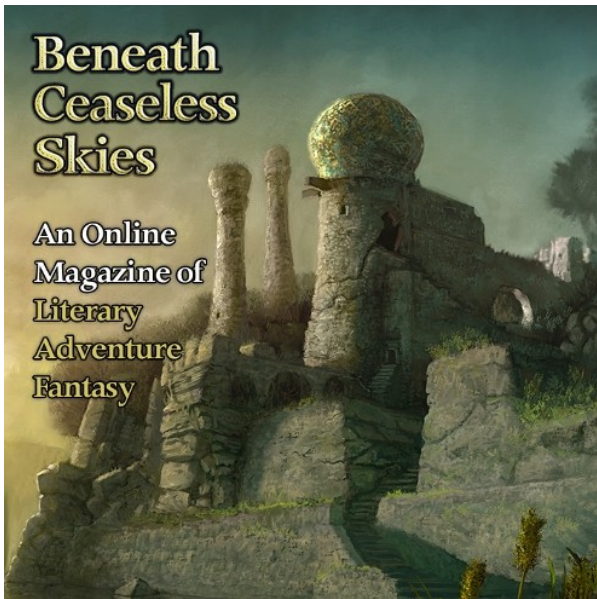


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Literary
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THE SACRIFICE PIT

by Brian Dolton

Sanquor's knife sliced through the belly of the sacrifice in one smooth movement. Amphyor's distended skin shrank away from the wound. Squirring thoravids burst free, in a foul tumble of violet and grey.

With the crowd roaring in the high galleries, an echo of his own blood roaring in his ears, Sanquor stabbed at the thoravids. Far from fully formed, they had no defense; they could only slither, their rudimentary limbs unable to carry them away from his Priest's blade. The knife turned from brilliant silver to indigo as the thoravids died. A few made it to the edge of the sacrifice pit, but the walls were too steep for them to climb. Jabbing with his knife, ecstatic heat coursing through his veins, Sanquor killed the last of them; and then lifted his arms high, with the chants of the crowd pouring down on him like a libation.

"Praise Dohem!" he cried. "Praise Morvay! Praise Chark!"

The crowd roared the chant back at him, lauding the three gods of the Tetharan. They roared with all the power of their lungs, and it echoed around the tower until the walls seemed to be straining to contain it.

He closed his eyes, and breathed long and deep, and as the sweat and ichor dried together on his skin, he felt the grace of the Tetharan, warm and holy, filling every part of him.

* * *

In the room of cleansing, Adepts came and stripped Sanquor. His clothes, and the tainted knife, were hurled into the furnace. Naked, sweating, Sanquor stood as water sluiced over him, blistering his skin.

No trace of the thoravid contagion could remain. They were an abomination in the sight of the Tetharan. Those who would not accept the grace of the Tetharan laid themselves open to the parasites. Only in grace was there salvation. Only in grace.

When the rest of the Adepts left, Amuranya stayed behind. Sanquor knew it was her, despite the mask she wore; he knew her movements, the way she held herself. She stood, swathed from head to foot in her robes, as he dried himself off.

“Speak,” Sanquor said eventually, when it was plain she was waiting for his permission, even though she had not sought permission to stay behind.

“My brother... my brother did not deserve to die like that. He was a good man.”

“I am sure he meant to be. But he fell from grace in the sight of the Tetharan. The contagion of sin had found a place

within him.”

She shook her head. He thought perhaps there were tears, behind the mask she wore.

“I have never known one more worthy of the Tetharan’s grace,” she said. “He was more worthy than I could hope to be.”

Sanquor belted his robe, smoothed the cloth down. The triple stripes – the yellow of Dohem, the red of Morvay, and the black of Chark – shimmered and mingled over the contours of his body.

“Many a man seems worthy to others. Only the Tetharan can see into a man’s heart, Adept. Only the Tetharan can truly know a man.”

“He was my brother. If I knew any man, I knew him. He should not have been taken!”

“You saw.” Sanquor looked at her. He found himself wondering if she was beautiful, under the robes. He shook the thought free; it was forbidden. “There were dozens of thoravids within him. He wore a mask, Adept; a mask that even you could not see through. He may have professed grace, but his heart was tainted. The Tetharan knew, and so withdrew their protection from him. Only in their grace can we remain pure. Only in their grace can we remain free.”

She said nothing more. She made her obeisance, and shuffled out, leaving Sanquor entirely alone.

* * *

Sanquor looked out of the window, across the city. There were nineteen towers he could see from where he stood. When he had become a Priest, five years ago, two had been empty. Now, only twelve of them remained inhabited.

The city was dying. The city was turning away from the Tetharan.

The city was killing itself through sin.

He turned, and poured himself a goblet of quey. It was warm, and rich, and a mouthful of it made him feel the same way. He thought of Amuranya again. Her brother had been a handsome man, before the thoravids had infested his sinful body. Perhaps, behind that mask, behind those robes....

He took another mouthful of quey.

It was very warm. He was very warm.

* * *

She stood in the doorway of the room.

“You sent for me, Master?”

“Enter,” he said. He waved his arm in a welcoming gesture. The unbelted robe shimmered like a rainbow. Beneath it, he was naked. He saw her hesitate; then she stepped forwards. The door swung gently closed behind her.

“Your words earlier... moved me,” he said. It was true, in a way, though the quey had moved him more. “You are a good

servant of the Tetharan, Amuranya.”

He heard her gasp at the use of her name. The mask tilted forwards, as if she did not want to look at him. He found it absurd; he had been naked, earlier.

“I serve as best I might, Master,” she said. “Only through the Tetharan may we find grace. Only through the Tetharan may we be saved.”

“Just so,” he said, nodding enthusiastically. He moved to the couch and sat down, sprawling comfortably on it. Perhaps it would make her more comfortable in turn. “Your faith in your brother does you great credit. But you must acknowledge the truth, Amuranya. He was infected. He had fallen from grace. You know this to be true.”

“I know it, Master,” she said. But her voice was hollow, and he did not think it was because of the mask. He leant forward.

“Do you doubt, Amuranya? I know there are heretics in the city. I know there are those who say that even the Tetharan may not save us from the thoravid parasites; that they infect the graced and the guilty alike. But they lie. Grace is our only ward against them. We must serve the Tetharan, and we will be saved.” He rose, crossed to the table by the window. The half-full jug of quey was there, with two goblets. “Drink with me, Amuranya.”

He poured the rich, fragrant juice into the goblets, and handed one to her. She took it, but stood, as if uncertain what to do.

“Drink,” he said again.

“It is forbidden...,” she said.

“To drink?”

“To remove my mask. I am only an Adept. I am three years from becoming a Priest of the First Circle.”

“We are alone,” he said, reassuringly. “It is permitted, to remove your mask, when you are alone.”

“But...” He could see it, in the set of her shoulders. She was warring with herself; trained to obey the teachings, but trained to obey him. He smiled, and took a mouthful of quey.

“Drink,” he said again, more firmly.

She was beautiful. Her skin was the color of the stone towers at sunset. Her eyes were pure and lightless black, liquid and fathomless. He stared at her as she raised the goblet to her lips.

Beautiful.

But it was forbidden, in the eyes of the Tetharan.

He thought of her brother, lying on the altar of the sacrifice pit. He thought of the thoravids, slithering free.

“You serve the Tetharan well,” he said. His tongue felt thick, clumsy in his mouth. “You will make a fine Priest, one

day.”

She held the goblet low, her head bowed.

“It is my only desire,” she told him.

“It is the only pure desire,” he said, and looked out of the window. For a moment, there was silence, heavy in the air between them.

“I have my duties, Master,” she said, very quietly.

“We all have our duties,” he agreed, not looking at her.

“And we must fulfill them. Be about your work, then, Adept.”

He did not look around until he heard the door close behind her.

* * *

The air of the Cambrus was thick with heat. Sanquor made the triple obeisance, in front of the blank-faced statues of the Tetharan. Only then did he turn to look at Phiruani, the High Priest. She had her hands folded in front of her, under the sleeves of her robe.

“You wished to see me, Mistress?” Sanquor asked.

“You have been a diligent priest, Sanquor,” she said.

“Ever have I tried to serve the Tetharan,” he answered, carefully, wondering why she had chosen to use the past tense and not the present. “It is my duty, my honor, and my pleasure.”

“As it is for us all,” she responded, gracefully. “But temptation is ever present. We must be vigilant; especially in times such as these. The thoravids punish us if we stray from the path of grace.” She gestured, beyond the enclosed chamber, at the half-empty city beyond. “Many have fallen from grace. I would not lose you, Sanquor.”

“I strive each day, that I might dwell in the grace of the Tetharan,” he said.

“It is not enough, Sanquor, merely to strive.” It was spoken mildly, but it was a clear rebuke. “Adept Amuranya was seen attending your quarters yesterday.”

“I... yes, Mistress,” he said. “I felt she was in need of instruction. After I sacrificed her brother, she spoke in praise of him. I felt it needful to remind her that he had fallen from grace; that no matter how admirable he may have seemed, yet he had sinned in the eyes of the Tetharan.”

“A necessary reminder. But your private quarters are not the place for such things. You had but to come to me, and I would have been more than happy to give her guidance.”

He bowed his head.

“Of course. It was an error of judgment.”

“Just so,” she agreed. “Be vigilant, Sanquor. I would not have you fall from grace.”

* * *

Sanquor heard the tumult in the streets. Swinging wide the shutters, he looked down into the grand court. Dust was rising, along with the voices of the gathered crowd.

There was a man, standing upon a makeshift dais, that had been raised in front of the Tower of the Tetharan. From his vantage point, all Sanquor could see was that he was dark-haired.

“This is the place!” the man roared. His voice echoed upwards, reflected by the ochre walls. “This is the heart of true corruption!”

It was another heretic, then. Sanquor moved to close the shutters; but then stopped. He was a Priest. He was vigilant. He dwelt in the grace of the Tetharan.

To listen to heresy could not harm him. To listen to it would strengthen him; allow him to counter the doubts of the people, fostered by foolish rabble-rousers.

He leant once more out of the window, and looked down, and listened.

“The Priests lie! The thoravids are killing us, killing us all, and do you think holiness will save you? Do you think the Tetharan will shield you? It is a plague! A disease! It is not a punishment!”

His voice was fierce with passion. Sanquor shook his head. Fear took men in many ways. Some sought shelter in the grace

of the Tetharan, as they should. But some; some, in their fear, lashed out even at those who strove each day to save them.

“You think they are shielded by the gods?” the heretic cried, presumably in answer to some shout from the crowd. “Is it their purity that shields them? Then why do they light the fires, to purify the sacrifice pit? Is it the Tetharan that strikes down the thoravids, or is it the sharp knife of a Priest?”

Sanquor shook his head. How could such foolishness, such misunderstanding, have taken root? Of course the thoravids had to be destroyed; of course any trace of them had to be scourged. They were an abomination in the sight of the Tetharan.

Down below, the clamor was rising. Temple guards had emerged, pushing through the crowd. Sanquor was pleased. He was a priest; he was strong, filled with grace. But for the people of the city... for them, the heretic's words were as much an infection as the thoravids; tainting those who heard them, tempting them to doubt.

To doubt; to turn away from the Tetharan; to become vulnerable. A vicious cycle. A vicious cycle that was killing his city.

He poured himself a goblet of quey, and drank it down in one gulp.

* * *

The refectory hall was filled with warmth and light. Sanquor sat in his allotted place. Ciengo sat opposite him, as always.

“You heard that heretic today?” Juvall asked, as he took his place beside Ciengo.

“Guard took their time,” Ciengo said, sour-faced. “You know what? We should have men, stationed ready above the square. With muskets. Put a ball through the head of any man who speaks so much as a word of that sort of foolishness.”

Sanquor shook his head.

“The heretics must be brought back to the grace of the Tetharan.”

“Too late for that, once they’ve fallen so far as to try and preach heresy right outside our doors! He’ll be riddled with thoravids, you mark my words.”

“They took him to the Interrogium,” Juvall said. “If he’s infected, then he’ll be on the altar tomorrow.”

“If? Of course he’s infected. Just some people show it more than others. There’s no other reason a man would do what he did.”

“I think you are mistaken, Ciengo,” Sanquor said. “It is fear. Fear, that makes men speak so. Fear can strip the reason from a man, that he turns, not to the sheltering grace of the Tetharan, but to heresy and falsehood.”

“And reason can bring them back? I used to think that. But when I was an Adept, there were, what, maybe six or eight sacrifices a month? Now it’s a rare day we don’t have to slice up some heretic, and a dozen thoravids. We don’t even have time to go about preaching the word of the Tetharan any more. All we do is sacrifice them, because they’ve been swayed by heretics like that fool.”

“We do as the Tetharan bid us, through Phiruani. And they do not bid us kill men in the squares of the city. Only those who are truly infected are to be sacrificed; and in the proper fashion. Would you have us range through the streets, Ciengo? Would you have us answer any hint of taint with death? You must remember, these are but citizens. They have not had years of training, as we have. They have their own tasks, and we need their skills, just as they need us. They may stray; but it is to us to bring them back into grace, not to cast them aside, if they can yet be saved.”

“There are days,” Ciengo said, “when I reckon the lot of them are beyond saving.”

“Have a care, Ciengo. That is tantamount to heresy itself. We are the servants of the Tetharan. And whether a man can be saved, or must be sacrificed... that is for the Tetharan to decide. Not us.”

Ciengo said nothing to that.

* * *

To Sanquor's surprise, there was only one sacrifice next day, and it was not the man who had spouted heresy in front of the Temple doors.

"What of the heretic?" he asked. "Surely he was infected?"

"He was untainted," Maricho, one of the Holy Interrogators, told him, there at the great, closed door of the Interrogium. "But he is being held, with the others. He cannot be permitted to speak so, to people who might be tempted away from grace. In time, no doubt, the taint will show in him, as it has in others. Then he will be sacrificed, and purified."

"It is strange... I had thought he must be infected, to speak so boldly. What madness must have possessed him...?"

"Who knows?" Maricho's shrug showed that he considered the question irrelevant. "He has fallen from grace. It is but a matter of time, now, before contagion shows. A day, a month, a year... it matters not. He is fated to die in the sacrifice pit."

"A year? Are there truly those who have dwelt so long in the cells of the Interrogium?"

Maricho shrugged again.

"Perhaps. We do not keep account. We merely observe them. Those who show signs of contagion... those, Priest, we pass to your care. The rest must simply wait."

Sanquor repressed a shudder. He thought of them, as he climbed the stairs to watch the evening's sacrifice. Shut away in darkness, forgotten by the city, forgotten even by their families, forgotten even by the Tetharan....

No. He caught himself. That was heresy, itself. Not even those who had fallen from grace were forgotten by the Tetharan. They saw all things, and heard all things, and knew all things. Their gaze could pierce the hearts of men; no truth was denied them. Nothing was unseen. Nothing was forgotten.

He took his place in the high galleries, amongst the crowd, to watch the sacrifice; to gaze on the knife, and see the glorious fires of purification.

* * *

He was late to the refectory the next morning. He had not slept well.

"Have you heard?" Ciengo spoke eagerly, even as Sanquor slid into his place.

"Heard?" he asked, poking unenthusiastically at his bowl. He felt faintly nauseous. The hangover of dream, he thought.

"They took an Adept down to the Interrogium. An Adept!"

"Don't be absurd," Sanquor said.

"It's true," Juvall confirmed. "I saw them taking her down. The way I heard it, they caught her in the city. With some friends of that heretic from yesterday."

Dread filled Sanquor, sudden and foul. He pushed his bowl away, untouched.

“Do you... do you know who it was?” he asked.

He got the answer he dreaded.

* * *

Maricho was there, standing in front of the door, as if he never left. He was no taller than Sanquor, and his build was slight; but his stillness gave him an implacable authority.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?” came the answer.

“Amuranya. I heard... I was told she had been taken to the Interrogium. Tell me what has become of her. Is she...?”

“She is untainted by infection.”

“I would speak with her.”

“She is a heretic,” Maricho said, flatly. “To speak with her is to risk contagion.”

“I am a Priest,” Sanquor reminded him. “I am a servant of the Tetharan. I will not be swayed by heresy.”

“I am sure she said the same thing. You may not speak with her, Sanquor. It is my duty to protect us all.”

“I do not forget your duty. But we have a higher duty, all of us; to do the will of the Tetharan. To ensure that all may live in their grace.”

“She has fallen from grace, Priest,” he said. “She has fallen, and there is nothing that can be done to save her.”

* * *

He went straight to the Cambrus, to request an audience with Phiruani herself. He had to wait, and paced back and forth across the antechamber. The long climb to the Cambrus had wearied him; there was a dull knot of pain, behind his ribs.

“You are here because of Amuranya,” the High Priest said, before he could even speak. He bowed his head.

“You are wise, Mistress,” he answered her. “I heard... I cannot believe it. She was an Adept. She was faithful.”

“She was. But let this be a lesson to you, Sanquor. Any of us can fall from grace; citizen, Adept, even Priest. We must be vigilant. We must be diligent.”

“But... Mistress, she shows no sign of infection. Perhaps there is yet hope? If she can be made to see... if she can be brought back to the grace of the Tetharan?”

There was silence. He waited, trying to still his breathing, slow his heart.

“You have ever been faithful, Sanquor,” Phiruani said, at last. “But I will not grant this. She has fallen from grace. She is tainted, even if the contagion does not yet show. I would not lose you to temptation.”

“Mistress... forgive me, but... do you think I am so weak?”

She offered a weary smile.

“We are all weak, Sanquor. If we were not, we would not be human.”

* * *

In his chambers, Sanquor paced, back and forth. Outside, the sun was setting; he could not see it, from his window, but he could see the ochre towers glowing, could see the long shadows being cast across the city by the Temple tower.

He gulped down a goblet of quey. The heat of it seemed to spread through him, congealing here and there into bright nuggets, so intense as to be almost painful. He poured another goblet, and stood at the window, watching the shadows spread, watching the darkness grow.

No. He was a Priest of the Tetharan. He was a brick in the wall that held the darkness back. It was his duty to stop the darkness from spreading.

He tipped the goblet back, and belted his robe, and headed down.

* * *

Maricho stood at the doors of the Interrogium. Sanquor wondered if he ever left; if he had any human needs, any human desires.

“I have spoken with the High Priest,” Sanquor told him. That part, at least, was true. “I am here at her bidding to speak

with Amuranya, that I might bring her back to the way of the Tetharan, to their holy grace.”

So much of it true, so little of it a lie. But his stomach churned at the thought of it. He did not want to think what punishment he might face, once Phiruani learnt of his disobedience.

But if he brought Amuranya back... that, surely, would be enough to earn forgiveness. To bring back to the grace of the Tetharan an Adept who had turned away. Such an example might stand, bright and shining against the darkness. Perhaps other heretics would see the light of truth. Perhaps....

Maricho did not question. He lifted the bar, and swung open the door to the Interrogium.

“Vardo will guide you,” he said. For a moment, Sanquor wondered what he meant; but then, from one side of the Interrogium, a man stepped into view. He was enormous; a head taller than Sanquor, his shoulders broad, his belly vast.

“Dwell in grace,” Sanquor said, bowing. He got no answer. As he rose from the bow, Vardo was still standing there, implacable, monolithic.

“Vardo is deaf,” Maricho explained. “This is the ideal work for him. He cannot be swayed by heresy he cannot hear.”

Vardo smiled. Maricho made certain gestures; Sanquor could only guess what he was telling the deaf giant. He waited,

impatient, his stomach churning. He had never been inside the Interrogium, let alone the prison beyond, where the untainted were confined.

When Maricho's gestures ceased, Vardo gave a nod, and a grunt that might have been understanding. Then he clapped Sanquor on the shoulder and, turning, led him to another door, and through, and down. Down, to bedlam.

He had not imagined it. There were dozens of cells; hundreds. He could hear the clamor of the voices. Some were praying, some begging, some weeping. Now and then a scream – of what he could only imagine was utter despair – pierced through the tumult like a sacrificial knife. His body pulsed with pain in sympathy. He did not want to think how long some of these people had been incarcerated here, waiting for signs of contagion to show, waiting for the inevitable; to be taken to the sacrifice pit. To be imprisoned, in this hot darkness, knowing that the only escape was sacrifice... it was no wonder that madness walked here, and cried out its pain.

He envied Vardo.

* * *

She rose, when the door opened. Sanquor looked at her, and felt his heart twist within him.

“Amuranya,” he breathed, like an orison.

“Sanquor?” He thrilled to the sound of his name, from her lips. “You are... why are you here?”

“To bring you back to grace,” he said. “I know that the sacrifice of your brother lit a fire of doubt within you. But that fire can be quenched.” He wished the fire in his own chest would snuff itself out.

Her head tilted forward; her long hair, unbound, fell about her face like a veil.

“It is too late,” she said. A spasm ran through him; fear, horror. He mastered it.

“No. Not if... you are untainted. You can yet be saved.”

“None of us can be saved,” she said. “If my brother fell from grace... none of us are pure, Sanquor. We should all be down here. All of us, just waiting to die.”

“No. You are wrong, Amuranya.” He kept his voice low, but urgency spilled out of him. “You are mistaken. This is not the place for you, here, amongst these heretics. The Tetharan shine their light of grace upon us, and so long as we do not turn aside from it, then we are blessed. We are pure.”

“And my brother? What was his sin?” There was bitterness there, and pain. He felt it as if it were his own.

“I cannot say. Only the Tetharan know the secrets of our heart, Amuranya. They are wise, and....”

“Wise? They are cold gods! They take joy only in our suffering!”

He stepped back, appalled. How could she have fallen so far, so fast?

“Amuranya... this is grief. Grief, speaking through you. Deep in your soul, you know that we dwell in the grace and love of the Tetharan.”

“I know nothing. Nothing! But I feel. I hate them, Sanquor. I hate them!”

Her venom stung him. His lungs tightened, spasmed. He almost doubled over, then, and he grasped at his chest, pulling his robe apart, clutching at the agony that coiled and twisted within him. That writhed....

He realized it, even as she gasped in shock and horror. He looked down at himself, saw the flesh of his belly distending, saw the movements under his skin. She screamed, and pressed herself back against the wall of her cell.

“You see?” she cried. “Even you! The Tetheran mock our faith!”

He wanted to deny it, to deny her, but the pain seared through him and denied all else. He clutched at his abdomen, as if he could claw the thoravids out of him with his fingers. But it was impossible. There was only one way to deal with the parasites, once they had grown so strong.

He thought of the row of sacrificial knives, bright and beautiful on the wall of his room.

“What was my sin?” he cried, falling to his knees. The tide of pain was drowning him. “Lord Dohem, Lord Morvay, Lord Chark... what was my sin?”

He was still pleading, still praying, when they came to bear him away.

* * *

He would have struggled. He would have fought against it, but the pain was too great. The poison of the thoravids made his limbs heavy. Ten Adepts bore him to the sacrifice pit. The stone of the altar was warm underneath him. It never cooled, now; not from the succession of purification fires.

Tears forced themselves from his eyes.

“It is a lie,” he tried to say, as the Priest intoned the Great Prayer to the Tetharan. “It is a lie! I deserve grace! I only tried to save her! *I am without sin!*”

But his voice was weak, and drowned by the crowd.

And then the knife came down.

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Brian Dolton has ridden a camel in the Sahara, played volleyball on a sandbar in the Pacific Ocean, and stayed in a Zen Buddhist monastery on a sacred mountain in Japan. He recently moved from rural England to rural New Mexico, where he intends to continue writing until they pry the computer from his cold, dead hands. Anyone who knows who the “they” in question might be should get in touch via <http://tchernabyelo.livejournal.com> so that suitable preparations can be made.

**Beneath
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CLOCKWORK HEART, CLOCKWORK SOUL

by Kris Dikeman

“It’s beautiful,” Lichtman whispered, and I glanced over my shoulder at the Cathedral dome ensnared within its scaffolding and gleaming in the moonlight. Even in this rundown section of town, the Cathedral dominated the sky.

The four of us—Lichtman, the Burgomeister, Fleischer, and myself—were clustered on the unswept threshold of the Doctor’s house like a covey of frightened schoolboys. Moonflower vines ran wild over the tightly shuttered windows, filling the night with sickly-sweet perfume. A roaring lion’s head, black with soot and age, stared from the stout oak door.

“Have courage,” the Burgomeister said.

Lichtman reached up to the fearsome mouth; the hollow boom of iron on iron reverberated through the narrow street. We waited. A rat scurried across the cobblestones behind us.

“There is no one here,” Fleischer said. He sounded relieved.

“The Doctor is surely home at this hour,” I said. “Knock again.”

Just then came the shuffle of footsteps down the hallway. We heard something set against the door and a grating sound as the bolts were drawn back, top, middle, bottom. More

shuffling and finally the door gave a groan and shuddered open.

The house was darker within than the street without. Fleischer held up his little tallow lantern, sending ghostly flickering shadows down the hall. We pushed forward again, peering in.

Below us a face popped into view, wizened and horribly simian in its aspect. Fleischer almost dropped the lantern and Lichtman gave a little squeal of fright.

The Doctor's servant was a malformed thing, with a horrible crooked back and a head too large for his misshapen body. I had seen him buying food at the market stalls. Boys threw stones when he passed by, and the women of the market did not haggle with him long. Easier to make his price and send him on his way than risk his ugliness spoiling the milk.

He stared up at us dumbly. He was dressed in filthy rags, his face streaked with dirt. I did not know if he could hear; certainly I had never heard him speak. The Burgomeister bent down until he was eye to eye with the brute.

"We would visit with your Master," he said, his words slow and deliberate. "Is he at home to us?"

This is what it had come to. The four of us, prosperous and successful men, begging for entry from the Doctor's pet idiot.

But we needed the Doctor's help too desperately to turn back now.

The crookback stared at the Burgomeister's face, lips moving silently. Then the wretch stretched out his wizened hand and led us into the house. Lichtman and I followed the Burgomeister, keeping Fleischer and his light between us, trying not to trip over the detritus cluttering the narrow hallway. It felt strange to enter the Doctor's home at last. All through my childhood I had tried to catch a glimpse of his fabulous inventions. And now I was here, about to beg this man to save our lives. To deliver us from evil.

We were ushered into a dark room, cold and stinking of dust and mold but still recognizable as the parlor. There were no lamps, but the crookback produced a box of sulfur matches and scuttled about lighting candle stubs among the clutter. As the room grew lighter, the profound disorder of the place was revealed. Piles of papers and books crowded every surface, along with soiled plates strewn with dried crusts of bread and rinds of cheese. Empty wine bottles were scattered across the threadbare carpet; ragged curtains of cobwebs thick with dust hung from the beams. We stood awkwardly, not wishing to soil our coats on the filthy chairs. With a clumsy half bow, the crookback limped out.

“For God’s sake,” Fleischer said, swatting at a cobweb clinging to his coat, “this is a fool’s errand. Let us go.”

“We have only just arrived.” The Burgomeister held up a candle stub, examining a bookshelf crowded with leather volumes.

“It’s madness, I say.” Fleischer left off wiping and looked up. “Please, gentlemen, let us go.”

“There is no more than a month left,” the Burgomeister said. “Barely that. The Doctor is our last chance.”

“We could postpone the dedication,” Fleischer said.

“The work is on schedule to finish on the exact day Herr Kobalt predicted, seven years ago,” I said, trying to keep the weariness from my voice. “How many signs do you need? Kobalt is what he says he is. He will not be denied. All our other plans have come to naught. Only the Doctor can save us from him now.”

“This is madness.” Fleischer’s voice quavered.

“To you it is madness,” Lichtman said, “because you have no sons. To me it is our last chance.”

I saw the Burgomeister wince.

Lichtman turned to me. “What do you think, Karl?”

“You are both correct,” I said. “This is our last chance. And it is madness.”

“Kobalt could not really.... It is not possible that he seriously means to—” he began.

“The agreement we made was clear enough to you seven years ago.” I held up my right hand, with the little crescent-shaped scar at the base of my palm. I closed my eyes and recited the terms: “In return for sufficient monies to finish renovation of the Cathedral, Herr Kobalt collects the first man to enter the building on its dedication day, to do with as he pleases.”

Fleischer ran a finger across the path of his scar. “Seven years is a long time,” he said softly.

“The afterlife, I fear, will be longer,” the Burgomeister said, closing his own hand into a fist. “We were more naïve then, poorer and less wise.”

“Do you really think the Doctor can help, Bader?” Lichtman asked me.

“My sister came here once long ago,” I said. “She and her little friends wanted to see the Doctor’s doll, the mechanical woman. It would dance all day, waltzing along the top floor of the house—we could see it through the windows. So real we could scarcely believe it was a toy. Do you remember, Burgomeister?” *We were friends then*, I thought.

“I remember,” he said. He gave a wan smile, and I was struck anew at how the last few years had aged him. “Your

sister was a headstrong girl.”

“She told me all about the workshop,” I said. “She said—”

“She did a great deal of damage.” The voice at the doorway took us all by surprise.

He was more cadaverously thin than I remembered, frailer and smaller. His eyes were watery and bloodshot. The white hair, once thick and full, lay in bare wisps across his peeling, freckled pate. His shirt was badly mended, the dirty and creased coat a style long out of date. The Doctor raised one veined and spotted hand and stabbed the air with a bony finger.

“They broke things, those girls. They had no right to invade my workshop.” His voice had grown high and querulous; it had lost the booming quality that had so frightened me as a child.

“She was only curious,” I said, “to see your wondrous dancing doll.” *And father recompensed you handsomely for the damages*, I thought, but held my tongue.

The crookback wrestled a high-backed wooden chair out of the shadows and placed it near the empty hearth.

“What a rare compliment, to have such gentlemen pay me a visit,” the Doctor said, making himself comfortable. “Be seated, pray, while my man finds us some refreshments.”

“We brought a small gift, Herr Doctor.” The Burgomeister gestured to Fleischer, who proffered the bottle of cognac we had purchased at the tavern. The tavernkeeper had taken our money with a grudging, sulky air; an old man drinking in the corner had stabbed the sign of the evil eye towards us.

“I grow more flattered by the moment.” The Doctor handed the bottle to the crookback, who went out again. “Sit, gentlemen, I beg you.”

We each moved to find a seat amongst the squalor. Fleischer unfolded his handkerchief across a grimy brocade couch, then settled himself quickly when the Burgomeister caught his eye.

“Let us have a fire,” the Doctor said. He made a languid gesture with his hand. At once a blue spark blazed up in the hearth; a moment later a fire burned vigorously. The shock and fear on our faces could be clearly seen by its light.

He knows why we've come, I thought. Of course he knows. Our bargain with Herr Kobalt was common knowledge in the town now.

The crookback returned with the cognac poured out into chipped clay cups. The crackling of the fire was very loud as he served us the liquor, making his distorted bow as we each took our measure from his tray.

“Your health, gentlemen,” the Doctor said, with a mock-solemn salute, “and the health of your families.” Behind me, Fleischer drew in a sharp breath as the Doctor drained his cup with practiced ease.

The Burgomeister took a sip of the liquor, then set his cup aside. “We are here to ask your help, good Herr Doctor. Your town has need of you,” he said.

“My help?” the Doctor said. “But surely—under your august leadership, Burgomeister—the town lacks for nothing. A flourishing, prosperous place, ever since the renovation of the Cathedral began. Almost seven years now, is it not? I believe the work finishes soon.”

“In a month,” the Burgomeister said, his face grim.

“The town is full of life again, now that our spiritual center is renewed. Father Buchman must be busy indeed, preparing for the dedication ceremony,” the Doctor said. He held his cup out to the crookback, who stood ready with the bottle.

“He has left the details of the ceremony in our care,” I said, watching in distaste as he guzzled the liquor. Father Buchman’s taste ran to beer; he had been continually drunk for almost three months now, ever since Fleischer had broken down in the confessional. These days the good Father only stopped drinking long enough to curse the four of us as damned men.

Lichtman started forward. "Please, Herr Doctor," he said, "you must help us. Kobalt wants his payment, and we are at wit's end—"

"And you wish me to sacrifice myself, for the good people of the town? Such dear people, who have been so kind to me, who have given me so much respect these many years?" Spittle flew from his mouth; in the flickering light he looked like a snarling dog. "Is it not for one of you to offer himself?"

"It is not our bodies we fear for, Doctor," Fleischer piped up. "It is a question of a man's immortal soul."

"And yet your sons are not afraid," the Doctor said. "I understand the young men of the town have set up a lottery to choose who among them shall meet Herr Kobalt's price, should their fathers shirk the duty."

I thought of Franz, my eldest, his face pale and resigned. *We are not afraid, Father*, he'd said. *One of us will go. It is for the good of all.* My wife had run out of the kitchen, weeping.

I caught the Burgomeister's eye. He nodded and reached into his coat pocket.

"We want you to build us a mechanical man," he said, and set the bulging leather bag on a low table before the Doctor. The bag, overfull, tipped over, and gold coins spilled to the floor in a glittering cascade. "We are prepared to pay any price."

The Doctor's laughter was harsh and raucous. He laughed until he shook, then coughed and gasped for air. The crookback hopped about in agitation until the old man's breathing gradually evened out.

Still gasping, the Doctor took up a gold piece and held it between thumb and forefinger. They were thick coins, heavy and pure, a capering devil wrought upon one side, blank upon the other. I knew them well.

"Ha, ha, very good gentlemen!" the Doctor said. "You wish to best a demon with a clockwork man! You commission the work with a purse of the very gold he gave you! An excellent jest." He laughed again, then stood up.

"We are desperate men, Herr Doctor—" I began.

"So you are," he said, laughing again as he stepped to the door. He looked back at us, his expression equal parts contempt and amusement. "I accept your commission," he said. "Come back in a month, on the night before the dedication, and not before. You shall have your clockwork man. Whether the demon you have bargained with accepts him, well, that is not my affair."

The instant he left the room the fire went out, leaving us staring at each other in the guttering candlelight. The crookback stood by the door, his arm extended. In a moment

we were in the street, the great oak door slamming shut behind us, listening to the crookback shoot the bolts closed one by one.

* * *

We went back to our lives. My eldest son came and went at odd hours. My wife wept without ceasing. She would not speak to me, or meet my eye. She slept in the children's room, clutching our young daughters as if she would never let them go.

A week passed in this way. Lichtman came to see me, stinking of unwashed clothes and brandy.

"Fleischer thinks we should go back to the old idea," he said, "find a stranger, some vagabond we could pay...."

"And how much would we pay a man for his life?" I asked. "How far would we have to go to find someone, now, who does not know of our bargain? Should we capture some poor fool, bind him hand and foot, and throw him across the threshold to pay our debt? Is that any more honorable than sacrificing our sons?" Lichtman's boy was also in the lottery.

"How could we have known...." Lichtman doubled over, hands balled into fists.

A healthy town needed a healthy heart, and the Cathedral, old and failing to pieces, had long ago lost its power to draw people in. A rejuvenated house of worship had been the keystone of our plan to bring the town back to life, a center of

trade and commerce. We had thought Herr Kobalt merely a glib-tongued investor, eager, as we were, to restore the Cathedral to its former glory. Only after we accepted his terms had he shown us what he truly was.

I remembered it all too well; the four of us, helpless as the blood from our wounded hands gushed out across the tavern table in a spreading pool around a pile of gold coins. Kobalt leaned forward to lap up an errant trickle. In that glistening scarlet puddle we saw his reflection, his real face, laughing at us. That face, a portrait of evil and corruption. A glimpse of Hell—of our future—leering up as we stared, paralyzed with fear.

“He tricked us,” I said to Lichtman. “But tricked or not, we did agree and now the price must be paid. Let us pray that the Doctor’s skill can save us.”

Lichtman went home and did not call again.

Time passed. The dedication ceremony drew inexorably closer. The town began to ready itself for a celebration, though the four of us were still shunned men. The stonecutters toiled ceaselessly, putting final touches on the gargoyles that leered from every corner of the Cathedral. Bit by bit the scaffolding was pulled away, revealing the gleaming white stone of the new facing. Carrera marble, all the way from Italy, imported at

exorbitant cost. Nothing but the best, in the wake of an endless flood of strange gold coins.

* * *

Those same gold coins had wrought great changes in the Doctor's house. We arrived just past midnight on the appointed night and were ushered back into the transformed parlor—warm, well lit and tidy—by the grinning crookback, himself scrubbed and resplendent in a suit of aubergine velvet and a black silk turban. He served us brandy in crystal glasses, gave his bow, and waddled out again. We waited in silence for over an hour, drinking and staring at the fire. It had been a long and weary month for all of us.

“Gentlemen.” The Doctor's new clothes were of a fine and fashionable cut, and fit his gaunt frame well. He had lost his haggard, hard-worn appearance. Good food, less cheap wine, and something more: he was a man with a purpose. He gestured out to the hallway, to the narrow stairs leading up. The Burgomeister went first, then Fleischer, halting and grabbing at the rail in trepidation while Lichtman urged him forward. We filed in to the workshop, myself last in line, my sister's long-ago voice prattling in my ear.

It was magic, she'd said. There was a wizard in long robes and a harlequin and a soldier with a curved sword. There was a long table with gears and tools and piles of

colored silks. And a golden parrot with ruby eyes in a silver cage – it whistled at us. A mechanical fish swimming circles in a crystal bowl. Wondrous things.

I had been sick with jealousy of my sister and her friends, that they had managed a look at the Doctor's workshop. Now at last I was here myself. I could see the echoes of that long ago day as we wandered about. The top floor of the house was one vast room, filled with tables, desks, and bookshelves. The thick and pleasant smell of wax candles perfumed the air, but beneath that was another smell, not so agreeable. Arms and legs, torsos and heads, doll parts of every size hung from the ceiling hooks like hams at a butcher shop. There was a hat rack festooned with masks, and trunks filled to overflowing with costumes and bolts of gaudy silk. A huge telescope was set under a window cut into the eaves. Off in a corner I caught a glimpse of what might have been the parrot's cage.

The Doctor stood at the far end of the workshop before a curtained-off area. As I drew near and took my place next to Fleischer, I realized the unpleasant smell—like meat left too long in the sun—came from behind the curtain.

“You asked me, gentleman, for a mechanical man. You have paid me handsomely for the project.”

“Very handsomely,” Fleischer muttered. Lichtman poked him with an elbow and he was still.

“Then here he is. All that you asked for and more.” The Doctor twitched back the curtain.

He was slumped forward in his chair, eyes closed—a clockwork miracle, metal, glass and springs wrought together in a magnificent semblance of life. His limbs were covered with a fine skin of hammered brass polished to a mirrored shine, with elaborate cutout shapes along the thighs and arms affording coy glimpses of cogs and gears within. All the joints of his body, knees, ankles, waist, elbows, wrists—even the knuckles of his fingers—were covered with fine overlapping scales. His chest was an articulated breastplate of silver engraved with muscles and bones, with a hinged panel in the center. Below the panel was a short length of chain, welded to his chest. A mask covered his face, a man’s features done in *papier maché* and painted white.

With a flourish, the Doctor produced an enormous silver key, fit it to a hole in the mechanical man’s neck the size of a penny piece, and turned. He struggled at the start, but as the spring tightened the work went quicker. I saw Fleischer’s finger’s twitch—like me, he longed to pull the key from those old hands and do the job properly. Finally, when he could wind no further, the Doctor reached behind the mechanical man’s ear and pressed a hidden button.

There was a humming noise as gears began to turn. Within the cut-out panels along his arms and legs, his clockwork innards began to whirl. The dreadful smell of spoiled meat grew stronger. The mechanical man hitched forward on his chair and opened his eyes.

I had expected doll's eyes, glass and unseeing. These were a startling blue but unquestionably not glass.

“What—” the Burgomeister began.

Clear liquid began to weep from the seams of the mechanical man's neck. The doctor wiped at it with a rag.

“What is this?” Lichtman's voice was shrill with anger. “What kind of shabby business is this?”

More fluid trickled from the neck. Clucking his tongue the Doctor took a small sharp-looking tool from his pocket and pried off the mask. We all took a step back.

It was not a skull but rather a frame of metal and wood. The eyes sat in metal cups, with a brass tube just above constantly spraying a fine mist of fluid across them.

It had no nose. Where a mouth should be was a smooth metal panel. It looked at us. It looked at me.

“Its eyes,” I said. “How did you make its eyes?”

The Doctor began fussing with the leaking metal plate, using the tool to crimp the edges tighter. “There is much within him that is not strictly mechanical, in the sense that you

understand it. Surely by now you have sniffed out the more... natural elements of his construction.” He finished his adjustment, mopped up the last of the excess fluid, and replaced the mask.

“They look human,” the Burgomeister said.

“So they were. Their original owner no longer had need of them,” the Doctor said. He wiped the tool on his sleeve, leaving a long smear of red. “Nor of this.”

He flipped the panel on the breastplate open, revealing a tank of glass filled with thick yellow fluid. Within, a knot of muscle and gears strung on wires ticked steadily.

There was a retching noise to my left. Fleischer was vomiting in the corner.

“I...I’m sorry,” he said, embarrassed. “It’s just...the smell...the way he stares...I can’t stand it. Please, I must go out.”

“Let us all go out, for the love of God.” Lichtman looked queasy as well. “We must go to the Cathedral and make ready for the dedication. There are only a few hours left. Let there be an end to this, please.”

“One of you must stay and help me keep him wound,” the Doctor said. “I am not up to the task. Now that he has been started, it will not do to let him run down.”

Fleischer was across the room and down the stairs before

the Doctor finished speaking, and Lichtman hurried after. The Burgomeister looked at me.

“I will stay,” I said. I wanted the wretched business done with as much as they.

“The ceremony begins at eight in the morning,” the Burgomeister said as he left. As if I might have forgotten.

And so I passed the rest of that long night in the Doctor’s workshop, winding the mechanical man at regular intervals. The Doctor showed me how his creation walked, taught me to guide him this way and that with the chain set into the chest, how he responded to simple commands.

“He is amazing,” I said, as he passed by me the second time.

“But will he suit Herr Kobalt?” the Doctor asked. “Or will the demon simply wait for the first of you that follows?”

“The first man over the threshold,” I said, “that was our bargain. If we follow the agreement to the letter, we might yet have a chance.”

“But is he,” and here the Doctor gestured to his creation, now staring sightlessly at a wall—“a *man*, in the strict sense of the word?”

“We shall see,” I said, and felt in my pocket for the small bottle that rested there, empty for now.

* * *

It was morning at last. The crookback brought us a simple breakfast, herring and brown bread and beer. The Doctor ate with gusto while I picked at the fish. The smell in the workshop was not conducive to a hearty meal.

The Doctor wiped his mouth of foam. “You spoke of your sister,” he said. “Where is she now?”

“She’s married,” I said. “She moved away with her husband, to live with his people.”

“She’s better off,” he said, and grinned at me unpleasantly. “Have you told her yet what a mess you made of this business?”

“We did what we had to,” I said. “For the good of the town, for the glory of God.” How many times had I said that in the past year? Did I even believe it any more?

“For your own good, you mean. To line your pockets. You are all rich men now, thanks to your bargain.”

I stood up. “My sister said you had a parrot that whistled at her.”

“Changing the subject, I see. Yes,” he said. He leaned forward and polished a smudge from his creation’s shoulder. “I had a parrot that did simple tricks. It was fashioned from gold. I melted it down when times grew lean.”

“Why didn’t you ever want us children here?” I asked. “Why keep us out? Our parents would have bought your toys. You could have grown rich.”

“I am not a *toymaker*,” he said, spitting the words at me. “Is he a toy?” He strode across the room to a large cupboard in the corner, threw open the door, and pulled away a cloth, sending up a cloud of dust. “Is *this* a toy?” he demanded.

She was sitting on a little three-legged stool, glass eyes wide and staring, arms upraised as if we had surprised her. The pink dancing costume was faded and tattered at the hem, the blond wig matted with dust, but her face—her perfect *bisque* face—was unchanged. The dancing doll, she who my sister and her friends had tiptoed up the stairs to see.

“Does she still dance?” I whispered.

He pulled her to her feet. “Wind her up and see,” he said, pointing to the key of tarnished brass jutting from her back.

He held her as I wound the key. With each turn she drew more straight and tall until she balanced firmly upon her own feet and the Doctor could let go. Finally he gave a short nod and I stepped back.

She made a clumsy pirouette and the Doctor and I both reached out to catch her. From nowhere came music, fragile and high-pitched, and she was off in a stiff-kneed waltz, delicate hands reaching to embrace her invisible partner. Her hip came up hard against the workbench, scattering papers to the floor as she careened away towards the attic windows. The music grew louder as her steps became more graceful. From

the street she must have looked much the same as when I had watched her, years ago.

“Even after all these years,” I said. “How does the music...?”

“A music box, attached to her mainspring. A trifle, really.” He smiled at his creation, a smile any father would recognize.

“You are not a toymaker,” I said, as the doll swirled past in a cloud of tinny, lovely music. “You are an artist.”

His bow was stiff and formal, but I could see that he was pleased. He knelt to retrieve the papers from the floor and I took a step forward to help. And so neither of us saw the moment the mechanical man began to dance.

I suppose he stepped forward and caught her in his arms as she swung by. We looked up in time to see him sway in a clumsy parody of her movements, but after a few turns he found the rhythm. They whirled past the returning crookback who dropped his tray in astonishment, then clapped with delight while the Doctor and I laughed.

They danced to the far end of the workshop and then looped back towards us. The doll stared up blindly at the rafters, the mechanical man gazed at her face. The morning sun streamed in, sending diamond shaped reflections from his gleaming skin skittering across the walls and floor.

Finally the music slowed, became thick and distorted. She stumbled, slumped in his grasp. He stopped dancing and stood staring at us, holding her upright in his outstretched arms. Across the square, the clock chimed, seven and one-half hours.

“It is time,” I said, and the Doctor nodded. He pulled the doll from the mechanical man’s arms and pushed her into a chair. The mechanical man reached for her again, but I stepped forward and took hold of his chain.

“Come,” I said, and gave a sharp tug. He let me lead him to the stair. Without another word to me, the Doctor turned back to his work. That was my last view of him, rearranging papers and sifting through the chaos of the workbench.

I led the mechanical man through the dim hall, leaving the door open behind us as we passed into the street. Startled by the morning sun, he balked against the chain. I gave a hard tug and led him onwards.

It was a perfect day, crisp and bright. I could smell bread baking. Most of the townfolk were waiting for us at the Cathedral, but I could sense eyes watching us, peering through curtains and closed shutters. We stopped at a chuckling fountain and I took a long drink of water, cold and pure, to wash away the sour taste of fish and fear. The sunlight on the water threw reflections up against his silver breastplate.

“You dance well,” I said. “But then you had a lovely partner.” I took out the empty bottle from my pocket and filled it, refitting the cork with care.

He stared at me with his unblinking eyes. What churchyard coffin had the Doctor pillaged for those eyes? I tried to recall any recent executions but my thoughts of late had been only about the Cathedral, the ceremony.

“Did he send the crookback for your eyes?” I asked him. “Did he cut them from a body at a crossroad gallows?”

The clock struck a quarter ‘til. I wiped my hands on my vest. “Wherever they came from, I doubt they have seen anything like what awaits us.” I said, winding his key again. “What awaits *you*.”

I tugged the chain again, but to my surprise he pulled from my grasp and made a turn back towards the Doctor’s house. I lunged for the swinging end of the chain and pulled, hard enough to spin him around. We stared at each other, my rebuke dying in my throat. Did I see fear in those eyes? I remembered my words to Lichtman, about capturing some hapless wanderer and throwing him across the threshold, what cowardice that would be. Was this so very different? What had we made? What, *who*, were we sacrificing here?

The clock chimed the quarter hour.

“Come,” I said, “it is too late to turn back. There is someone you must meet.”

I heard the crowd before I saw it. We rounded the final corner and there were hundreds of them, all the town and more besides, strangers and friends and those who had cursed me, all mixed up together across the square, well away from the Cathedral steps. I saw my son, my Franz, in his best suit of clothes, with his friends, the Burgomeister’s sons, Lichtman’s boy, and the rest. My wife and daughters were there as well, with several of our neighbors. When the crowd saw us a sighing moan went up, equal parts fear and relief. I saw many make the sign of the cross and still more fork the evil eye, but whether towards myself or the mechanical man I could not tell.

The Cathedral glowed in the morning sun, magnificent and pure. If the Doctor would only come and look, I thought, he would understand. Surely God would forgive us the sins we had committed in the name of his glorious house.

And to line your own pockets, the Doctor whispered in my ear.

The Burgomeister, Fleischer, and Lichtman stood on the Cathedral steps along with Father Buchman, who had slumped to his knees. The mechanical man and I crossed the square to them as the Burgomeister hurried towards us.

“Kobalt is inside,” he said. “Fleischer went up to the door. He heard him singing.” He eyed the mechanical man warily. “Is it ready, Karl?”

“I have the water,” I said. “We must be sure.”

The Burgomeister signaled to Fleischer and Lichtman. Together they hauled the gibbering priest to his feet and pulled him to us.

I took out the bottle of water and handed it to Father Buchman. “Bless it, Father,” I said.

Buchman flinched back. “This is heresy,” he said.

“Bless the water and baptize him,” the Burgomeister said.

“It is not a man,” the priest said. “It has no soul.”

“That is not for us to say,” I said, “He has a man’s heart. He does a man’s duty. Baptize him now.” We owe him that at least, I thought. But does it excuse what we do to him, or does it damn us all?

The priest snarled at me but the others held him fast. Finally Father Buchman blessed the water and threw it in an arcing spray – up and down, side to side—against the mechanical man. Then he dropped to his knees again, moaning. Several men from the crowd rushed to his aid, pulling him away.

The mechanical man looked at me and I pointed to the West door. My hand did not tremble as I wound the key. I

silently repeated my son's name with each turning as the main spring tightened.

“Do not break it, Bader, for Heaven's sake,” Lichtman said.

I finished winding and looked again into the creature's vivid, stolen blue eyes. Liquid was leaking from his neck again. I took out my handkerchief and wiped it away carefully, then placed my hand upon the panel in his chest, over the lump of muscle and gears that made his heart.

“Go,” I said, and then, “have courage.”

The Burgomeister started at that.

The mechanical man walked away from us slowly, climbing the steps. The Western door, decorated with a bas-relief depicting the Creation, swung open as he drew near. Inside the darkened narthex a figure beckoned. The mechanical man passed inside and the door swung shut.

We waited. I could hear the priest mumbling prayers to the cobblestones.

I turned to the Burgomeister, “If Kobalt is not appeased—”

From within the Cathedral came a sound like nothing I had ever heard—a scream of rage and a roaring laugh together. Fury and mirth co-mingled, it filled the square like a vast wind, whipping the trees into mad frenzy, sending hundreds of drowsing pigeons to the air in a fluttering cloud that blocked out the sun. People screamed and bolted in headlong panic.

Fleischer fled with the rest. Franz shouted to me, and I gestured frantically towards his mother. To my relief he pulled her and his sisters away, towards home.

In moments the square was deserted but for Lichtman, the Burgomeister, and myself, our hands clapped over our ears, and the priest, still on his knees rocking back and forth.

Finally the screaming wind stopped and Father Buchman's whispered prayers were the only sound. Then Lichtman shouted and pointed to the Cathedral.

The west door was open again. A wellspring of blood poured across the stones of the narthex. The torrent of red ran across the portico in a vast, unstoppable tide. We watched horrified as the flow drew closer, then slowed as it reached our feet. I knelt down and touched the edge of that dreadful crimson puddle.

The marble was dry beneath my hand, warmed by the morning sun. The horrible red stain—as clear and irrefutable as the mark of Cain—lay *within* the stones.

Trembling, we three moved up the stairs, peering into the church. I heard the Doctor in my head. *What if he simply waits for the first man that follows after?*

I took a breath and stepped forward. *For my son, I thought, for my family.*

But before I could step across the threshold, Father Buchman pushed past in front of me. He crossed the threshold and stumbled down the aisle.

The Cathedral was empty.

Of Kobalt and the mechanical man there were no signs. But like the portico, the stones of the narthex floor were stained crimson all the way back along the nave, stopping just before the altar.

“We will repair it, Father,” the Burgomeister said. There was confidence in his voice, strength I had not heard in months. Lichtman heard it too and smiled. It had worked. We had won.

Back to business, I thought. Back to how it was before.

* * *

That night I went to bed believing we had reached an end to the whole wretched mess. I embraced my son and called him a man, kissed my daughters and my wife, lay my head upon my pillow and—for the first time in seven years—went to sleep at once, without listening to the wind whistle in the eaves until exhaustion claimed me.

In my dream I was at the Cathedral, on my knees with a scrub brush and bucket, frantically cleaning the ruined steps, though I knew I could never turn the stones white again, not if

I scrubbed until the brush wore away to pieces beneath my bleeding fingers.

The mechanical man appeared. He reached down and took hold of my shoulder, shaking me....

My wife shook my shoulder again, calling my name. Someone was knocking at our front door, pounding fit to raise the dead. The Burgomeister's servant, summoning me with all haste to the Doctor's house.

The stout oak door had been torn off its hinges. The little crookback lay on the floor, wailing piteously, cradling the Doctor's severed head in his arms. The torso lay sprawled in the high-backed chair by the smoldering fire, an arm dangling from an oak beam like the doll parts in his workshop. The Burgomeister stood before the mutilated corpse, his eyes wide and unbelieving. Within the wounds, something glistened. As the Burgomeister gasped, I pulled a length of silver chain from the hole in the Doctor's chest. Then I knelt down and after a moment of gentle struggle retrieved the Doctor's head from the sobbing crookback. A bright silver key protruded from the neck, just behind the ear.

"I don't understand, Karl," the Burgomeister said.

I thought of those eyes bright with fear, of how he had balked against the chain.

“Herr Kobalt is not finished making deals,” I said. “It is the mechanical man’s turn now. I only wonder what Herr Kobalt will ask for in return for freedom from chains and winding keys.”

* * *

Lichtman tried to run, packed up his family and fled to his people in the North. The mechanical man dragged him from the carriage and eviscerated him on the road, before the eyes of his horrified family. As he was pulled apart, Lichtman’s wife heard horrible laughter from the darkness nearby.

Fleischer was next. He turned his home into a fortress, barring every door and window, sleeping with a pistol beneath his pillow until the morning his wife woke to find the bedchamber an abattoir awash with the blood of her husband.

The body of the Burgomeister—what remained of it—was found early one morning on the ruined steps of the Cathedral. His pistol was also nearby, a single shot discharged. As with the others, the priest refused to bury him in the churchyard, so the remains of my childhood friend were thrown into a barrel like so much rubbish and buried in the potter’s field outside of town, far from even the shadow of the Cathedral.

And I? I am back in the Doctor’s house, in self-imposed exile from my family. The people of the town—those good people, as the Doctor himself once called them—destroyed his

workshop soon after his body was removed. They burned his books and smashed his models, tore his notebooks to pieces as they cursed his horrible creation. They would have killed the crookback but I stopped them before they could manage the rope around the creature's misshapen neck. He serves me now, waddling amongst the wreckage, bringing me plates of bread and cheese and pots of beer from the tavern.

The dancing doll was trampled in the soot and muck, her perfect bisque face smashed on one side, her costume soiled and ruined. I have tried to fix the damage to her dress as best I can, turned her where she sits so that her good cheek and eye face the street. Anyone looking up from the street can see us here together through the windows, a wretched man and a beautiful girl.

The front door stands open, the full moon shines down. I am ready for the mechanical man's homecoming.

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COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardinha



Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.battleduck.com>.



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