opportunity...’ I began to say. ‘No need to continue,’ my father said pleasantly, cutting me off by raising his hand. ‘I would not put you in a position to have to commit another sin, especially in this house.’ ‘Oh Father, I would never...’ I began to lie but my Father interrupted me again. ‘I have good news for you.’ He said, then paused cruelly. He was enjoying himself now, allowing me to stew in my imagination. Everything in the garden seemed to pause with him, watching me squirm. The only

sound was the garden fountain as water trickled from one tier to the next. One unbearably long moment stretched to the next. He watched me perspire in the harsh noonday sun. Finally, my mother reached out and touched him from behind, asking with her hand that he put an end to this cruelty. ‘It is my pleasure to inform you that you have been given a great opportunity to heap glory and honor upon yourself and this family. The Caliph, himself, has hand picked you for an important mission. You are to accompany Ahmad Ibn Fadlan on his embassy to the King of the Bulgars.’ “This was worse than I thought possible and far outweighed my supposed crime. I was to be exiled from Baghdad, my family, my known suppliers of wine, and Miral. Only Allah knew how long I would be gone. I opened my mouth to speak, but could say nothing. My mother renewed her wailing. Yakut almost choked on his stifled laughter. Realizing he had finally gotten through to me, my father’s smile spread. Even the guards began to snicker quietly, unconcerned that my father might see. This was bad indeed.

I finally found my tongue. ‘But Father...’ I began to say.

‘You leave immediately,’ my Father said for all to hear. Then his fierce black eyes locked onto mine as he lowered his voice. ‘Use this time wisely, my son. Find your way back to Allah.’ With that, he and Yakut turned their backs on me and pushed my sobbing mother before them as they disappeared into the house. Outside of my memories, that was the last I ever saw of any of them. Allah, but I would give anything to see any of them, even that weasel, Yakut.

I pause so that my audience may appreciate the gravity of my loss. Instead, both huge Northmen giggle. This is annoying. I wonder if any of these barbarians are capable of a civilized thought. “Well?” I ask of them, not sure I even want to know.

“This is old wisdom that even children understand,” Lars explains. “Be wary of the stranger. Be doubly wary of the friend. Be triply wary of the family.” He almost can’t finish the sentence, he begins to laugh so hard.

“Now what is that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“It means, of course,” Wyglif explains patiently through his tears of laughter, “that you can be most easily taken advantage of by those closest to you.” I shrug. What else can I do? But these two find even that amusing. My shrug sends them off into another round of hysterical giggles. These Northmen truly are barbarians. They are not even embarrassed that they titter like little girls. “May I continue?” I ask, unable to bear their asinine behavior any longer.

“Our apologies,” answers Wyglif as he bows, but spews out another guffaw when he looks at Lars. This, of course, sends the huge youth off into his own round of laughter. “Barbarians,” I mutter. “Oh,” Wyglif says to Lars, “Now we’ve gone and hurt his feelings.” “How can you tell?” asks Lars. “He starts calling me a barbarian.” Finding themselves humorous, both erupt into another storm of laughter. I persevere. “I was bound hand and foot, gagged, and hauled out to the already-packed camels. I presume my father decided on camels just in case I did not return. They are not as costly to loose as horses. That idea stuck me profoundly. I was tossed across the back of one like a sack of dung. For modesty’s sake, a rough blanket was cast over me. In that ignominious state, they led me out of town to join Fadlan, who was already some miles on his way.

“My father’s guards escorted me for the next week, refusing to untie me unless at least four of them were present. Even then, they did not wholly untie me; only as much as was absolutely necessary to allow me to perform the few functions needed to keep me alive. Try as I might, I could not escape my bonds. Finally, when they did leave, they delivered a sealed order from the Caliph directing Fadlan not to untie me for at least another two months. Despite my sometimes-tearful pleas, Fadlan remained unmoved. The two months passed painfully and slowly. I do not wish to recount more of that experience here.

“We crossed so many valleys, climbed so many hills and forded so many rivers that I lost count. We plunged into vast virgin forests with as many trees as there are grains of sand in the Sahara. We scaled high mountain passes, where I experienced snow for the first time. Never having been a traveler, I was so hopelessly lost I knew I would never have been able to find my way home. With no reason to fear I might attempt to return to Baghdad on my own, Fadlan finally untied me.

“As the landscape around me became wilder, it became colder. As I became colder, I become more depressed. I began to wallow in my despondency. By day, I rocked back and forth on the cold back of my camel, wrapped in wool blankets and a state of semi-consciousness. By night I huddled near the fire, seeing my mother and Miral in the flames. “Often, I prayed to Allah to deliver me. But He would not. I prayed that He might at least deliver to me a bottle of nice port. Allah, in his wisdom, remained deaf to my pleas. One particularly difficult evening, when my body shook from craving for wine, I began to realize that perhaps my plight was just punishment for my sins. And despite my best efforts, I came to terms with my status. The sores on my backside became calluses, and my depression began to lift. “And after a great while, we arrived in the land of the Rus. Or at least that is what Fadlan told me.”

“I know of the Rus,” Lars beamed, glad no doubt he finally had a landmark to grasp. “They live far to the east and south of my people.” “Yes, well, it was there that I had my first encounter with you Northmen. I witnessed a most barbaric funeral, during which the body of one of your chieftains and the bodies of several recently murdered young slave girls were tossed into a perfectly good ship and burned. Of course, none of this is new to you, but I recall it was horrifying to me at the time.

“That would have been the funeral of Wyglif the Black,” Wyglif explains to Lars. “Ah,” Lars replies, as if this Wyglif the Black and his funeral are common knowledge. They probably are to these barbarians. “After the funeral, for reasons I could not comprehend at the time, there was a great celebration. I swear to you, Wyglif, I do not understand how you Northmen take such great joy from death. “I missed my libations greatly and I missed Miral. The Lord of Darkness saw his chance and tempted me. Mead and slave girls were offered to me in enormous quantities. The aroma of the alcohol wafted toward me, insinuating its wicked, invisible tendrils into my brain. And I could not take my eyes off these northern women. Their eyes of ice and bodies of pale fire promised illicit delights. Their coupling seemed more like combat but their vigor captured my imagination. Added to this already head-spinning mixture were the wild spirit of heathen carnival and so much exotic food that the oak tables groaned. Smells and tastes and sights overwhelmed me. I feared for my eternal soul should I succumb to temptation; and I knew I would succumb. “But then I spied a kind of remedy. As to the slave girls, I realized

they were already lost souls. They would remain just as lost whether I took pleasure from them or not. Surely a small dalliance with a lost soul was no great risk to my own soul. As to the alcoholic beverages, I reasoned that it might be safer to give in only a little to temptation. After all, taking one drink was certainly no mortal sin. And if I were to take just one drink, I could satisfy my craving and avoid the greater sin of over indulgence. Besides, was it not a great sin to turn down the hospitality of my hosts?

“I firmly resolved that I would strictly limit myself to no more than one, no two, ... maybe ... three cups of mead and no more than one ... well ... yes, one interlude with a slave girl. My limits clearly set in my mind, I set out to enjoy my hosts’ hospitality, assured my soul was safe.

“Alas, I reached my self-imposed boundaries much more quickly than I had anticipated. Fortunately, I realized one more cup of mead and one more slave girl were almost no more sinful than what I had already done. And since I had strictly limited myself to just two, or rather a few more cups of mead, I thought the cups should be large cups, to make sure I adequately slacked my thirst and avoided further temptation. As for the slave girls, I found two who were equally tempting. Rather than risk later temptation, I reached the reasonable conclusion that I had best partake of both immediately.

“Again, I reached my boundaries much more quickly than anticipated. Happily, I realized that no further damage could come to my soul if I continued to partake. In fact, I realized that my soul might be at even greater risk should I stop, only to succumb later, thereby committing two sinful episodes instead of just one. Besides, from this point on, I calculated I could no longer be held accountable for any sins I might commit because my judgment had been so completely impaired by the amount of alcohol I had consumed. Understanding for the sake of my soul it was safer to continue, I stopped thinking and partook greatly. “It was some time during that night that I believe I first met Wyglif. First he was my teacher, then we became competitors and finally we became friends in all forms of debauchery. “Let me tell you,” Wyglif says, “Abdallah didn’t need much teaching.” “Do you mind?” I ask Wyglif as I stretch my arms out to my sides, pleadingly. “I’d like to get this done before dawn.” He nods. “When I finally recovered my senses some days later, I stumbled toward Fadlan’s camp. All I found were a few gnawed bones, one scrap of dirty gray cloth, and some charred brands in several cold hearths. Fadlan had already departed and left me behind. I panicked. I dashed about, questioning everyone. However, back then I could not speak your language. What few words I learned from Wyglif during my days and nights of debauchery, were not appropriate in this situation. Even so, I surmised that Fadlan had left by ship several days before. “I desperately sought out my new friend Wyglif. With grunts and crude hand gestures, we worked out a deal. I would give him all the gold in my possessions and the fine sword my father had giving me when I reached manhood. In exchange, Wyglif would take me on his ship to catch up with Fadlan, or so I believed.

Wyglif interrupts my story and laughs. “How was I supposed to know that Abdallah wanted to follow his chieftain? Wasn’t it only natural to think that Abdallah stayed behind on purpose?” The youthful listener nods his understanding. “Anyone with half a brain should have known,” I state, “and how could you possibly think I wanted to go way up north to your kingdom?” “I had orders from my Lord Elderic to immediately deliver a message to King Olaf.” Wyglif looks to Lars for support. “I thought he wanted to come along for some adventure.

That's what any normal man would want do. Why would I presume otherwise?" Again, Lars nods in agreement. Barbarians.

"Wyglic," I sigh, "you ought to know by now that I am not a hero. It is vanity to seek glory and vanity is a sin."

"Nonsense," Wyglic counters. "And besides, I differ with you about your low opinion of yourself, at least most of the time." He turned to our young listener. "In this next part of the story, you will see what I mean." He stood and delivered a good-natured blow to the top of my head that felt as if it would drive my spine into the bench upon which I was seated. "This outlander has the true spirit of a mighty warrior in his tiny little body."

"I do not know about that," I respond humbly. He does not realize the risk such well-meant praise creates for my soul. I still have some small hope Allah may one day reclaim my soul. Nevertheless, it does feel good coming from him. "If you will allow me to continue...?"

"Certainly," he says and leans back, lacing his fingers together behind his head, and sighs, "though you men from the south are not very good storytellers."

"Thank you," I give him one more pointed glance and we both smile. "Having no knowledge of travel or these northern lands, I did not think it particularly odd that Wyglic took me farther west and north. We finally emerged from a river into a great green ocean, boiling with monstrous storms. When I expressed concern, Wyglic laughed and said it was only a little sea and the storms were only gentle spring showers. Indeed, he and his men seemed unconcerned as the ship crashed through waves taller than a man.

"I am surprised you noticed," smiles Wyglic. "If I recall correctly, you spent all your time emptying your stomach over the side." Even though it was so many years ago, the embarrassment still stings. He and the young warrior take far too much pleasure from my embarrassment.

"As I was saying, after several days, we crossed the ocean. During this time and despite my better judgment, I grew to like Wyglic and his men. I also began to learn your tongue. Not long after that I learned the enormity of our misunderstanding." "And you never saw some one so upset in all your life," Wyglic interrupts. "He was dancing around and squawking like some wounded bird." Wyglic stands so that he can imitate my frustration. I fear for another great eruption of laughter, so I hurry them back to the story. "To my great relief, we finally reached land. Wyglic wanted to push straight through. He said we could reach his village early the next morning if we continued to sail. However, it was so close to sundown and the wind was slack. Besides, we needed fresh water. Wyglic reluctantly decided to stop at the mouth of a small stream and hope to catch a strong morning breeze. We filled our water skins and set up camp. "Now we come to the good part," says Wyglic. He rubs his hands together in gleeful anticipation.

"Most of the men were off chasing some animal called a stag. I've never been very skillful at hunting. I saw no pleasure in making a fool of myself and so did not go with them. Wyglic and a few others had stayed behind to discuss some political intrigue or other. Since I knew none of the principals and had barely begun to speak your language anyway, I felt no great desire to sit with them. Instead I decided to go off into the woods to relieve myself of a pressing anatomical burden.

"A what?" the young warrior asks.

"He had to pee," Wyglic explains crudely.

"Oh," the young warrior says. "Why didn't he just say so?" Wyglic shrugs.

"Anyway," I frown at Wyglic, "I was day dreaming about the reception Wyglic's men had told me we would receive at his village. I was really looking forward to sampling the mead and the slave girls he had boasted about. Suddenly, I heard yelling and the unmistakable clang of weapons.

"Ah," said Lars as he smiled.

"Enemies of King Olaf the Gray had picked that time and place to ambush my mission," Wyglic steals the narrative, speaking in quick bursts. "They must have noticed so many gone on the hunt. We were outnumbered four to nine and they had the element of surprise." Wyglic pauses and laughs heartily, "Ah, there were many valiant deeds done that day. In the initial rush, three of theirs went down, but so did two of mine. That left only me and my brother-in-law, Anders, to deal with the remaining six of them. Anders had all he could handle as two of them drove him toward the stream. I was left with the other four."

"That is when I came running back into camp," I take the narrative back. "I saw those cowardly monsters around Wyglic. I was so frightened, I was unable to move."

"Then why did you do what you did later?" asks Wyglic.

"I still do not understand," I answer humbly. "Tell him about the Sword with No Name." Wyglic's thoughts change course that suddenly. He gets all excited and discombobulated by these adventure stories. Sometimes I believe that giant body of his houses the soul of some wonderful, brawling little boy. "If you'll stop interrupting, I'll get to that part," I say. Glaring until I am certain I will not be interrupted again, I continue. "It was the most spectacular battle I have ever seen. I stood there and just watched in awe. They attacked from all sides at once. He blocked a blow from one attacker, dodged a blow from another, and swung his mighty ax..."

"Skull Splitter," Wyglic interjected with a broad, silly grin. "Right. He swung mighty Skull Splitter at the third attacker, instantly killing him. The fourth managed to draw blood as he slashed at Wyglic's back, but my friend here did not seem to notice. He turned and attacked the others, taking one down immediately. The two remaining attackers threw their swords down on the ground then fell to their knees crying. They wept like women as they begged for mercy. I was not familiar with the warlike ways of you Northmen, but even I was offended by their groveling. "Wyglic spared them when they swore allegiance to King Olaf the Gray, Lord Elderic and himself. Accepting their word as honorable men, Wyglic turned and started off to help Anders, who was still struggling with the other two down at the stream. As soon as Wyglic turned, the dogs picked up their swords and moved to strike him in the back. It offended my sense of fair play. I suppose I became angry."

Wyglic takes the narrative back. "I heard an awful scream, like some devil caught in a trap. I turned and caught sight of a tiny blur as it flashed by to my right from behind. For a moment, I thought he was

another attacker, but then I recognized it was Abdallah. He had a strange ferocious look that I had never seen on his face before, kind of like one of those little dogs the Saxon princesses sometimes keep. As I turned to follow him with my eye I saw what those two oath breakers were up to. Before I could even prepare myself, I saw him neatly slice off the head of one of my attackers with that remarkable curved blade of his." "The Sword with No Name," asked Lars, enthralled. "The very same. Abdallah drew back in time to parry a sword thrust from the second man. Unfortunately for Abdallah, the second man also had a knife. My good friend here was slashed in the gut most savagely. I keep trying to teach him about that move, but he refuses to learn."

"I got that son of a dog, though," I blurt out, perhaps too proudly.

"Yes," Wyglif laughs then winks. He seems to think these occasional outbursts of mine are evidence that I really like it here. He turns once again to our young listener. "I tell you Lars, it was the kind of death every warrior dreams about. As his last bit of strength failed him, Abdallah crashed The Sword with No Name down on the head of the second man, splitting his helmet and most of his head. Oh," says Wyglif, enraptured, "it was one of those special deaths Wodin so seldom grants." "You must be beloved of Wodin," Lars says with awe. Wyglif beams a smile. Then the young warrior looks me up and down, reassessing me. He nods with approval and just a scrap of admiration. I swell with sinful pride.

"It was disgusting," I mutter. Allah, in his infinite wisdom, was right to send me here to be punished. I quickly change the subject. "Then you botched my funeral, you big stupid ox."

"How many times must I apologize?" Wyglif quickly turns defensive, practically begging our listener for support. "I didn't know the ways of his people. I gave him the best warrior's funeral anyone has ever had in my village. It was better than my own, as I recall. I even gave him my best, most enthusiastic slave girl." He turns back to me, "Now didn't I? Haven't you been satisfied with her?" I refuse to answer. Then he asks, "Well then, can I have her back?"

"I cannot say which is worse," I respond, "being torn apart by you fiends by day or that Nordic imp by night," I try to sound upset but can not suppress my sinful grin. Wyglif and our new friend laugh heartily. Despite my best efforts, so do I.

Lars stands to leave. The massive young man clasps my hand in thanks, crushing it. "It would be an honor and a pleasure to met you and your Sword with No Name on the field one day." "Yes, wouldn't it?" I lie and pump his hand again. May the day I meet Lars on the field of battle never come. However, just in case, I think I should begin to formulate a plan of defense. Lars allows me to extract my hand from his massive paw. With that, he is on his way. I look to the sky and scratch the rough stubble on my chin. From behind, the new morning sun dabs the edges of the craggy, frozen Nordic peaks and the underbellies of the clouds with blood red. It is daylight, time for battle. Wyglif stands and hefts mighty Skull Splitter, smiling in anticipation. I wipe the grogginess from my eyes, yawn, stand, and draw the Sword with No Name. It occurs to me that if these Northmen have a weakness, it is their exuberance. Sometimes they get so wound up that they forget to think.

"Abdallah?" Wyglif says as he smiles warmly. "I believe that in your heart you are a Northman and a warrior. What does it matter where a

man is born as long as he finds his place in the world? Admit it, Abdallah, you really do enjoy being here. You don't really believe your God has sent you to Hell."

One again he flashes that irking smirk of his. Then he charges out to greet the morning sun. To avoid suspicion, I follow, but allow his zeal to carry him just a couple of steps ahead of me. Let him think I lag behind because he is bigger, faster and stronger. His back is now exposed.

I draw back my sword and aim its razor sharp tip at the soft spot between the ribs protecting Wyglif's heart. He is wrong, of course. I take no joy in this after life. I have been sent to this Hell to be punished for my sins. "IF THIS BE HELL," I shriek just before I plunge the Sword with No Name into Wyglif, "LET US MAKE THE MOST OF IT!"

THE END

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