

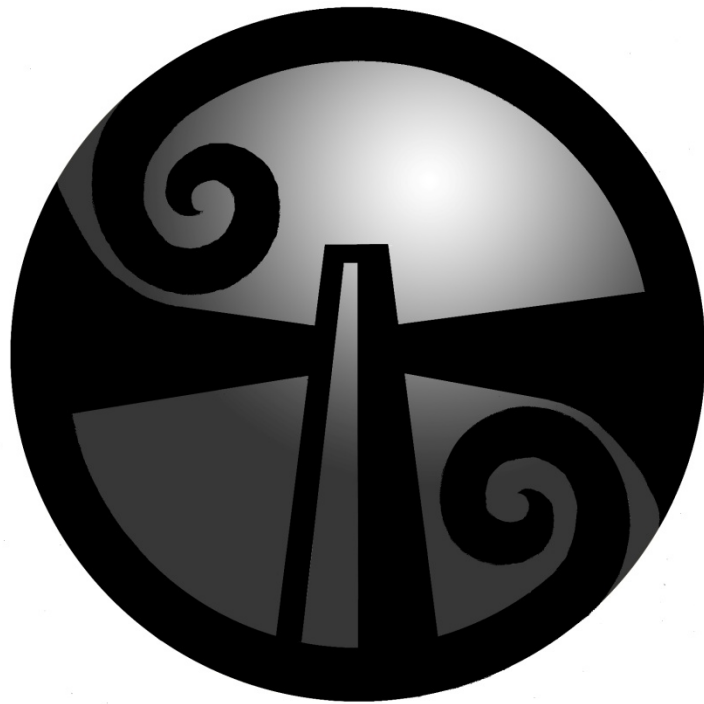
# CATCH

*a falling star*



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## INTRODUCTION

This issue marks *Semaphore's* one-year anniversary, an event I'm incredibly happy to see come to pass. Or will be, once I've had a good sleep and something to eat and stretched the cramps from my fingers and neck and slept some more and repressed the memories of all those hours spent battling with Word and the internet to get the damn thing online . . .

No, no, it's been great fun, even the bits where I feel like taking a hammer to my laptop. I've never had a project live as long as this before, and given that I started out last year with very little idea of what I was in for, I'd say *Semaphore* has done quite well in the survival department. There have been a few stumbling blocks – due to some bad timing on my part, the print edition of the first issue wasn't available until halfway through last December, and a few online issues have been delayed due to technical difficulties, but not so much that our rather behind friends in America noticed anything amiss. And despite these few difficulties, which none of you would probably have even remembered had I not just brought them up (bother), I think *Semaphore* has struggled to its feet quite satisfactorily. We've published some wonderful stories by both new and established authors, and it's been a thrill to work with them all – as some astute readers may have already noticed, several authors have popped up multiple times in the magazine, something which I myself am very pleased by: it is great fun to have correspondence with authors which extends past the usual being bludgeoned with manuscripts.

This month also sees the publication of the very first *Semaphore Anthology*, a book – yes, indeed, with paper and everything – which contains the very best of the last four issues' contents, as voted by our fantastic readers and thus perhaps as voted by *you*. It's a gorgeous little book (says the publisher as she strives to flog it off to all

and sundry), and I hope you'll have a look at it. In the meantime, enjoy this December issue, short as it is - and remember to pop off afterwards and tell us what you thought!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marie Hodgkinson', with a stylized, cursive script.

Marie Hodgkinson

PS For all her assumed astuteness, this editor has only just realised that this issue features our very first all-male author line-up. As she cannot tell whether this requires some sort of sweeping social statement or not, she will return to cursing Word for continually resetting the default language to US English.

# A Madder Scientist

By Stuart Sharp

“Are you sure this is really necessary, Edwin?” Cuthbert asked for what had to be the tenth time.

“Yes, Cuthbert,” Edwin answered, wearily. A polite cough behind him turned his attention to the man who stood there, looking neat and polished while the two of them laboured to drag The Apparatus up half a dozen flights of stairs.

“Yes, Mr Mackenzie?” Edwin demanded. The other man was over six feet tall, in his fifties, and with a nose that seemed designed to be stared down. Nevertheless, Edwin had resolved to maintain his manners.

“I just thought I should point out,” Mr Mackenzie pointed out, in a voice that was obviously happy to be doing so, “that, strictly speaking, you should be referring to Master Willington-Smithe as ‘Igor.’”

“But his name’s Cuthbert, man!”

“I fully understand that, sir. As I have pointed out before, however, as the executor of your uncle’s estate, it is up to me to ensure that his wishes are followed in the proper spirit.”

Edwin bit back an angry response. After all, it wasn’t the lawyer’s fault. It was his uncle’s.

It had all sounded so simple in the will. Edwin was to inherit his uncle’s estate, on the condition that he continued the family business. Edwin had been certain that the stipulations had said “scientist” in describing that business. It was hardly *his* fault if Mackenzie’s thumb had partially obscured the crucial word.

“What the world wants with a *mad* scientist, I’ll never know,” Edwin muttered, and then swore as he dropped a piece of the Apparatus on his foot.

“That’s the spirit, sir,” Mr Mackenzie encouraged, while making no move to help. “Although, strictly speaking, you should be cursing those people who held you back with their narrow mindedness.”

“Can we curse people who held us back with their narrow staircases instead?” Cuthbert asked above.

“I’m afraid not, sir, and I must insist that you take this matter more seriously. This is, after all, your uncle’s Great Work.”

Edwin snorted.

“I’m beginning to think,” he said, “that it is more a great deal of work than a Great Work.” Mr Mackenzie shook his head and made a note in a small, leather bound book.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, “but comments like that really aren’t helpful. How would science advance if we did not push it beyond the artificial bounds of what other men would consider reasonable, moral and even *sane*?” For a moment, Edwin fancied that the lawyer’s visage took on a hungry look, but the moment passed. Besides, Cuthbert chose that moment to drop something up above.

“Be careful with that Cuth . . . Igor!” Edwin corrected himself. He was beginning to think that Cuthbert wasn’t as helpful a companion in the venture as he had hoped. In theory, he was a man of science, at least on those few days when he wasn’t a man of cards, wine and shooting. It had seemed a good idea to bring him along, so that they could complete his uncle’s work in double quick time, thus freeing Edwin to do as he wished with the inheritance.

Unfortunately, Cuthbert had proven to be rather clumsier than was really safe. Already, he had dropped a jar of explosive chemicals, almost burning the lab down. Mr Mackenzie had seemed curiously happy about that, claiming that it was perfectly normal behaviour for the assistant of a mad scientist.

Edwin dragged his own burden onwards up the stairs. Piece by piece the pair of them assembled the Apparatus, until the fizzing retorts, slab and lightning conductors were all in place.

Between them, they carried the body-shaped sack up to the room at the top of the tower. It was body shaped because it held a body. Technically, Edwin thought, it probably counted as several bodies, but he didn't think too hard about that because hauling around parts of cadavers didn't seem like a terribly nice thing to think about.

Mr Mackenzie hadn't been entirely happy with it. Apparently, fashion in the "stitched-together corpses" community dictated that obvious stitches, badly matched parts and random pieces of metalwork should combine into something hideous. Instead, partly thanks to hitherto unknown needlework skills on Cuthbert's part, what lay on the slab looked like a perfectly ordinary young lady.

"I still don't see why you insisted on the dress, sir," Mr Mackenzie said from behind Edwin. He was so used to it that he hardly even jumped this time. "After all, it is entirely natural to come into the world naked."

"It would hardly be proper otherwise, man," he pointed out. "People would talk."

"They're *supposed* to talk, sir," Mackenzie pointed out. "Mad scientists are not just valued for their contribution to knowledge, but for their contribution to the edification of the great unenlightened masses."

"Nevertheless," Edwin insisted, "we will maintain *some* sense of propriety here." Deciding to change the subject, he looked out of the nearest window. The landscape outside was, needless to say, one of rustic splendour, but it wasn't the landscape Edwin was looking at, it was the sky.

One thing he'd noticed since arriving was that Mad Scientists and Englishmen had one thing in common. They both talked about the weather far too much. In this case, though, it seemed justified. They needed a lightning strike, or the three of them

would be sat there playing cards while the Great Work went unfinished. And Cuthbert tended to cheat.

Thankfully, an iron grey sky surrounded the tower, and lightning flashed in the distance. With the lightning rod up, they were almost guaranteed a strike. Edwin turned back to Mr Mackenzie. "I think we should hurry," he said, "we won't have long."

"Very good sir. That's far more like it. Enthusiasm for the Great Work."

Edwin didn't reply, but set off up the stairs at something near a run. Mackenzie didn't run, but when Edwin reached the top, he found the man right behind him. It was probably a trick they taught lawyers in these parts. They both drew to a halt as a scene of near carnage greeted them.

"Cuthbert . . . you idiot!" Edwin exclaimed, looking at the mess of glass and grey matter that lay on the floor. "You've dropped the brain!"

He thought he heard Mr Mackenzie's intake of breath behind him. If so, it was probably the first the man had ever bothered with. Still, he had a right to be upset, Edwin supposed. After all, it was Mackenzie who'd gone to the trouble of getting them a brain in the first place.

Cuthbert held up his hands in apology. "It's all right, I brought a spare just, in case."

Edwin took a moment to absorb that information.

"You brought a spare *brain*, just in case. In case of what, Bertie?"

"In case of this, mostly."

Edwin had to admit that it was a fair argument. Mackenzie fumed silently to one side, but Edwin guessed that was at least partly because he'd forgotten to call Cuthbert "Igor" again. With a sigh, he helped Cuthbert position the brain within the skull and waited while he sewed it up.

The next few minutes were busy ones, as the pair of them ran around flicking switches, connecting cables, and generally shouting instructions at the top of their

voices. There wasn't much point to it, because the whole thing was set to run anyway, but it seemed like a good way of impressing Mackenzie.

Eventually, Edwin leaned back against a desk, panting. Cuthbert passed him a bubbling test tube filled with some sort of pink liquid. Sure enough, it turned out to be pink gin when he knocked it back. Good old Cuthbert.

Lightning struck.

Electricity crackled through the Apparatus in an instant, blowing several circuits apart. Thankfully, they seemed to be the ones they'd installed for the purpose of blowing apart to add to the look of the thing. Edwin threw the really big switch, because there has to be a really big switch for these things, and a groan issued from the creature on the workbench.

"It's *alive*," Mr Mackenzie breathed. "It's *ALIVE!*"

"I say, steady on," Edward said. Mackenzie's eyes bored into his.

"Steady on? *Steady on?* Are you a mad scientist or aren't you? In fact, don't answer that, because I will. You aren't."

"I'm not?" Edwin's wave took in the lightning blasted tower, the Apparatus, and, crucially, the young woman sitting up with assistance from Cuthbert.

"No," Mr Mackenzie gnashed, "you're not. Not like your uncle was." He made a note in his notebook. "And I'll tell you something more; you can expect precisely none of your uncle's estate to pass to you."

"You can't do that," Edwin exclaimed.

"I think you'll find I can."

"So what happens to the money now?" Cuthbert asked.

"The money now goes to the alternative recipient in the will."

"Who's that?" Edwin demanded, and Mackenzie smiled nastily.

"Me."

"Excuse me," a feminine voice said. "But I don't think that's going to happen."

They both turned to find their freshly risen creation brushing down her dress, and examining the surrounding room.

“And why should you think that?” Mackenzie asked.

“Are you feeling all right, miss?” Edwin asked at almost the same moment, because he was that sort of chap. The young woman smiled, and Edwin couldn’t help but notice that it was a pretty smile.

“I’m fine, thank you. As for you, sir, well I can’t imagine that a court would simply take your word that these gentlemen have failed to fulfil the terms of a will, seeing as you stand to benefit. They would require proof, which I, as I understand it, am.”

Mackenzie laughed. “A highly speculative argument at best, young lady.”

The woman shrugged. “Alternatively, we could simply get this will overturned.”

“On what grounds?”

“Mental incapacity. The uncle was, after all, a *mad* scientist.”

Mackenzie shuddered.

“What *are* you?” he demanded. Cuthbert stepped forward.

“That rather brings us to our third point,” he said. “When you handed me the jar with the brain the other day, I noticed that a label had been removed. A quick search revealed this.” He brandished a label on which the words ‘brain of “Mad” Mike Fullsey, donated by the Fairfax hospital for the criminally insane’ could be clearly read, at least if you looked closely.

“You tried to kill us, you ratter!” Edwin exclaimed.

“Which is why I dropped the brain,” Cuthbert added, “and substituted one more suitable.” He held up another label. This one read ‘Miss A. Williams, probate lawyer.’

“A monster . . .” Mackenzie said, “you’ve created a *monster*.” He paused. “Perhaps . . . I may have been a little too overzealous in my assessment.” He made a note in the notebook.

“So I get the inheritance after all?” Edwin asked, and the other man nodded and then turned stiffly to walk out. Of course, since he did everything stiffly, it wasn’t much of a change. Edwin jumped for joy, and narrowly avoided banging his head on part of the Apparatus.

“Oh well done, Cuthbert. And thank you, Miss. I don’t know how I can possibly repay you both.”

The recently restored Miss Williams brushed her hands tentatively over her newly risen body. “Believe me, this is more than enough. Though I do have one other idea . . .” she gave Edwin a tentative smile.

Two months later a notice appeared in the Times. It read simply, “Mrs Beatrice Hartrington wishes to announce the wedding of her son Edwin to Miss Adele Williams on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month at St Barnaby’s Church. In the absence of living relatives, Miss Williams was given away by Mr C. Willington-Smithe, who also assisted with the stitching for the dress.”

# THE UGLY COPS

By James Trimarco

The night started out with a typical track-and-watch job. Although the client was anything but typical – the Chief Executive Officer of a major biotech firm – the assignment was ordinary as bagels and coffee. Like lots of other fathers, he was worried about his young daughter, and he'd retained me to keep an eye on her as she made her way through Manhattan's Lower East Side. I gave him a ring a few minutes after midnight and told him what I knew.

"This Larry O'Dell? Mehmet Yapici here. Your daughter started out with a couple of downtown bars. After that, she stood on the sidewalk making pretty talk. No funny business I could see. Then she took the Holland Tunnel for the Velvet Glove building. The man who opened the gate there seemed to know her. She left half an hour later and drove away, headed home. You got any idea what she might have been doing in your company's building?"

I heard gasping and wheezing from the other line.

"Mr. O'Dell? You all right?"

"They're out there . . . in their uniforms . . . if I had a gun. . . ."

"Hold on," I said. "What's wrong?"

"They're right outside my door," he said. "You've got to help me."

"Who's outside your door?"

"The police," he whispered roughly. "They're gonna break in. And they'll shoot me dead."

The man hasn't had his anti, I thought. Couldn't help but notice the irony: Velvet Glove Solutions, O'Dell's own company, controlled the sole license to manufacture and distribute Paxifan, the chief effect of which was a powerful fear of police. The government bought the drug on contract and put it in the tap water, in the crops, in pretty much everything. Only way to avoid it was to take anti, but

most people didn't qualify.

"Have you had your antis?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I got them from my locker at the company . . . they . . . only made it worse."

That didn't surprise me. I'd dealt with missed antis before and O'Dell's symptoms were too over the top for that.

"I'm coming over," I said. "Why don't you open the door and sit with somebody?"

"Open the door?" he gasped. "No!"

"I'm coming over right now," I said. "You may have received an overdose of Paxifan. You shouldn't be alone."

I heard a clattering as he set the phone down on a hard surface. A series of thuds came next, then the crackle of splintering glass and the tinkle of shards raining on the floor. I heard pounding footsteps, a faraway scream, then nothing.

~

The O'Dells lived outside of Newark and it took me the better half of an hour to drive there from downtown Jersey City. The house was tall and stately, with white stucco walls and smooth white columns out front. Flood lamps set in the lawn threw light on the building in glaring triangular streaks. Higher up, jagged spears of glass shimmered in the frame of the uppermost window.

I got out of my car. The midnight air carried a sweet scent of jasmine. I found Larry O'Dell's body at the top of the driveway with a pool of blood around his head. A thin stream of it trickled into the grass.

The front door swung open and a young man and woman stared out at me. The woman I recognized as Ellie O'Dell, the girl I'd been trailing. She was small and fine-featured with long hair the colour of unsweetened chocolate.

"I'm Mehmet Yapici from the Sunstar Detective Agency," I said. "I was working for Mr. O'Dell on another job when he called me about . . . this. Who are you?"

"We're, um, we're his children," said the young man. He was tall and thin in a

red sweater and wore glasses with thick tortoiseshell frames. He had wispy, cardboard-coloured hair that he parted in the middle and swept back over his ears.

"Have you called the police?" I asked.

"Of course," said Ellie. "Why aren't they here?" She was crying hard. She ground at her eye sockets with white fists covered in a sparkly slime of tears and makeup.

"Could you tell me your names?" I said.

"I'm Julian," he said. "And this is my sister, Ellie. You're a detective, then?"

"That's right." I pulled my investigator's license from my wallet and flashed it. "Since I was already working for your father, I'd like to go upstairs and look around while the scene is fresh. That all right with you?"

"You're taking antis, right?" Julian said.

"Yeah, all investigators do. We work with the cops, you know. Why?"

"I don't trust people who are on the Pax, that's all. Go upstairs and take a look."

Just then, Ellie let out a wail of grief. Julian tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him away so hard he nearly tripped over his Daddy's corpse. It was a savage push, claw-handed and bitter, with years of resentment behind it.

I slipped through the door and went inside. Very posh, with a sharp smell of latex paint. The front door led to a white hallway with black-and-white pictures of empty parking lots hung on the wall. That took me to a living room stocked with hard, metallic furniture. A brick fireplace with fake logs was the only thing that ruined the Manhattan vibe.

I climbed the stairs and found the door leading to the office. At first it wouldn't budge. I shoved harder and heard something fall. Something scraped against the floor as I pushed the door open and stepped through. I found a spacious room with a mesmerizing Persian rug in gold and green thread over parquet floors. All the chairs, together with an elaborate biometric exercise machine, had been piled in front of the door in a makeshift barricade. A desk stood just in front of the shattered window. The smell of smoke hung over everything.

I walked to the desk and looked at the things O'Dell had left. I saw a disc-shaped paperweight that projected a dim hologram of the Chrysler Building, an empty vial of *antis*, and the cellular phone O'Dell had used to call me. I followed the gray curls of smoke to a wastepaper basket under the desk. Two partially burned pieces of paper lay over discarded anti vials, laser discs, and cellophane wrappers. The least damaged of these was a letter addressed to Julian O'Dell. I squinted at the curly script until a phrase towards the end caught my attention: "You are my son and you should know I love you despite our disagreements. I hope what I am about to do will settle the matter once and for all."

The other letter mostly fell to ashes at my touch. On the one corner that remained intact, I could just barely make out the name of the addressee:

*Mr. Vincent Swarovsky*  
*Executive Vice President*  
*Velvet Glove Solutions*

I was still looking at that when the cops arrived. I shook some hands and then bald old Lieutenant Wu gave me his fearsome barn-owl stare.

"You find anything we can use, Yapici?"

"Just a couple letters in the trash."

"You mean *paper* letters?" Wu asked. "What was this guy, an antique collector?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he was trying to keep a secret," I said. "You want to run a chemical analysis on that vial over there? I've got reason to believe this man overdosed on Paxifan."

Wu raised his short, bushy eyebrows. "OD'ed on the Pax, huh? Bad way to go – and I say that as a cop. We'll let you know what we find."

I was deleting spam from my account the next day when the email arrived with their results. The vial contained twenty times the normal daily dose of Paxifan. The

stuff was incredibly clean, too – pure up to 999 particles in a thousand. Only the best for the CEO.

~

In the short time that I had known him, Larry O’Dell had always looked haggard and freaked out. When I asked him what was wrong, he’d pinch the bridge of his nose and mutter something about stress. But when they laid him in his casket, he looked hale and healthy as a teenager ready for the prom. Nobody knew their way around the new biotech quite like the undertakers.

I had come to the visitation to get another look at the family after Julian extended my retainer. Ellie hovered over her father’s body, her tears dripping onto the silver rosary in his hands. She brought her handkerchief up to her nose, honked into it, then rushed off to the bathroom. It was her sixth trip. She knocked over a chair. The girl was on something, I thought. Painkillers?

In Ellie’s absence, Julian and a woman named Kendra Pagan stepped up to the casket. Larry had told me about Kendra – she’d been his girlfriend for several months – but he’d never mentioned how young she was. She had long legs and fingers and her skin glowed like a china teapot full of boiling water. Her pale brown hair was as fine as a baby’s and fell in sleek waves down her cheeks. She held Julian’s hand while the two of them stood over the body.

Then a heavysset man with fat cheeks and wiry black hair put his hand on Julian’s shoulder. That would be Vincent Swarovsky, the number two goon over at Velvet Glove – and maybe number one, now that O’Dell was out of the picture.

The people left by twos and threes until only Julian and Kendra were left. I waited in the parking lot and cornered them on their way out. Julian had tiny hands and made no effort to overcompensate when he greeted me; his shake was like being tickled with a feather.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I need to ask you a few questions.”

“It’s not exactly the best time.”

"It would help me if you tried," I said. "Every day means another day for the killer to cover his tracks. Or hers."

"All right then," he sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"Did you fight a lot with your father?"

His brows darted downward. "I didn't kill him, Mr. Yapici. I loved my father."

"I didn't say you did."

"I suppose that he has to ask that, though," Kendra said. "It's part of his job. Everybody knows you disagreed with him."

I shrugged. "Would you mind telling me the subject of those arguments?"

"Not at all," Julian said. "It's very simple. My father designed the Paxifan system. He was proud of it. I was proud of it too, but I never approved of the way it was used. I understand why the government wants it. And a good portion of ordinary people wants it, too. I haven't forgotten what the riots were like – despite what editorial writers might say about me. But Paxifan in the water isn't the answer. Not in a democratic society, anyway. It's mind control, plain and simple."

"You said this to your father?"

"All the time."

"And do you take antis yourself?"

"I do," he said.

"How'd you get the script?"

"I applied. I have a PhD in philosophy so I guess they assumed I wasn't violent." He chuckled at that. "And they must have known who my father was."

"They must have," I agreed. "Now, the police have analyzed the materials we found on your father's desk. It appears that someone replaced his antidote with enough Paxifan to dose twenty people."

Julian's face contracted. He looked like he'd just been punched in the gut. "So he jumped . . . out of fear?"

"I spoke to him on the telephone before he died," I said. "He was convinced the cops were in his house."

Julian blinked rapidly.

"Do you have anyone in particular that you would suspect of this crime?" I

asked. "Someone with a motive?"

Julian stared at the ground. "I don't know," he said. "I suspect everybody. I hate to say it, but my sister was furious with dad. She frightens me sometimes."

"What was she mad about?" I asked.

Julian started to answer but Kendra cut him off. "Ellie never liked me for him," she said. "She thought I was too young."

"Yeah," Julian said. "Then she really lost it when Dad started supporting your dance company."

"Do you suspect her?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

They got in their car and drove away. Five minutes later I was on their trail, following a GPS transmitter I'd stashed under their hood before they came out. They parked outside a red-brick factory building with curtains in the upstairs windows. They were holding hands as they went inside. I waited there until two o'clock in the morning, at which point I figured Julian was staying for the night.

~

The next morning I found the highways empty as usual and turned off at an exit to get gas. The electronic signs above the station proclaimed prices of more than ten dollars a gallon. I was thankful I could put mine on the expense account I'd worked out with Julian. A small group of people stood together in front of the pumps. A heavysset man in a leather jacket fired shots into the air and waved a burning torch, threatening to set a fire if somebody didn't pour his friends some gas. The people behind him pumped their fists and cheered. The scene reminded me of the riot years and I was about to look for a less nutty place to fill up when a black and white police car rolled up. The people backed down within seconds. Some of them even left their cars behind. The man in the leather jacket stood there cowering, like a mouse cornered by a cat.

That was life for the ones on the Pax, I thought, as I pulled up to the nearest pump and swiped my expense account card. Just the sight of a cop in uniform set their knees shaking. Nobody really liked the idea, but we were more scared of the

alternative. During the first congressional debates on the issue, a representative had asked why Velvet Glove couldn't manufacture something that would prevent people from rioting in the first place, instead of making them fear the police once the trouble had already begun. The company said that was impossible. Fear of a particular visual stimulus – a uniform for instance – was doable. An aversion to rioting in general was not. In the end, Congress decided that if Paxifan could do the job, Paxifan it would be.

Thirty minutes later I strolled into the lobby of the Velvet Glove building in Newark.

"I'm here to see Vincent Swarovsky," I said.

"Mr. Swarovsky is very busy," said the green-eyed secretary, tapping her cheek with a light-pen. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Sorry. But let him know it's the detective on the O'Dell case."

Swarovsky requested that I come up immediately and I took the elevator to the twenty-second floor. I stepped out into a wide hallway lined with wood paneling. The doors, the ceiling, even the potted plants felt slightly bigger than normal, like they were designed for a company where all the employees took growth hormones to intimidate the competition. I stepped through a hologram of a waterfall and found another secretary who showed me in to Swarovsky's office.

"Nice place you have here," I said. From the window I could see the buildings of Manhattan, tiny and stained a yellow by miles of intervening smog.

"Isn't it?" Swarovsky said. "Now, you'll have to make this fast, Mr.--what was your name again?"

"Yapici."

"That an Armenian name?"

"Turkish."

"Great people, the Turks," he said, smiling.

I winced. "Yeah."

"As I was saying, I'm extremely busy," Swarovsky said, his eyes on his computer screen. "It's amazing how people will always find something to fight

about. Here we are, a company with a product that really helps people and we've gotta spend all our time fighting lawsuits and whacko 'activists.' I don't know what this society is coming to."

"What whacko activists do you mean?" I asked.

"We got people brewing up unlicensed antidotes to our product. We're looking at ways to make Paxifan constantly mutate so that their bogus antidotes won't work."

I considered that. "Don't you worry that even the licensed antidotes might not work if you did that?"

Swarovsky huffed. "Of course not. We'll be able to predict the mutations precisely. Unlicensed antidotes represent a grave danger to our nation, Mr. Yapici."

"All right," I said. "I'll try to make this fast. When did you last see Mr. O'Dell?"

Swarovsky stopped typing and twirled his light-pen between his fingers.

"He was here the day he died," he said. "He went to work. That was the last time I saw him alive."

"Okay," I said. "Now, what's your take on these arguments between him and Julian?"

Swarovsky rapped his pen against his desk. "I didn't probe into Larry's personal business. But I know Julian saw things differently. He tried to convince his father to make antis available over the counter, for instance. And his father, in all his wisdom, told him no. We'd be back to the riot-times in a matter of days. Besides, it would wreck the company. The government would see that Velvet Glove couldn't offer the high-quality security they expect."

"How about Ellie O'Dell?" I said. "Larry ever talk about her?"

"He did, actually. He was closer to her. He never mentioned any problems."

"Then do you have any idea why she comes into this building in the middle of the night on a regular basis?"

Swarovsky's cheeks drooped as if someone had cut the strings holding them up. "I don't want to bring shame on his family, Mr. Yapici."

"Why does she come into the building, Mr. Swarovsky?"

"I'm afraid she's hooked on a drug. The kids call it Officer Friendly. It's a

cocktail of Paxifan and a synthetic barbiturate. Apparently it reverses the effect, makes the user feel completely protected by the police, even if there are none around."

"And you let her come in and take what she wants?"

"Her father requested, Mr. Yapici. He wanted her to feel safe. I assume you'll keep this information confidential. Now if you don't mind, I need to get back to my business."

~

Ellie O'Dell volunteered at a centre for refugees burned out of Southern California. I made an appointment to meet her there the next morning, but the door to her office was locked. I tried her mobile phone. She picked up without saying hello. I could tell from her breathing that she'd been crying.

"Ellie? What's wrong?"

"It's my father," she said. "I miss him so much. If only there was something I could do. But I can't and it's all my brother's fault. Right up to the end he was relentless."

"Relentless about what?"

"You know what! Every day it was the same. Arguing over the Pax and 'Oh, this is mind control,' or 'Oh, this is fascist,' and all. How do you think that made dad feel? Towards the end he was so pale I thought he might break in two."

"Where are you, Ellie?"

"Jersey Turnpike," she said. "I've been driving for hours."

I was glad the rioting crowd I'd seen outside the gas station wasn't around to hear her say that. Everybody obsessed over their fuel like an alcoholic with one last case of hooch. They'd be liable to do some damage if they knew she was cruising around just to blow off steam.

I asked her exit and then told her to meet me at Andy's Diner off the next off-ramp. Twenty minutes later we were sitting in a booth. The wind had blown her long hair into tangled ropes of brown and a crust of grit lined her puffy eyes. Her pupils were dilated so wide I could have poked a finger through them. A stray slash

of lipstick across the side of her nose completed the effect.

"I want to say thanks for everything you've done, Mr. Yapici."

"You're welcome," I said.

"You're . . . you're almost as good as a real cop."

She didn't seem to be reading the menu so much as staring at it. I suggested the Belgian waffle, which she ordered, and got a tuna fish sandwich for myself. When the waffle arrived, she cut it into tiny squares and put them into her mouth one at a time.

"These are good waffles," she said.

I nodded, watching her layer three different kinds of syrup over the remaining pieces. "So you've just been driving around all day?"

"Yeah. I can't bear to go into the centre. I mean, I've got my own problems. My father's dead, his ex-girlfriend is living off his money, and my brother's chasing her around like a schoolboy."

I noticed a bit of tuna stuck to my moustache and scraped it off with my napkin. "Kendra is living off your father's money?" I asked.

"She doesn't even bother to hide it," Ellie said. "The whole time she was with him it was always 'Oh, if you want me to marry you, show me how much you care.' And that meant Benjamin Franklins. And he gave them to her. And not two weeks later, Dad jumps out the window. I guess she'd gotten all she needed."

I took a sip of water.

"And you know what really gets me? She was always kind of agreeing with Julian about Paxifan. I'll bet the two of them planned his murder together." The girl sniffed three times and broke into tears. "And Daddy cared enough to listen to them. You know? He really cared about what Julian said. And then they turned around and . . . Oh!"

"It's all right," I said. "But are you saying that Julian killed your father for his money? Wouldn't he have stood to inherit half of it anyway?"

"That's not the way he thinks," she said. "He's crazy. He doesn't deserve to inherit any of that money. Listen, if it came to me I would use it to help the refugees."

It could pay for good, strong policemen to patrol the refugee camps and keep everyone safe and happy.”

I was so busy trying to think of an answer that I missed it when she paid my half of the bill. Then she bid me a mushy goodbye in the parking lot, kissing me on both cheeks and looking long into my eyes. I was anything but charmed. I pulled out enough money for my meal, and held it out for her to grab. She wouldn't take it. Then she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, hopped into her little yellow convertible, and drove away.

~

It was right about then I got the call.

“Is this Mr. Yap-somebody?” said a woman's voice.

“Yapici. Who's this?”

I heard frantic breathing. I was beginning to think that was the new way of saying hello.

“I said, who's this?”

“It's Kendra Pagan. I'm, I'm freaking out, Mr. Yapici. It's the cops. I don't know what I've done, but they're here. You can explain it to them, can't you? That I haven't done anything wrong?”

For a moment I was speechless. I'd been narrowing down the list of possible killers, but I hadn't expected a second murder attempt. I'd have to figure that out later. For now I needed to make sure it stayed an attempt. I told Kendra I'd be right there and raced over to her loft.

I found the front door locked. Not only that, but it was covered with some kind of clear, soapy fluid. I stopped wiped the stuff on the brick wall to my side. My hands still felt slimy so I wiped them again on my slacks. I rang the bell, but no one answered. She probably thought I was the cops. I went to my car and got a crowbar from the trunk. I stuck it under the edge of a metal grate over the window and humped on it with all my weight. The grating pulled back a little. Red grit poured out from around the screws that held it in place.

Then I stopped. What if the cops saw me doing this? I saw a policeman, bald

and pot-bellied and stereotypical, standing right behind me. His crisp blue uniform rustled as he came towards me, his billy club swooping down to play ping-pong with my head.

I'd been dosed. The stuff on the door – someone had been expecting me. I had some spare antis in the car but the cops made it impossible to think. They had snarling faces like doberman pinschers. They called me a Fez-head and a rotten Turk guinea. One of them pulled a gun out of his holster and drew a bead on me.

I don't know how I broke that spell. Probably I just couldn't take another minute of it. I swung the crowbar in front of me and stumbled down the metal stairs. I pulled the car door open and jumped inside. I swept the faces away, jerked open the glove compartment, and downed my antis without so much as a sip of water.

The next five minutes were hell. But then it simmered down. A few minutes later and I'd ripped the grating from the window and climbed inside Kendra's loft. I heard a moan coming from the bathroom.

"Is that you?" I cried. "It's me, Yapici – let me in!"

Kendra didn't answer. She just screamed. It wasn't the kind of scream you forget. It was high and deadly and went on and on. It stuck in my ears like a knife in a board.

I thought about calling up Lieutenant Wu, but I didn't want to think of how Kendra would react if she saw him. So I broke down the bathroom door myself. Hot water was spraying from both sinks and the steam hit my face like a wet mop. I found Kendra sawing at her wrists with a piece of a broken mirror. Her white skin hung in strips from her arms and the blood was already searching for the drain. I grabbed the screeching woman and stuffed a cap of antis into her mouth. She scratched and bit at me and by the time it was over, my face and arms looked like I'd gone for a sleigh-ride in a barbed-wire factory.

Wu and his boys showed up a while later. I told them how I'd stepped into the rat-trap out front and showed them the slime. They got back to me that evening with the results of their analysis. It was Paxifan all right, dissolved in water and dishwashing detergent. There were traces of genetic material, too. And they belonged to Julian O'Dell.

~

The next few hours were busy ones. First I paid Kendra a visit in the hospital. Julian was there with her. I made him stand in the hallway and shut the door.

"I suppose you heard Julian's DNA was found along with the Paxifan in your place," I said.

Kendra sat up in bed. Her wrists were heavily wrapped in bandages.

"Are you telling me you think it was Julian?" she said. "But he wouldn't do that to me! We've been together for months."

"Even when his father was alive, Ms. Pagan?"

"Yes," she said, tears welling up her eyes. "I wanted to tell Larry that I couldn't be with him anymore, but, but . . ."

"There was the money, wasn't there?"

She breathed in, deeply. "Yes," she said. "There was the money. I run a dance studio out of my loft. It doesn't always pay for itself. I needed his money."

"Was anyone else around your place today?"

"Maybe," she said. "Most of the morning I was just dancing. I really go into a trace. Anyone with a key could have been there."

I thought of Ellie and her whole morning spent on the Jersey Turnpike. I left the hospital room and headed to the refugee centre to see if I could find her. As usual, she wasn't there. This time I used an electronic locksmith to get the door open and stepped inside. I checked the file cabinets and the closet. Then I yanked open the desk drawer and found what I was looking for. A loose key, a bunch of vials caked with white powder, and a bucket still wet around the bottom.

Ellie must have been hoping that Kendra would off herself and that Julian would be take the rap. Then she'd be set to inherit all her dad's loot. But she couldn't have thought too much of my sleuthing if she expected me to take her bait. Just like a junkie to kill the old man first and then go in for the competition. And to pick the girl's lover as the frame-up job. . . . It was sloppy work.

I called Wu and gave him the scoop on Ellie. Thirty minutes later he called back to let me know they had her.

"I've never heard a woman curse like that in all my life," he said.

I was glad I hadn't heard it.

~

After they'd picked Ellie up I went back to the hospital to see how Julian was doing. He looked tired but calm as he sat holding Kendra's hand.

"I'm sorry it had to be her," I told him.

"Yeah," he said. "But how did you know it was her?"

"First of all, she was always the one with the access," I said. "She's hooked on some mix-up of barbs and Pax they call Officer Friendly. So she picked up shipments of the stuff all the time. That made her a likely suspect in your father's murder. Then she went out of her way to tell me how much she loved him, and tried to charm me with a kiss, and told me lies about driving all day on the turnpike. None of which was evidence, exactly, but it was damned suspicious."

"She was very strong-willed," Julian said. "Father was like that, too. But with him I was at least making progress. I don't know if that will ever happen with my sister."

"Hold on," I said. "What was that about making progress with your father?"

He straightened his glasses and raked his hair back over his scalp. "When I started telling him about the problems with Paxifan," he said, "he just argued his own side at first. But then he started to listen. I told him he should make the antis easier to get, so we could work together to wean ourselves. There's no way to know now, but I believe he might have done it."

I thought of the two burned letters on the old man's desk. Suddenly I had the piece I needed to put them together.

"Hey Julian," I said. "I think your sister may not be quite as bad a number as we thought."

"What's that?"

"You heard me. We've got her red-handed on this business at Kendra's loft, but she didn't kill your father."

~

I drove back to Velvet Glove headquarters and found Vincent Swarovsky sitting at his desk.

"How goes it?" he asked.

"All right," I said.

"Ellie went to jail, huh? Such a shame. A girl killing her own father like that. I don't understand what's happening to this society."

"Yeah," I said. "It's real sad."

He must have heard the sarcastic edge in my comment because his he raised his eyes from his screen and let them settle on my face.

"I know you killed Larry O'Dell," I said.

He jumped almost imperceptibly, then grinned like an affable regular at the neighbourhood bar. "Ha ha! There's that cockeyed Turkish sense of humour!"

"You were my chief suspect from the start," I said, "until Ellie mucked things up with her copycat routine. First there was the Pax that killed him. Pure but for one part in a thousand. If a tweaker like Ellie had made the switch there would have been sweat, mascara, and who knows what else in there."

"That's amusing," Swarovsky said. "But where's the motive? Larry was the backbone of this company. You think I'm glad to have him gone?"

"I don't think it, I know it," I said. "You told me yourself that you thought any plan to make antis more widely available would turn the company bottom-up. And that's just what Larry wanted to do, isn't it? After fifteen years of arguing with his son, he was finally ready to ease the qualifications. You thought it would ruin you."

"That's just speculation."

"After Larry jumped, I found two papers on his desk," I said. "One was addressed to you, but he'd burned it up real good. The other one was addressed to Julian. It said he hoped something he was about to do would put their fighting to rest. I thought he was talking about jumping through a window. But he was talking about the other letter, the one he was about to send to you, the letter that said from now on Velvet Glove was going to make antis easier to get."

Round beads of sweat appeared on Swarovsky's forehead, each one as big as a dime.

“It must have been hard for him to write that letter. He knew the authorities wouldn’t like it. Not the government, not the company, not you. Maybe he kept it in a drawer for weeks. That would explain how stressed he seemed at the end of his life. Meanwhile, you had decided to get rid of him. So you switched the antis in his locker. He took them at home and started seeing those ugly cops. He must have thought they would find his letter and punish him for it. So he burned it. Then he jumped.”

Swarovsky reached under his desk. He pulled out a white plastic pistol and levelled it at me.

“Get out or I’ll shoot,” he said.

“No you won’t. I’ve got enough cops downstairs to take your whole company in. And unless you want to live out the kind of paranoia you put Larry through for real, I suggest you let me put the cuffs on you.”

“No,” he said.

“Put the gun on the table.”

“You don’t want to do this,” he cried. “You’ll bring back the riots and the looting.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed the first digits of Lieutenant Wu’s number. “You want me to call the guys in uniform, then?”

He put the gun on the table and held out his hands.

“You can keep me in there for a little while,” he said. “But you’ll be back to get me out. The Paxifan mutates now. I designed part of the algorithm myself – no one understands it but me. The antis won’t work. Even the cops will be seeing cops.”

“I hope that’s not true,” I said.

“Oh, it is.”

“Then you can give the authorities that information from prison.”

I watched him go to jail with a smile on his face. Smarmy bastard. I don’t know if what he said was for real or not, but if we ever did need information from him, I could think of a way to make his interrogation go lickety-split. Cruel, yeah. Awful, yeah. But nothing worse than what he put Larry O’Dell through. Nothing worse than the ugly cops.

# THE WITCH – A CLINICAL CASE STUDY

By Joseph Reich

*The witch opens her door*

*to escape folklore . . .*

Flicks on her electric fire

and sparks a cigar.

Checks the clock

on her coffee maker

and recharges the vibrator.

Takes chattering teeth

out jaw and gently lets

it fall to cocaine mirror.

Screws off splintered stilt

and sticks it in hole

in floor leaning it

up against door

to keep out

hookers and whores.

Composes curses for

the sleazy and soulless  
neighbours then goes on  
to pray for bad weather

*The witch opens her door  
to escape folklore . . .*

Her man took off on her  
on a motorcycle  
to New Mexico  
and now stores  
sex symbols  
and super heroes  
in shoes boxes  
in her walk-  
in closet

*The witch opens her door  
to escape folklore . . .*

All her daughters have left her  
who once were gorgeous . . .  
tomboys of the

neighbourhood  
radiant and  
rambunctious  
who used to spit  
sunflower seeds  
into each other's  
hair at sunset  
now simply going through  
the motions going into  
the fortune-telling business  
with cheating husbands  
who have all left them  
(This tradition  
this rendition  
has been passed  
down from generation  
to generation, as they  
now shuffle through  
The Lower East Side  
suspicious on the sly  
with glowing cat eyes  
powder-blue suits  
tap shoes

and dangling  
roses having fallen  
for much younger girls)

*The witch opens her door  
to escape folklore . . .*

Getting back to daughters  
they have all become  
parasitic and vindictive  
or what the abusive  
psychiatrists call it  
passive-aggressive  
having turned on each other  
competing on every other corner  
wasting away in windows, aloof  
and apathetic, catatonic on  
cell phones, picking at their  
beauty salon nails with pastel  
views of paradise, chewing pork rinds  
while all you hear are their bastard boys  
cry—"You don't know what you're talking of!"  
right below blaring globes which read—"Fortunes To Go"

*The witch opens her door*

*to escape folklore . . .*

All her sons have become dope addicts

either in jail or underground

having interestingly been

found dead in alleys

or having robbed a string

of Friendly's upstate

having become the

punchline for all

the inmates

(Having once

been seen

screaming

at sisters

beneath rainy

movie theatres

in Brooklyn-

"I'm not proud

I'm a junkie!")

*The witch opens her door*

*to escape folklore . . .*

and pulls out a batch of fresh-baked road-kill

straight from the oven, lights a candle

and while half-blind, and now numb

all over from what life has wrought

her, stands dazed in a haze

watching the radioactive

sun squinting through

pine needles with window

cleaners high up above

cleaning the panes

of the sanctuary and

slaughterhouse and

factory with thieves

stealing the

cable

of next door

neighbours, then

starts to go through her

obsessive-compulsive

rituals of kissing every  
souvenir and tchka  
in her rent-  
controlled  
hole-in-the-wall, as this  
is the only thing which  
makes her feel  
safe and secure  
and hasn't  
betrayed or  
deserted or  
taken off . . .  
then proceeds  
to turn on  
the game shows  
with those road-kill  
sandwiches and mugs  
of Carnation Instant Breakfast

*The witch opens her door  
to escape folklore . . .*

and sees a sudden gaggle of crows  
stalking a coyote in her backyard  
thinking to herself - "No one ever  
seems to leave anyone alone . . ."  
Now feeling at home, contented,  
demented, even convinced she's  
lived a pretty charmed existence  
or about as well as can be expected.

# ON THE ROAD TO CATMANDUEL

By S. Arthur Yates

As I entered the Mini-Mart, the hackles on my neck leaped to attention, yet a furious glance of the store only revealed only the clerk and a young woman.

From the side, she appeared to be in her mid to late twenties and was dressed as a black cat for Halloween. At about 5' 9", we were about the same height. But, unlike me, she was thin – at the most 120 pounds. Her three inch heels did a fantastic job of showing off her lithe form and a really nice butt. However, it was her hair, a tossed salad of colours, that refused to let you ignore her. Punkish spikes of red, yellow, blue and green wrestled for attention on an ebony field of steel wool.

Trying not to be obvious, I kept an eye on her as I approached the counter. The attendant cleared his throat to get my attention and looked at me, questioning.

"How much for a coffee and donut?" I asked.

"\$3.15 plus tax," was his bored reply. I guess he got that question a lot.

"OK, here's \$27.65 – all I've got. Put the rest on pump three."

I was watching him ring it up when I got an uncomfortable feeling and then felt a tap on my shoulder. She was right next to me.

"Mister, where are you headed?" she purred.

That first view of her face took my breath away. Her short hair framed a face of alabaster skin, a turned up nose, thin lips – in a passionate red – and a smile that shouted playfulness. Emerald eyes that seemed to glow in the dark made it perfect. Drop. Dead. Gorgeous. I had to swallow a couple times before I could reply, "North on 280 to Pregnant, then on to Delivery. Why?"

“Well, I want to go to Conception, and as it’s on the way to Pregnant, I was wondering if you could give me a lift. I’ll pay for your snack and a full tank of gas if you give me a ride.

The clerk gave me a warning look, but this was too intriguing an offer to pass up.

“Sure,” I said in the most comforting voice I could muster. “Glad for the company.”

She must have been anticipating my answer because quick as a cat she was sliding a hundred to the clerk and pushing my money back at me.

As she sat in the car, out of the downpour, I filled the tank and went inside to get the change from the pre-pay. When I got back, the radio was blasting an electric dance tune. I turned the volume down and handed her the change. It disappeared – I’m not sure where, as she wasn’t carrying a purse.

As I pulled onto the highway, I glanced over and asked her her name.

“Kathleen, but my friends call me Kitty. And you?”

“Rex. But my friends call me Rex.”

Her giggle was infectious and brought a grin to my lips. This was going to be a great trip – in so many ways.

“So, how did you get stuck at the Mini-Mart?” I asked. “And, why would you ask a complete stranger for a ride? That’s not a very smart thing to do in today’s environment. Not that you have anything to fear from me. I’m really just a puppy dog.”

“I was hangin’ with my girlfriends when they called me catty. In my stupidity, I said that I didn’t need them and could get along on my own. They decided to prove me wrong. So here I am. And, I’m not some helpless little girl. I’ve been taking care of myself just fine for a number of years.”

“Well, why didn’t you call someone to pick you up?” I asked.

Starting at her head, she swept her hands down her body. "Where would I keep a cell phone? I was just lucky to have some cash hidden away."

As I followed the movements of her hands, it was clear there wasn't any place to keep a phone with that outfit.

"No pay phone? The clerk wouldn't lend you his cell?" I asked.

"When I asked, the jerk laughed, pointed to an empty spot on the wall, and then asked what it was worth to use his phone. If it hadn't been raining so hard I would have just left."

"Wow. That takes big ones."

We continued to chat. She told me she was studying to be a vet at a College in Conception. I told her that I was a free-lance trucker. That's why I was on my way to Delivery - I had found a load and had a delivery to make.

~

We had been on the road about thirty-five minutes, had just passed Foreplay and were still half hour from Disappointment, when I pulled into a rest area. The moon had just risen full. It was time.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she demanded. "You'll regret trying anything with me. Bigger men than you have tried - much to their chagrin."

Again, the hackles on my neck stood out. She was making a statement, without any hint of fear. Something wasn't right, but I couldn't stop. Much to my shame, I never can. The only way I can live with it is to embrace it.

Quickly, while I could still be understood, I turned to her. "You really seem like a great girl, and I am sorry about this. But, my advice to you is - RUN!"

The change was underway and she just sat there, laughing. No one sits there laughing when I change. As my face agonizingly morphed into full canine - snout extending, teeth protruding, saliva dripping - she casually opened her door and stepped out. Again, no panic, no fear.

I stumbled out of the car as my new body ripped through my clothes. My back arched, legs pulled in and down, dark brown fur where once there was pink skin. With the change complete, I bound to the hood of my car, ready to hit the ground running. I was shocked to see her still standing there with that Cheshire grin.

“Oh, this is too good to be true,” she said.

Seeing her standing there, head tilted playfully to the side, made me pause in my pursuit.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” she teased.

With that, she changed. While my metamorphosis is hard and violent, she just settled into her new shape. It was like I was forced into this abomination and she was returning to her natural state. Where once stood a beautiful woman – now crouched the most graceful creature I had ever seen. What were the odds? In the whole world, there may be a few hundred werewolves. And here I was, confronted by a were-cat.

My instincts overcame my wonder, and I pounced. When I landed, she wasn’t there. Sharp claws pierced the thick coat on my back. I spun and turned my head to bite, but she was gone.

She stood a few feet away, head cocked to the side, that wonderful grin still there.

Then, the contest was joined for real. Growls and hisses filled the air, echoing off the surrounding buildings and trees. I got a quick bite on her hind leg, but released it at once as a paw of five knives slashed my eyes. She sunk her teeth into my haunches, but I shook her off without much effort. We circled each other, feigning attack just to back off. I rushed in and she leaped aside. She’d try to get behind me, but I could spin faster than she could run. She tried to pounce on me, but flipped away as I jumped to intercept. And she always landed gracefully on her paws.

The fur was flying. At times I thought I had her, only to find my jaws clamping on air. My howls of frustration would draw attention, but I didn’t care because, in

reality, she was getting the better of me. I was stronger, but she was faster. Much faster. I faltered – I'd gotten soft over the years. It had always been so easy. I'm used to a two minute chase and five or ten seconds to finish the job. This was work.

Bloodied, tongue lolling, drizzle rolling off my coat, I made a desperate lunge to finish this quickly – while I still could. But I slipped on the wet pavement and I hit my head on the curb. I wasn't out, but dazed. In no time she was on me, teeth bared for the killing bite.

I closed my eyes as thoughts of my long bloody life flashed through my mind. Perhaps this was the way it was supposed to end. At least it would be quick. The curse would end this night.

Then I felt it. A sheet of wet sandpaper on my face. I opened my eyes to see it happening again. Her long pink tongue was making a second pass of my muzzle. Then, in a flash she was gone – devoured by the night.

I lay there a while, thinking about what had just happened. I had certainly taken a licking. Another thing was certain – I would be back at that mini-mart the next full moon. And on Halloween – full moon or not.

# BEYOND DEATH

By Lance Young

It was funny. When people thought of heaven, they usually imagined a place in the clouds or something resembling the Garden of Eden, all sunshine and flowers. Very few thought of an office complex hidden away in a leafy, nondescript suburb on the outskirts of the business district. Carlton Haggard, Billionaire industrialist, also doubted that the actual pearly gates boasted this much security, but then this was a hell of a lot more exclusive. Or so he observed, silently, as his heavily armoured luxury vehicle pulled up to the complex's security centre and was examined by all manner of guards and exotic security devices, including a couple produced by his own company.

Patience had never been one of Haggard's strong suits and the little he had been born with had faded away as he grew older and angrier. Now aged 150 it had all but disappeared. "Godfrey, tell those morons to hurry up or so help me, I'll have all of them fired when I finally get inside." Haggard's long suffering assistant replied in his usual measured tones: "Yes, Sir."

He leapt out of the vehicle and proceeded to give the hapless guards a severe tongue-lashing.

Haggard's anger temporarily sated, he fell back exhausted into his seat, disgusted with his present condition. It was a sentiment that had become all too familiar in recent years. In his youth his physique had been a source of pride to him and envy to others. And it had been produced the old fashioned way, none of that artificial body sculpting that was all the rage nowadays. Sure, Haggard had taken life-prolonging drugs but that was just common sense: no point dying if you didn't have to, but when it came to physical fitness he was his own man. Time and illness however had reduced Haggard's once massive frame to that of a living skeleton.

Haggard had used every medical advance known to man legal or otherwise to keep himself alive, but he had finally reached the limits of what was available. His body was failing and the only things keeping him from death were extremely expensive experimental drugs and his own steely determination.

It was an unbecoming fate. But – and the thought made Haggard smile – it didn't have to be *his* fate. He just hoped that the brochure was accurate. If this was all some scam to lighten his wallet, he'd make sure he lived just long enough to punish everyone who worked here or was associated with them in anyway. It was cruel to provide dying people with false hope.

A flushed Godfrey got back into the vehicle. "Sir, these gentlemen were less than agreeable but rest assured we will be entering the grounds within moments."

As if on cue the gates finally opened up and Haggard felt the vehicle move forward beneath him. The company had an exquisitely laid out garden, but Haggard was far from impressed. In his time he had seen so many that he rarely took notice any more. A little originality was something that always seemed to pass them by.

The vehicle came to stop and the doors to the complex opened up. The woman who glided out to meet him was so perfect in appearance that Haggard immediately thought she was either a robot or had had a lot of work done.

The greeter flashed him a smile. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Haggard. My name is Sophia."

"I couldn't care less what your name is," interrupted Haggard. "Spare me your inanities and take me to your boss." If the greeter was bothered by his tone, she didn't show it. She just flashed him another well-rehearsed smile and gestured towards the lobby. "Of course, Mr. Haggard, if you'll follow me. We'll head straight to Mr. Travis's Office."

Haggard suppressed a sigh; he might as well not have made the effort to get riled up for the effect it had on her. He forced himself to relax and told Godfrey to follow her. As he watched her walk briskly in front of him, an idea popped into his head. When this was wrapped up he'd have her fired. That would crack her little

facade. Assuming she was human of course. And if she wasn't – well, he would buy her and have her deactivated. Not as much fun as dismissing an actual human, but it would suffice.

The assistant smoothly opened the wooden doors and gestured for him to enter. The office was large and spacious with a large window overlooking the bay. Its centrepiece was a large metallic desk which looked like the hood of an ancient car, all curves and chrome. The walls were dotted with various pieces of artwork depicting famous battles and other historical occasions. Haggard had no doubt that the images were continuously altered to suit the temperament of the client being wooed. It didn't impress him, but it showed that they had done their homework.

There were also a few statues scattered about. The one closest to him caught his attention: it showed some generic classical hero slaying a monster. He smiled inwardly and wondered whether he the monster or the hero.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with brown hair and a slick-looking smile got up from his chair and made his way over. "Mr. Haggard. I'm Travis Cord, CEO of HI. It's a pleasure to meet you." Cord moved to shake his hand.

"So everyone keeps telling me," said Haggard. "But I didn't come here to make friends." Taking the hint Cord quickly retracted his hand and replied solemnly: "No, you didn't. You came for help. Before we get started, can I have Sophia get you anything?"

Haggard shook his head. "Just get to the point."

Cord made an expansive gesture with his arms. "To put it simply, Mr. Haggard, our operation is about cheating the consequences of death. It's about second chances."

"Go on."

"I used to work at a University doing studies on bioenergy and its uses. During my research I uncovered a previously undetectable energy field inside each person that contained the essence of who they are. A person's life force, if you will – or what

some would call a soul. I came to believe that this life-force could be extracted before a persons dies and placed in a matrix preventing it from crossing over."

"I find that most remarkable, Mr. Cord. You don't look intelligent enough to discover such a thing, but please continue."

Unruffled by Haggard's slight, Cord continued with his well-rehearsed speech. "Now I'm no theologian, Mr. Haggard, I don't know what - if anything - lies on the other side, but let me put it to you this way. If you've led a life that might not be as moral as most, do you really want to take the risk of where you'll end up? I say if you have the resources why not create your own afterlife without the risk of eternal damnation or worrying about the morality of your life's work."

"All right, Cord, you have my curiosity. What exactly am I getting for my money?" asked Haggard.

A smiling Cord replied: "Effectively, your choice of afterlife. We will remove your life force and place it in a chamber, which we call a Paradise Cube. The Cube is indestructible and has its own self-replicating power source. Which means it can run forever. Inside it you can create your own version of paradise where time has no meaning. The cube will be transferred to our deep space storage facility where you can sit out eternity in comfort. There you will be visited annually to make sure there are no problems and if for some reason you wish to take your chances on the outside you can be released from the cube during this review."

"Who exactly runs this facility? It's not aliens, is it? I hate aliens."

Cord shook his head. "No, No, No. Absolutely no ET's allowed, I can assure you of that. The facility is mostly automated, and we hope to have it completely automated within a few years. Don't worry, Mr. Haggard, if something happens to the Human Race, you will still be well looked after. But that said we do keep a few Human handlers on station, for emergencies. We intend to keep the Human touch going for as long as possible."

"Very commendable of you," replied Haggard before bluntly stating: "How much?"

For the first time, Cord's features tightened slightly. "It is not a cheap procedure, but bear in mind what we are providing."

Haggard replied slowly as if each word was composed of multiple syllables. "How much?"

"It's two hundred million for the removal and another five hundred million for permanent storage."

Haggard replied hesitantly. "That's a lot of money, even for a dying man. What sort of guarantee do I have?"

"Well, we can't bring you back to life if you don't like your surroundings, but in the highly unlikely chance that something does go wrong all of your money will be returned to your estate - minus, of course, a small administration fee of ten million dollars. The Government - highly unfairly, I might add - also insists we pay a penalty fee of one thousand million. All quite unnecessary, I can assure you. We have so serviced over one hundred clients from some of the wealthiest families in settled space and nothing has gone wrong so far."

Cord flicked a switch on his desk, activating a hologram display with the HI logo. "Here, let me show you a few testimonials from some of our very satisfied clients." The logo dissolved and was replaced with the image of a smiling, youthful-looking, dark-skinned man who filled the screen like a colossus. His features looked familiar, but Haggard couldn't quite place him.

A deep, booming voice began to address him. "Hello. When I discovered that I was dying, I immediately contracted the services of HI and I haven't regretted it once. Hell, I wish I had thought of it sooner. I urge you to take advantage of this opportunity at once. It will be the best decision you have ever made."

There was something eerily familiar about that final sentence that finally lit a bulb in Haggard's mind. "I know that man."

"Yes." said Cord "That was General Klara, former leader of Mobutu Prime."

Haggard nodded. "Yes, the Butcher of Greentown. I thought he sounded familiar, but he never looked like that even in his youth. He was a lean, skinny-looking fellow."

Cord smiled. "In the cube you make your own image. There are no restrictions."

"Interesting," replied Haggard softly. "Very interesting." Although his features remained cautiously neutral, Haggard could feel just the smallest tingle of excitement building inside him. But he had been through too many false hopes before to start believing in this one just yet. "Well, Cord, I'm rich enough and desperate enough to be interested. But I want to see this facility that takes so much money."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Mr. Haggard," replied Cord easily. "Let me show you to the chamber room, where all the magic happens."

The corridor was decorated with overdone images of bright green meadows and sun-drenched beaches. Cord passed the time describing the artists involved and Haggard nodded, pretending to care. But all of his attention was focused on the dome-like building he could see through the windows.

As they turned a corner the chamber's massive metal doors loomed in front of him. They looked like they would have been more at home in a maximum-security prison. Positioned at both sides were two stone-faced, heavily armed guards. Only when Cord had been completely scanned did the doors finally rumble open. Haggard craned his head to get a good look around as he was pushed in.

Haggard wasn't entirely sure what to make of Cord's grandiose contraption. It was massive to say the least, over 20 metres high and a mixture of silver and gold in colour. Its most prominent feature was two large metallic arches that connected in the centre. Beneath this crossover was a small, person-sized, spherical chamber that was connected to the arches by a series of smaller metallic pipes that ran along the ground. The largest of these was connected to very sophisticated workstation, which

Haggard guessed was where the 'paradise cube,' for want of a better term, was installed.

A petite, very young-looking red-haired woman walked confidently over to meet them. She was clad in a tight-fitting, white lab coat and sported the rather old-fashioned accessory of eyeglasses, which emphasised her blue eyes. Beaming a pearly white smile at them, she greeted him. "Mr Haggard, a pleasure to meet you. I'm Doctor Saffron Devere, Head of Operations"

Incredulous Haggard turned to Cord. "Is this some sort of joke? I came here expecting to see a serious scientific endeavour. Instead I find your so-called head scientist is probably worrying if anyone's going to take her to the school ball. I think I've seen enough. Godfrey, it's time to leave."

Cord moved swiftly in front of him. "Please, Mr Haggard, don't let the Doctor's youthful appearance dissuade you. I worked with her at the University and I can assure you she is a genius of the highest calibre with more degrees than I can remember. It was her expertise that helped finally to refine the process."

Unfazed by Haggard's denigration, a still-smiling Devere continued. "It is a common mistake made by many, Mr Haggard. Concerning my age, I am actually 27 and I didn't go to my school ball as I was conducting a very delicate experiment at the time."

"Fine. Show me some proof of your credentials - and stop smiling, it's getting on my nerves," grunted Haggard.

"No promises, Mr Haggard," replied Devere. Making her way over to a nearby computer terminal, she continued, "My achievements are a matter of public record, feel free to look them up. It's all there."

Haggard wasn't sure what was annoying him more: her youth, her intelligence or the very fact that nothing he had said so far had actually gotten to her. He was starting to wonder if there was something in the water here that allowed them to handle difficult clients without it bothering them. He had tried something similar in one of his companies, but the Union had found out, and continuing with it would

have been more trouble than it was worth. Haggard typed her name into the search engine. With seconds a full profile of her appeared on screen complete with a picture of her smiling back at him. Grimacing Haggard finally replied. "All right, 'Doctor.' Show me the machine."

Smugly, Devere replied, "Right this way Mr Haggard."

Despite his misgivings, Haggard looked at the machine with a longing he had previously reserved only for money and very occasionally women. Finally he asked the only question that really mattered, trying hard to keep the desperation out of his voice. "So it really works?"

Devere replied. "Well, it's a very complicated process that involves fluctuating energy fields, and . . ."

Haggard snapped. "I don't care how the warp drive is aligned with the flux capacitor, Doctor! I just want to know - does it work?"

Haggard's eyes bored into the young scientist and he wondered if she had any idea that her life depended on what she said in the next few seconds.

"It works, Mr Haggard. I take my reputation very seriously. I wouldn't attach it to something that didn't do what I promised. Is that good enough for you?"

Haggard nodded, satisfied. He recognised an earnest answer when he heard one and the young doctor practically bled sincerity from her pores. A less scrupulous person might take advantage of that and for a second he found himself re-evaluating his opinion of Cord: perhaps there was more going on behind that bland smile than he gave her credit for. He turned his attention back to the good doctor. "This is quite an invention you have here, Doctor. Do you not have a problem with cheating God in such a blatant way?"

Devere responded with a smile that was a world away from the ones she had previously been projecting and Haggard actually felt a chill go up his spine. Perhaps Devere wasn't quite the innocent she made herself out to be either.

"I wouldn't be much of a scientist if I did, Mr Haggard." She replied. "Science is all about cheating God in one form or another." She patted him lightly on the

shoulder. "Without it you would have been dodging demons with pitchforks and lakes of fire a long time ago."

Haggard laughed. "Despite my reservation,s Doctor, I'm beginning to like you. If I was a bit younger, we could have had a few interesting weeks together."

"Just a few weeks, Mr Haggard?" replied Devere coyly

Haggard shrugged. "Any longer than that, I tend to lose interest. It's my curse."

"Well," said Devere. " You won't have that problem again if you sign up with us. Time will no longer have any meaning for you."

"You can cut the sales pitch, Doctor. I'm adequately convinced. When can we start?"

Cord's eyes practically lit up with dollar signs. "Whenever you're ready, Mr Haggard. We'll fit you in anytime."

"I'm sure you can," replied Haggard cynically. "I need some time to make the necessary arrangements, but I want to get this done quickly. Let's say Wednesday. I don't have time to waste."

Cord replied with a suitably fake smile. "Don't worry, Mr Haggard. We'll have everything ready."

Smiling once again, Devere said, "We also invite you to have family present. Make an occasion of it."

Haggard replied with a snort. "My family and I don't get along."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Family should never fall out," replied Devere sympathetically

Haggard shrugged. "They had a problem with me selling weapons to some general who used child soldiers. It's not like they've got schools to attend or families, I told them. Everything had been destroyed in the fighting. But there was no getting through to them. So I said if you have some objection to my blood money, don't worry because you won't be getting any more of it."

“Well, I hope you will try to see them before the end,” said Devere.

“I prefer to focus on the future, Doctor. I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

With a slight smile, Devere replied: “Don’t worry, Mr Haggard, you won’t be disappointed.”

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Energised by sense of adventure he hadn’t felt in years and a comparatively large dose of drugs, Haggard hadn’t stopped moving since making his appointment; he had far too much to do to waste time on sleep. Godfrey had warned him about taking so many of the drugs, but Haggard didn’t care. He would be long gone before he felt any of the side effects. He had an empire to sort out and final insults to deliver to people who had annoyed him in the past but hadn’t been worth killing or had been too important to risk alienating. In a twist he found deviously cruel, the majority of his money was going to form the Clayton Haggard Institute for Peace. Something he was sure his children would appreciate as they tried to grab a piece through the courts.

Haggard particularly liked his final send off to the President: it was a very private recording which, once released to the press, would make re-election very difficult come November. That would teach him to denigrate Haggard in the media. Of course it wouldn’t be made public until a week after the funeral; Haggard wanted him there in the front row. It would make what was coming next even sweeter, even if he didn’t see it himself. Yes, people would remember Clayton Haggard, whether they wanted to or not.

Haggard was making final notes right up to departure time, until finally Godfrey tapped him on the shoulder. “Sir, I believe it is time we got moving.”

Reluctantly putting his pen down, Haggard allowed himself one last look at the study where he had spent so much of his time. It was lined with books going back hundreds of years. Haggard had been a prolific collector and he wished he could take the actual copies with him, but he supposed he would see them all again soon enough. Finally he said. “Right then, let’s go.”

For Haggard the ride to Heaven Incorporated alternated between going much too fast or far too slow. Haggard considered himself a man of action: when he set his mind to something, he did it, and to hell with the consequences. But even he could have doubts. Was this the right thing to do? This wasn't minor surgery. This was his immortal soul. Was it worth playing games with? Maybe if he buckled down there was still time to redeem himself.

It was then that his natural stubbornness kicked into gear. Haggard shook his head. He had lived his life the way he wanted and by his rules – he wasn't going to allow anyone or anything to stand in judgment of him. He had exercised total control over his life and he intended to do the exact same thing with his afterlife. Regrets were for the weak-minded.

With his doubts tucked away once and for all, it was with a huge degree of relief that Haggard noticed that they had finally arrived. All too eager to get his hands on Haggard's money, Travis was already waiting at the door to greet him.

“Exciting day, isn't it, Mr Haggard?”

Haggard was indeed excited, but that was hardly the final impression he wanted to leave. “I suppose it is,” he replied noncommittally. Escorted by Travis and a small group of his flunkies, they quickly arrived at the Transfer chamber, where they were met by Dr Devere and a handful of what Haggard assumed were technicians. They were all clad in skin-tight white jumpsuits, although the garb was hardly flattering on some of them. As soon as she saw them enter, Devere put down her datapad and made her way over.

“Mr Haggard, good to see you could make it.” She gestured behind her. “This is my team; they will be helping out with the procedure. All the best in their field, I can assure you.”

Ignoring the gathered scientists, Haggard replied, “Please, Doctor, considering you're about to suck my soul out, we can afford to be a little less formal. Call me Carlton.”

Devere smiled. "Then you have to stop calling Doctor. You'll make me feel old."

Haggard grinned. "Considering you're the youngest one here, I believe there's little chance of that."

"Well you're not getting younger, Mr Haggard," interjected Travis. "We should get started."

Devere nodded. "We'll need to get you out of those clothes and into a special gown we have created. Do you need any assistance?"

Haggard shook his head ruefully. In his current emaciated condition he was careful about who saw him in his natural state and he wasn't about to give some girl barely out of nappies something to laugh at - or even worse, to pity. Quickly raising his head he said: "No, thank you, Godfrey here will help me with the preparations."

Devere smiled all too understandingly. "OK, Carlton, that's fine. Go get yourself changed and we'll begin as soon as you are ready."

Godfrey manoeuvred him over to a nearby changing facility. Haggard looked into the mirror provided and grimaced. Stripped of his clothing and placed into something resembling the now all too familiar medical gowns, Haggard was painfully aware of how far he had fallen from his prime. As Godfrey finished up he said: "Any final requests, sir?"

Haggard thought about that for a moment then he smiled and handed Godfrey his gold watch. "If my family asks what I left them, give them this."

Godfrey smiled. "You are all heart, sir."

Haggard laughed. "I know; it's always been my one weakness. All right, enough sappy sentimentality. Time to die. Wheel me out."

Returning to his normal neutrality Godfrey replied softly, "Yes, sir."

Now suitably attired Haggard allowed the nurse and one of the Technicians to help him into the transfer chamber at the bottom of the mechanism. As they placed him, Haggard felt a sense of foreboding. The shiny metal slab was about as

comfortable as one would expect a glorified metal coffin to be and he squirmed around for a number of minutes trying to make himself comfortable. Finally satisfied that he wouldn't be spending his last few moments with the memory of something sticking in his back, Haggard motioned to the waiting technician that he was as ready as he was ever going to be. The technician began strapping in Haggard's limbs and it wasn't long before Haggard rasped: "Careful, idiot! You're not tying your Christmas Ham."

The technician exchanged looks with the nurse before replying, "My apologies sir, but please try to keep still."

Haggard was about to give technician a piece of his mind, when Devere popped her head over the side. "How you holding up there, Carlton?"

"Apart from these two buffoons trying to strangle me, I'm fine." His expression softened slightly. "I suppose its natural for patients to get a bit nervous before the procedure?"

Devere smiled. "You're on the threshold of something totally new. It's only natural to be nervous. Just remember everyone here is a professional."

She slapped the technician on the back. "They can take anything you dish out. So if you want to let rip for a few minutes go for it."

The technician gave Devere a look that showed what he thought of the idea, but Devere took no notice. A wry grin on his face, Haggard replied: "Tempting, but I'll have all eternity to chew people out. I'd prefer to get going."

Devere nodded, "All right then, we'll get going."

Haggard watched nervously as the chamber almost completely sealed up, the metal hatch stopping at his neck. Devere looked down at him, biting her lip nervously. "Now before we begin, Clayton, there's something I should warn you about."

Haggard narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Devere took a deep breath, "In the selling stage we tend to understate the pain levels you'll be experiencing."

"Exactly how much pain are we talking about, Doctor?" an angry Haggard asked.

"Well, for the next five hours you will be in the most excruciating pain of your life - it will feel as though your every cell is on fire. But what are a few hours of pain for eternity, right? So try to think of something happy. I hear it helps. See you on the other side." Devere then swiftly disappeared.

The happiest thing Haggard could think of right at that moment was throttling the good doctor. He was about to launch into a rant when a transparent cover sealed the chamber completely. Haggard's eyes darted around; he could feel sweat running down his face and once more he cursed Devere. She might have had the best of intentions in warning him, but for once in his life this was information he would have preferred not to know.

Suddenly he saw a series of blue lights running up and down his body, pulsating with ever-greater frequency. Haggard calmed himself; so far, so good. It was hard to keep track of time in the chamber but Haggard estimated this went on for at least five minutes, to little or no effect. Haggard considered the possibility that something had gone wrong with the procedure. Any second now, the cover would slide back and they would be bowing and scraping before him in abject servility, apologising that nothing like this had ever happened before. It was just then that a blinding light filled the chamber - and in those final few seconds of life, the last thing Haggard heard was the sound of his own screaming.

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"Mr Haggard . . . Mr Haggard? Clayton! Can you hear me?" Haggard wasn't sure how long it took his mind to finally react to the voice echoing in his head. Confused and feeling weaker than a newborn baby, it felt like ever longer before he was finally able to stammer: "Is that you, Dr. Devere? Where am I?"

“I told you to call me Saffron,” she replied reproachfully, then continued in a gentler tone: “Welcome to the afterlife.”

The blinding white light that smothered his every sense finally began to dim. His eyes adjusted to reveal an impossibly vast grass plain, under a cloudless blue sky. Directly in front of him stood Devere, clad in her white jumpsuit and looking like she had just stepped out of the lab. Pausing to take it all in, he finally said: “You mean I made it to the other side? You actually did it?”

“Of course. You didn’t doubt me, did you?”

“A little bit,” admitted Haggard. But his joy was cut short as he looked down at his hands and noticed with horror that they were still as withered as before, and that his legs were as lifeless as they had been for the last two decades. Bitterly, he said, “Then why am I still old? You told me my form would be whatever I wanted it to be. Or was there something else you and Travis forgot to mention?”

Devere shook her head and kneeled down beside him. “You’re still in this form because this is how you remember yourself. It will take you a while to fully adjust yourself to this new existence. But with a little focus you will find anything possible. Try this: think of an apple.”

A doubtful Haggard closed his eyes and concentrated his every thought on creating an apple, but to no avail. Giving up, he said, “It’s not working.”

“Then what is that?”

There beside him was a green crisp looking apple. Haggard laughed disbelievingly. “I did it!”

Reaching over, he picked it up. It looked, felt and smelled like the real thing.

“That’s a good start,” said Devere. “Now think of an apple tree.”

Haggard once more focused his entire mind and hoped this time would be easier, but if anything he found it more exhausting. He was about to stop in disgust when his mouth dropped open in amazement: a tree had just appeared out of the soil. It began as a sapling but quickly transformed into a fully-grown tree covered in

leaves and apples. Haggard found himself laughing uncontrollably. “Amazing. Simply amazing.”

Devere walked over to the tree and tapped the trunk. “Now think of an entire forest.”

Haggard closed his mouth tightly and concentrated. After the difficulty of the first two, he thought creating the forest would be the most difficult of all. But instead it was far easier; he had barely started to picture it when trees started popping out of the ground fully grown all around him. “This is incredible.”

“It gets better. You created these trees. Now do the same thing to yourself.”

Haggard looked down at his age-ravaged hands and watched as they came back to life, the flesh filling out once again. Within seconds he could feel the same thing happening all over his body. He felt better than he had in years; probably better than he had ever felt. Jumping to his feet, Haggard lifted Devere into the air and spun her around, before finally placing her back on the ground. “I’m alive again! Saffron you must stay and help me celebrate.”

Devere replied, “Thank you, Carlton, but this is your paradise, not mine. I have to go. I’ll be back, but until then – have fun.”

She waved goodbye as her form dissolved into nothingness. As he watched her disappear, Haggard replied: “I intend to.”

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As Haggard made his way out of bed, he wondered just how long he had been dead. Time had long ago lost any meaning for him and so he had stopped taking notice of it. He slept when he felt like and woke when it suited him, the days and nights always perfectly matching his mood. As did his choice of companion. Right now, slumped in exhaustion, were the naked bodies of the greeter he had first met at Heaven Incorporated – and, of course, the good doctor herself. The real one may have declined his offer to stay, but the faux Devere had been more than accommodating. Haggard strolled over to the mirror to once again marvel at his new

younger body: having just satisfied one of his physical pleasures, he now intended to satisfy another.

Out on the plain surrounding his castle he was assembling an army and was about to lead it against another force he had created a short distance away. As a small boy he had enjoyed playing with toy soldiers and had always wanted to be a knight – now, finally, he was getting his chance. He would lead his legions through mountains of blood and death, celebrate his victory with his ladies, and then do the whole thing again tomorrow. A grin came over his face as he pictured days of blood and fire that never had to end.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Haggard turned around, thinking one of the women had spoken, but when he looked back at the bed they were both gone. Haggard slowly examined the room. “Devere, was that you?”

But there was no reply, leaving Haggard perplexed. This was his world; people didn’t vanish unless he wanted them to. He looked out the window and noticed for the first time that the sky had darkened. Thunder rumbled and bolts of lightning lit up the sky. The air was filled with screams as his troops began withering away into dust like they had never been there. Haggard leapt down from his tower, a full ten stories, and ran to the remains of the nearest soldier. He scooped up the sand before letting it slip through his fingers.

A loud crack brought Haggard’s attention back to his fortress; the ground beneath him began to rumble as dozens of cracks started running up the castle’s walls. Haggard flew a safe distance back, as he watched his once mighty fortress collapse into nothingness. An angry Haggard yelled, “Who’s there? If you’re a real man, show yourself!”

It was eerily quiet as Haggard waited for a reaction, with just the howling of the wind to keep him company. This answer was far from satisfactory.

Haggard suddenly felt very weak, his legs giving out beneath him. He looked at his hands with horror as he saw them shrivel up in front of him. “No!”

Haggard tried to pick himself back up, but to no avail. It was then that he noticed the swirling mass around him. Closer inspection revealed it to be millions upon millions of vicious looking insects. Haggard tried smashing the closest ones with his fists, but there were too many and he was too weak. Within seconds they were swarming all over him. Haggard couldn't even scream as they began stripping away his flesh. Time seemed to stop as the assault continued, but eventually they crawled away, leaving him bloody and ragged. In total agony he gave up trying to move and collapsed to the ground, unable to see as the insects had eaten away his eyes.

Then, wonderfully the pain just stopped, and the parts of him that had been devoured started to grow back. But as his vision returned, Haggard suddenly felt the ground open up beneath him, and he found himself plunging down into a dark, dank, slime-covered pit, before slamming into a stone floor. Haggard yelled in pain, but he soon realised that he was still in one piece. As he peered upwards the pit sealed itself up, blocking him off from the sky above, while the cave walls transformed themselves into something that looked like an ancient dungeon. Chains sprang out of the stone, sealing tightly around his limbs, pulling him up off the ground into a spread-eagle position. Dazed by the recent turn of events but still defiant, Haggard snarled: "Is that all you've got? I went through worse during my last physical!"

A disembodied voice that was neither male nor female filled the dungeon. "Defiant to the last. Tell me, Mr. Haggard, how are you enjoying your afterlife?"

"Go to hell," replied Haggard testily. "I find out who you are, you're dead." Haggard instantly regretted the hostility of his words and he involuntarily flinched as laughter boomed off the walls. "It is good to see you still have spirit. It will make breaking you that much more interesting."

"Who are you? What do you want, money? I have resources – stop this madness and you can name your price. Word of honour," replied a half-hearted Haggard. He tried to raise his hand as a gesture of sincerity, but the chain was too tight.

The voice replied derisively. "You talk of honour. That's laughable. A man who sold weapons to anyone and everyone so long as they had something to trade. Drugs, money, even slaves – it was all the same. The human cost never occurred to you, did it?"

"The slave thing only happened once, and I let all those people go!"

"I suppose that makes you humanitarian of the year, does it?"

It was then that a form materialised around the hidden voice. Haggard groaned. "Devere, you're behind this?"

A black-clad Devere replied coldly, "My family lived on Heimdall. That name ring any bells?"

"I dealt with a lot of worlds, you expect to remember them all?"

Devere shook her head. "No, that would be expecting a bit much – you have devastated so many worlds."

She looked up angrily at him. Haggard felt the chain around his throat tighten just a little bit more. "Here's a reminder. You sold weapons to the rebel forces despite it being illegal and then bribed your way of jail. You devastated an entire world, just to make a little more money for yourself. I lost half my family thanks to you and spent ten years growing up in a refugee camp, scrounging for food and hiding from roaming gangs, until we were finally granted asylum on Earth."

Haggard shrugged. "If I hadn't sold them, someone else would have. It was just business. Nothing personal."

Devere replied with a big smile that Haggard found less than welcoming. "Well, this is personal. Very personal. I couldn't believe my luck when you came rolling through the door. It was like Christmas. I'd always wanted to get back at you, but you know how it is. Other things keep coming up and it got pushed to the back burner until now."

"I'm so happy I could oblige you," replied Haggard sarcastically.

“Yes – it was hard to keep straight a face when I meet you. I was afraid you’d change your mind.”

“Well I’m certainly having second thoughts now,” said Haggard. “I should have gone with the all-natural version.”

Devere stroked his cheek gently. “You don’t deserve an easy afterlife, Clayton, and I’m going to make sure the Devil gets his due.”

“Do you do this to all clients?”

“Actually, you’re the first. But there are others who don’t deserve the gift I gave them. Perhaps it’s time they were punished, too.”

A desperate Haggard tried appealing to Devere’s conscience. “I thought you were an intellectual, Doctor. This isn’t justice. It’s revenge, plain and simple. Stop now before you do something you’ll regret.”

Devere chuckled softly. “Mr. Haggard, you are severely underestimating just how much I hate you. And I’m not about to be lectured on matters of justice by the likes of you.”

“We can settle this, Devere. Just tell me how much you want.”

“I don’t want your blood money, Haggard. Just your blood.”

With his appeals to her conscience and greed failing miserably, Haggard tried appealing to her sense of self-preservation. “You can’t win. Put me back before my lawyer comes to check on me and we’ll call it even.”

Devere laughed lightly. “No one knows you’re missing, Clayton. Remember, I designed this system, this universe. I used your brain scan to create a perfect replica of your mind. When your lawyer or any of your other flunkies come to visit, they’ll never know they weren’t talking to the real you.”

“Your boss Travis will know there’s something wrong. That you’ve replaced me with some substandard copy.”

Devere shook her head. “In case you haven’t noticed, Travis can’t see past his own wallet. He stopped doing any actual technical work along time ago. Now all he

concerns himself with is trawling for more pathetic excuses for humanity like yourself.”

Devere made her way over to him, her expression one of sweet, mocking pity. She stroked his forehead, “No one’s coming to rescue you, Clayton.”

Haggard reared up and came within inches of biting into her hand. Devere pulled back momentarily startled before quickly regaining her composure. “Well, it seems there’s still some fight left in the old dog yet.”

Angry at losing control Haggard swallowed the blind fury he was feeling and tried a more conciliatory approach. “I don’t suppose you would accept a plea for mercy from a feeble old man.”

Devere chuckled clearly enjoying herself, “I am very merciful, Mr. Haggard. That is where we differ. So here’s something to hold onto. When I grow tired of the noises you make I will set your spirit free. If you are truly remorseful by then maybe you’ll accepted into heaven. So in a way you should be thanking me for this second chance. Think of it as purification through pain.”

Haggard grunted contemptuously. “Excuse me if I don’t agree.”

“You will,” replied Devere coldly. “By the end you’ll be agreeing with everything I say.”

Haggard glared back at her. “We’ll see. I suggest you get started I don’t have all day.”

As Devere dissolved in front of him her voice echoed off the walls. “That’s where you’re wrong. We have all the time in the world.”

As the walls transformed into flames, Haggard let out a sigh. The day had started so well.

Maybe he mused, tomorrow would be better.