



# THE BUG LADY OF VOLGSTADT

CASSANDRA BYRNE

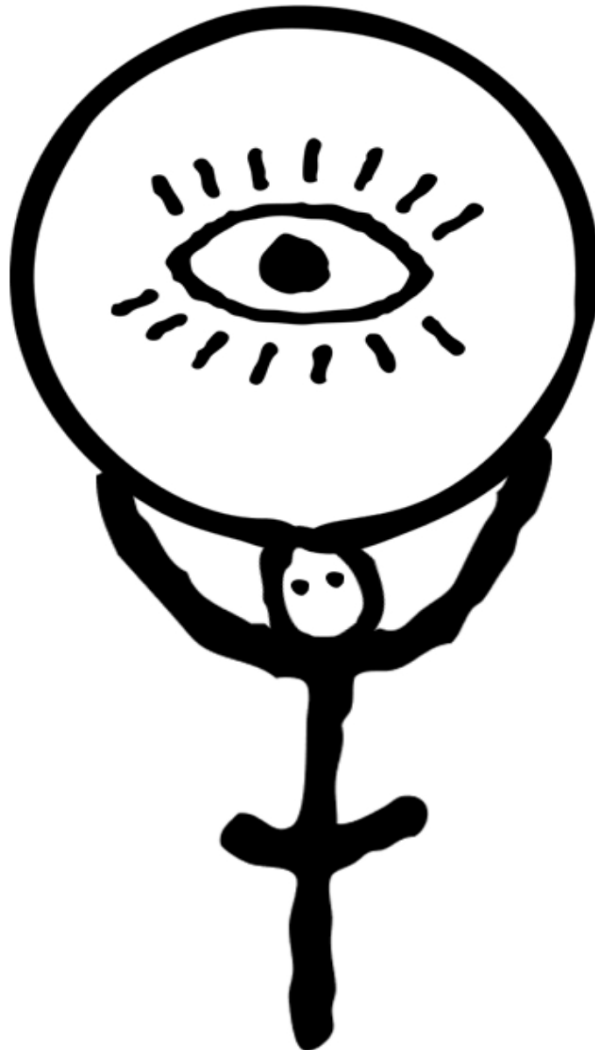




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OF  
VOLGSTADT  
BY  
CASSANDRA BYRNE

COVER ART  
PARRIS RYAN





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For business inquiries and other requests, contact [valsombra@blackbriarstudios.com](mailto:valsombra@blackbriarstudios.com)

Written by Cassandra Byrne  
Cover Art by Parris Ryan

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There is a city in the mountains possessed of a distinctly German flavor. Its narrow avenues and neatly paved cobblestone streets are evidence of well-oiled bureaucracy. Fresh construction salts the streets, new homes painted with bright reds, cheerful yellows and gentle cascades of jade and lavender. The windowsills of these houses are graced by flower boxes, with colorful curtains drawn open to let in the last light of a sleepy midsummer's eve. This is the city of Volgstadt, and like the flowers in those window boxes, it is in full bloom.

Of course, like any city, it has its quirks.

"So this is the hole?" asked Mr. Wulf.

"Yes," Lady Ashford replied. "Ghastly, isn't it?"

"Unusual, I'll give it that. Any notion as to how it came to be?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. You're supposed to be the expert."

It did not seem to Mr. Wulf a hole, but rather a wound carved from the flesh of the cellar. A sheen of mucus and ichor congealed around the rim of the gash; the earthen walls of the shaft were unworked—at least by human hands. No light illuminated its stygian depths, but a stone's drop revealed an echo at a hundred feet or more.

"How long since you found it?"

"I only just discovered it this week," Lady Ashford answered. "I don't come down to the cellar often. It's the mildew, you see, I haven't the constitution for it. I suppose it's possible it has always been here, but I feel certain Malcolm would have mentioned it to me."

"Where is Lord Ashford?"

"I'm afraid he's disappeared."

Mr Wulf raised an eyebrow, "Disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where he's disappeared to?"

She seemed irritated. "I assume the hole has him. It's the smell, you understand. There wasn't any smell before—" Lady Ashford paused, her nose wrinkling, "I've lit candles. It helps, I think."

"How long has he been missing?"

"A few weeks. Maybe two. I've no way to be certain."

Lady Ashford had a certain reputation for joyless practicality, but her indifference to her husband's disappearance nevertheless came as a shock to Mr. Wulf.

"You're not sure?"

"I am not his mother, Mr. Wulf. A fact I have reminded him of on more than one occasion. It is not my job to coddle him."

Wulf could not help but laugh, "I suppose not."

"How soon will your employer see to the hole? I am concerned something may be alive down there. There are noises, you see, Mr. Wulf. Dreadful noises."

"Noises?"

"Yes," she said, her lips curling ever so slightly in disgust, "a sort of gurgle."

"A gurgle?"

"It is distinctly a gurgle."

"Never did enjoy a gurgle," Wulf said soberly.

"Nor have I," Lady Ashford replied. "Will your mistress take the work?"

"Work is work. Lady Grimsby is not too picky as long as the work is weird."

By the time Wulf left the estate, the sun was nearly set. He followed the road from High Hill down to the warm glow of Penny Market's lanterns, and spent several hours in and out of bars, hiring bluecoats in need of work. He made arrangements for the laborers to meet him at Lady Ashford's estate in the morning, then headed back to the house on Ragsman's Row.

Despite the late hour, lights still burned in the third floor windows.

He knocked and Mr. Barghest, the chamberlain, answered. The chamberlain was a tall, pale creature, skin draped over long bones in a ghastly sheet. In spite of his advanced years, the man's brown eyes remained sharp and active. He stood in stark contrast to the warmth of the recently renovated interior; the foyer's floor was cherry parquet, its walls polished red oak imported from the lowlands. An aroma of cedar and cinnamon permeated the air.

"How are her humours?"

"Sanguine waxing choleric. She is agitated," replied Mr. Barghest.

"Over what?"

"More murders. Five Coins. A girl and her father—near the quarry road."

"Mutilated?" asked Mr. Wulf.

Mr. Barghest nodded. "So I'm told."

"How many does that make? Seven?"

"Twelve," answered Mr. Barghest, "if you count the missing bluecoats. There will be riots soon."

"If the watch wants her help, they'll ask for it."

"I believe she feels that if she were a man, they would have asked for her help already."

Wulf frowned, but said nothing. The notion was not without merit.



"How did it go with Lady Ashford?" Mr. Barghest inquired.

"Something is off there. It warrants a look."

"Shall I notify Mr. Gage?"

Wulf nodded, "Usual supplies. Primaries and Additional. We'll need a winch and a pulley and plenty of rope."

"I'll see to it tonight," said Mr. Barghest.

"He's asleep by now."

"The smell of money will wake him."

They both laughed.

"Thank you, Mr. Barghest."

"Of course, Mr. Wulf."

Wulf made his way to the third floor where Lady Grimsby kept her apartments. He listened at the door for a moment. He could hear her heels clacking as she paced the hardwood floors, muttering darkly to herself. Wulf could not make out her words through the door.

"Are you free?" he asked, knocking.

Lady Grimsby opened the door so sharply it seemed to draw breath. She wore a velvet frock with a high, tight neckline which hid her olive skin. Emerald eyes pierced the cascades of long black hair that fell across her face. She had her mother's eyes. The same green. The same madness.

"You look like a stormcloud, Evie."

"I shall take that as a compliment, Mr. Wulf."

"As you like."

"Would you like some tea?" the Lady asked.

"Have you got anything stronger?"

"It depends, Mr. Wulf. Are we working tomorrow?"

"We are."

"Tea, then."

Mr. Wulf scowled, unable to hide his disappointment.

The apartment was one part library and two parts alchemical laboratory. Bookshelves buckled under the weight of their contents, while racks of drying herbs, plants, and flowers, pressed or hung, covered the walls. Two large tables covered in vials and beakers dominated the sitting room. Each of the vials and beakers were filled with powder or Lady Grimsby's latest concoction. Some were medicines, some were poisons; some burned to the touch or could take a person's sight if handled improperly.

A brace of pistols lay disassembled upon the coffee table.

"Tell me about the hole," Lady Grimsby said.

"You don't want to discuss the murders?"

"Shame about the murders. Someone ought to do something about them."

"I agree," said Mr. Wulf.

"Tell me about the hole."

"You're in a foul mood."

"Fouler by the minute, Mr. Wulf."

The big man sighed and straightened his coat before taking a seat. "It's at least a hundred foot drop, irregular opening; natural, if unnatural, if you follow my meaning. Could be what you've been looking for. She says it's only been there a short while, but it looks old."

Evelyn frowned.

"We will need bluecoats for labor—"

"I've taken care of it."

"—and a winch and a pulley and—"

"Mr. Barghest has sent a list over to Mr. Gage."

"Primaries and Additionalals?"

"Of course."

"Was it a well, perhaps?" Evelyn said, pursing her lips, "Sealed and recently broken open? A smuggler's hold?"

Mr. Wulf shook his head, "I don't think it was men who made it."

"We shall need a canary."

"I thought I was the canary."

The comment seemed to amuse her. She broke out into a broad smile, and her tinkling laughter filled the air. It cheered Wulf to see her smile. The room was brighter for it.

"Hardly. You are much too fat, and lack a canary's cheerful disposition."

"I'm not fat. This is all muscle."

She mmm'd at him, mischief in her eyes, "Indeed? You've disguised it so cleverly."

"You're a brat, Evie, and I'm too tired to contend with you tonight. I'll have my 'good work' and be gone."

"Good work, Mr. Wulf."

"Thank you. I'll see you on the morrow."

"On the morrow, Mr. Wulf."



The next morning a loosely managed chaos descended upon Lady Ashford's estate. A supply caravan from Five Coins under the direction of Mr. Barghest and Mr. Gage delivered oil and lanterns, spools of rope, demolition powder, and non-perishable foodstuffs. Before noon, Lady Ashford's cellars were transformed into an impromptu base camp.

Wulf arrived with the bluecoats shortly thereafter and saw to the installation of a winch and pulley system which could be used to access the pit beneath the estate's cellar safely. Not sturdy enough to deliver more than one person at a time, but certainly up to the task at hand. Between themselves the bluecoats had elected a foreman, Mr. Brisbois, who was senior in experience. A thick man, as tall as Mr. Wulf but leaner in the shoulders, who spoke with the hint of a French accent. The foreman's sharp appearance suggested to Wulf an active mind. His bald pate was clean-shaven, and his black beard cropped neat and salted with wisps of gray. Wulf liked the look of him.

"Excellent work, Mr. Brisbois."

"Thank you, Mr. Wulf."

"We'll need five men at the bottom, one man at the top, for operations."

The foreman regarded the hole with a skeptic's eye. "You want us to go down there?"

"Indeed, Mr. Brisbois. As was discussed last night."

"Due respect, Mr. Wulf, I had not seen the hole when we spoke last night."

"Is there a problem with the pay?"

"No, no. Not that, Mr. Wulf—but you did not mention how deep it goes, perhaps?"

"I understand the dilemma, Mr. Brisbois. I am not eager for the trouble myself, but it is precisely because of its depth that Lady Grimsby has an interest in it. I am sure she will see to it that you and your men are well compensated for any hazards."

Mr. Brisbois paled. "Lady Grimsby? The witch?"

"If she were a witch, Mr. Brisbois," Wulf scoffed, "do you think she'd need a winch and pulley and all these men to get down this hole?"

The foreman was undeterred. "I have heard stories—that she cavorts with faeries and turns men who cross her into toads."

Evelyn Grimsby arrived as the foreman finished his sentence, padding down the cellar steps dressed in men's clothes: black trousers and waistcoat, white blouse beneath a dark green vest. She wore the pistols Wulf had seen disassembled in her apartment the night before at her hips, and a loose bundle of fresh parchment in the crook of her arm.

"Your fears are misplaced, Sir," she stated flatly, "it is weak mothers and indulgent fathers who turn men into toads. If I were going to turn a man into anything, it would be something useful, like a stool or a ladder."

Mr. Brisbois' eyes dropped to the floor and he removed his cap.

"I am sorry, Madame, I did not mean—"

"Lady Grimsby," she corrected him.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Grimsby. Just talk, that's all."

"No pardon is needed Mr. Brisbois. For what it's worth, the only faerie I am acquainted with is kept in a cage under lock and key. We hardly cavort."

"Truly?" asked Mr. Brisbois, "You have seen one?"

"Truly," the lady answered in a conspiratorial hush. "I use her as a lantern. If she's stubborn, I give her a proper shake."

At this, the foreman laughed. "Well then, Lady Grimsby, you and I? We are on the same team. Give her a shake for me, next time."

"I will, Mr. Brisbois. But first, we have business to attend to." She moved to inspect the hole, and gave the pulley and winch a sharp tug to test the quality of the installation. She gave the foreman a short nod, to indicate she was satisfied, then looked to her companion.

"Is everything else in order, Mr. Wulf?"

"I believe so, Ma'am."

"Well then, I suppose you'd better go and get the canary."



As it turned out, the canary Mr. Wulf procured was more figurative than literal. He removed the cover over the bird's cage with a sidelong glance at Lady Grimsby, dark eyes filled with worry. He looked like nothing so much as a schoolboy ready to be scolded and cleared his throat nervously as he made his offering to his employer.

"Mr. Wulf," said Lady Grimsby, "I believe that bird has eaten our canary."

"It was all I could find."

"That is a *pigeon*, Mr. Wulf. Should I be thankful you did not bring me a potato?"

"Don't start. It's still morning and I'm not in the mood."

She took the bird from him carefully and appraised it.

"Was there nothing smaller? A turkey, perhaps?"

"I was up and down the market three times."

"Were you wearing a blindfold?"

"If you don't want the bird, Evelyn, you can go and get one yourself. I will happily eat this one."

"You have a savage humor, Mr. Wulf."

"I expect that's what makes me useful. Will it work, or not?"

"Any bird shall do just fine, dear Aloysius. It is something to do with how they take in air. Shall we begin?"

They fastened the cage to the pulley and sent it down the hole, gear whistling and whining as they lowered it by pulling up the counterweight. Some of the bluecoats gathered behind Mr. Wulf and

Lady Grimsby, venturing near enough to the pit to watch as the pigeon disappeared into darkness. Their foreman, Mr. Brisbois, stood at the edge of the shaft across from Mr. Wulf and Lady Grimsby. Its depth was cause enough for natural discomfort, but Mr. Brisbois appeared transfixed instead by Lady Grimsby, as unsettled by the look her eyes as the cellar's black gash.

The foreman knew what madness looked like. He'd seen it before, and saw it again now. Lady Grimsby burned with unblinking intensity—he could not tell if the madness had mastered her, or if she had mastered it.

"What do you think we will find down there?" Mr. Brisbois asked Lady Grimsby.

"A murder, perhaps. Or something worse. We shall know which soon enough."

"What could be worse than murder?"

She knelt beside the hole and gestured to a spot where a boot scuff had marked the stones.

"Malcolm Ashford is missing, Mr. Brisbois, and this mark was likely made by his boot. If Lord Ashford had come near the edge and slipped, or hadn't seen the hole, he'd have stumbled and there would be no mark, or the mark would be angled toward the hole, but instead—"

The foreman saw it once she'd pointed it out. A partial boot print, showing from toe to heel. Angled away from the hole, not toward it.

"He was pushed."

"Perhaps," said Lady Grimsby, but she did not seem certain.

"Best the bird come back dead," Mr. Brisbois whispered softly. "We fill in the hole and go on our way."

Lady Grimsby arched an eyebrow at him, "You're not the least bit curious what's down there, Mr. Brisbois?"

"My father say: '*Curiosité est un vilain défaut.*'— 'Curiosity is a wicked fault.'"

"I have not heard that before."

"He was not from Volgstadt," Mr. Brisbois said, "Carcassonne, he called it."

"I know the name."

"Do you know the way?"

"It is in the other world. Elsewhere. There is no way to be known." She paused. "How did he come to Volgstadt?"

"He trespassed in a faerie wood. She changed the trails and lead him here."

Lady Grimsby nodded, "At least she let him live. Most are not so lucky."

"He was not lucky. It drove him mad."

"Better mad than dead."

"Perhaps," Mr. Brisbois replied—but looking at her eyes, he was not so sure.

They waited an hour before bringing the pigeon back up; they heard its calls as it made its ascent, echoed and amplified by the shaft so that it rebounded throughout Lady Ashford's cellar and multiplied. By the time the pigeon reached the top the sound was nearly deafening; the bird itself was in a frenzied panic, terrified nearly to death by its own alarm calls.

Lady Grimsby was first to brave the trip to the bottom of the pit. She took hold of the rope, looped it round her wrist, and stepped out into the air over the hole. Mr. Brisbois was startled by the unexpected action and lunged to catch her, but caught himself and held back for fear of falling in.

"A lantern if you would, Mr. Brisbois."

"We don't know what's down there."



“That is the point, Mr. Brisbois.”

“We could fill it in. Go home. I’ll charge you half.”

For the briefest moment, the lady seemed to consider it. Mr. Brisbois thought for certain she would change her mind. She looked down into the abyss and seemed to lose herself there.

“Half,” Mr. Brisbois implored again.

“Half will get me nothing, Mr. Brisbois.” She looked back to him and her tone hardened, and he saw there was more than madness in her. She had killed before. Death lurked in those dark green orbs—far worse than any stories about witches or faeries. Her eyes were unburdened by the weight of uncertainty. They were the eyes of a monster that could kill without hesitation or warning.

“A lantern, please,” she repeated, a cold impatience in her voice.

The foreman gestured to one of the bluecoats and the young man fetched her a lantern.

She loosened her grip on the rope’s counterweight and disappeared into the pit, accompanied on her journey by the lantern’s soft glow. The wheel of the pulley hissed and whined at the reckless speed of the descent, then caught suddenly and slowed.

“Well?” called Mr. Wulf.

A long silence passed before the lady called back. “We shall need more bluecoats.”



A massive cavern lay below the Ashford Estate, a large central chamber adorned by countless tunnels which seemed to stretch underneath the whole of Volgstadt. The tunnels reminded Mr. Brisbois of an octopus’ tentacles, curling and twisting as if searching for something. A deep layer of mud and clay formed the floor of the chamber, while the walls had been decorated by some long vanished

tribe. Their gods stood watch. Graven idols carved into rough-hewn stone, frog-headed horrors with fat bellies, and wicked grins.

The bluecoats who followed the lady down placed lanterns throughout the cavern, but the light did little to improve the atmosphere. Illuminated by flickering lanterns and guttering torches, the idols lining the cavern walls seemed to undulate and laugh. Mr. Brisbois made the sign of the Christian God to ward off whatever spirits watched the expedition. Whatever doubts he once held regarding his father's tales of devils and faeries, the chamber extinguished them.

Lady Grimsby donned a pair of black leather gloves which came up over her elbows and began the work of her investigation. She sifted through the cavern's muddy floor with a hand spade and horsehair brush. The search yielded quick results.

"What have you got there?" Wulf asked.

"I believe it is an arm, Mr. Wulf."

She lifted the limb from the dirt and displayed it for him; it was bone and tattered flesh, fingers stripped bare. Some vestige of humanity was still evinced by the sinew and muscle that congealed upon the bicep and forearm. If the macabre artefact upset her in the least, she did not show it.

"Lord Ashford?" Wulf asked.

"I think not. Lord Ashford was a slight man, advanced in his years. Whoever bore this arm was a young man, and well-muscled." She gestured to a nearby lantern, "More light, please."

Lady Grimsby paused and re-examined her immediate area, then fished a ring from the mud.

Wulf took the ring and turned it over; a chisel and hammer had been engraved on its face. "A craftsman's signet. A stonecutter, by the look of it. What's a stonecutter doing down this pit?"

"Whatever brought him here, it has been at least a month. The decay is advanced. His nails are loose, and liquefaction has taken root."

"Any clue as to what happened?"

She turned the stonecutter's arm and showed it to Mr. Wulf. "He was attacked. These lacerations in the bones are defensive wounds."

At the far end of the chamber, a bluecoat swore and stumbled backward. He froze in place, staring at the ground a few feet ahead of him. It shifted, ever so slightly, and the bluecoat bent over with his lantern held low to get a better look.

Then came a voice, ragged and torn. "Help me," it rasped, "please."

Lady Grimsby moved to join the bluecoat, followed closely by Mr. Wulf and Mr. Brisbois. She knelt carefully and began to clear away the clay. It was Lord Ashford, half-buried in the chamber's floor as if the earth itself had tried to swallow him whole. He had dragged himself to a pool of artesian water near the mouth of one of the tunnels. The man was dessicated, but alive: his lips cracked, his skin pocked with bleeding sores.

"Help me," he rasped again, near sobbing.

"*Pardieu!*" exclaimed Mr. Brisbois.

"Rest easy, Lord Ashford," Mr. Wulf said solemnly. "You are safe now."

Under Mr. Wulf's direction the bluecoats fashioned a makeshift gurney from pieces of the supply crates. The discovery of Lord Ashford had somehow survived in such a place, perhaps for weeks, heartened the men. They were stout folk built for work, and it gladdened them to be busy. It made the chamber smaller somehow, and lessened its menace. With the spectacle of loading Lord Ashford onto the gurney and coordinating his safe delivery back to the cellar above, it was easy to forget the eyes of the old gods were upon them.

"I have him," shouted a bluecoat waiting above. He repeated it, as if he could not believe it himself, "I have him."

The bluecoats at the bottom of the pit clapped and cheered at the signal. Mr. Brisbois joined them for a moment, but found his celebrations cut short as his eyes were drawn to Mr. Wulf and Lady Grimsby, who stood a bit apart and talked in a low whisper.

"This isn't right," Lady Grimsby muttered, her lips pursed with disapproval.

"Nothing about this place is right," Mr. Brisbois grouched.

"Of course, Mr. Brisbois, but that is not what I meant. It is his bones that are not right. They were not broken. Not his legs, not his arms..."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he didn't fall," Wulf answered sourly.

"He was pushed. As you said."

"No, Mr. Brisbois," Wulf said, "his bones were not broken. He did not *fall*."

Mr. Brisbois frowned, "I do not understa—"

"He was dragged," Lady Grimsby said sharply, before the foreman could finish. "You have your armor, Mr. Wulf?"

"It's with the supplies."

"Are you well-armed?"

"I have my long knives."

"Have everything brought down. Best to be prepared. I will need my books as well. The old ones."

"What are you saying?" interrupted Mr. Brisbois, "Prepared for what?"

"Everything, Mr. Brisbois."

As if in response, a clacking and clattering arose from a tunnel at the far end of the chamber. The noise was not unlike settling earth or falling rock, but seemed pregnant with intention. The cheering bluecoats stopped and turned, milling near the bottom of the shaft as they tried to identify the source of the sound.

In the tunnel's darkness something shifted. A shadow within the shadow.

"What is that?" Mr. Brisbois whispered.

And then the shadow moved. A monstrous shape on six spindly legs menaced forward from the tunnel's mouth. It was huge—impossibly so—nearly twice as tall as Mr. Wulf and at least twelve feet long, a primordial nightmare of antennae, chitin, and clacking mandibles. The creature's carapace danced in guttering torchlight, reflecting the shocked faces of the bluecoats on its surface.

"Hold," Mr. Wulf barked.

Terror broke across the bluecoats all at once. They panicked and clambered over each other, tugging at the pulley, fighting with each other to escape.

"Hold damnit!" Mr. Wulf bellowed again. One man fell, screaming as he scrambled backward before the creature's advance. It did not even notice him as it stepped forward and impaled him with one of its long, pinioned legs. His screams turned wet and blood bubbled from his mouth, howls reverberating off the cavern walls. The frog-faced Gods watched and laughed as he wriggled and squirmed, clutching at the creature's leg. Mr. Brisbois watched too, struck dumb by the horror of the moment.

He could not bring himself to move or speak, let alone attempt an escape.

A sound like thunder cracked through the air, and then another, each accompanied by the smell of sulfur and gunpowder. A great gout of yellow fluid erupted from the creature's body. The lady had fired each of her pistols and now circled calmly away from the

creature as she reloaded, putting the bluecoats between herself and it. Mr. Wulf moved clockwise, opposite his dark-haired mistress, his long knives drawn. They were like gears of a machine well-oiled and tuned to perfection, maneuvering to put the creature between them.

The creature snapped forward and impaled another bluecoat, pinning him to the clay of the cavern floor, before pulling him away from the mass of men gathered round the pulley. It emitted a terrible shriek as it closed on them, and the nearest bluecoat collapsed to the ground, clutching at his head as his eardrums burst. The noise ended with a third bright flash of burning powder and another gout of bilious yellow liquid.

"Get back, Mr. Brisbois!" It was Lady Grimsby, pulling him away from the mass of bluecoats near the pulley. The foreman stumbled backward, unable to look away as the creature's mandibles snapped at one of the men, piercing his shoulder. Another bluecoat came to his defense, prying the mandibles open to keep his comrade's arm from being torn off.

Mr. Wulf looped round to the creature's flank and made the most of the opportunity created by the struggling bluecoats. He went to work with his long knives, carving at the soft crevasse between the creature's head and thorax. It was quite clearly an insect. Incomprehensibly huge, but distinct in both the form and function of its parts.

Lady Grimsby reloaded and sent another shot into the creature, striking it in the head, causing the chitin to crack and split. It flailed madly, skittering backwards; Mr. Brisbois watched as Mr. Wulf evaded its thrashing legs deftly, putting distance between himself and the monster. It turned and twisted and then collapsed. It was strange and silent in the dying. It did not scream, or if it did, it was not in a way human ears could hear. The surviving men huddled together beneath the shaft, watching its death throes in silence.

After it had died and they'd begun the process of sending the wounded up to the cellar, Mr. Brisbois found himself compelled to

linger a moment. There was something in the creature's carapace he could not quite make out and it would not let him look away. He stooped to pick up a nearby lantern and approached. As he did he saw it was his own reflection in the monster's chitin. The truest reflection of himself he'd ever seen, more true than any mirror ever showed him. He looked small and piteous and pink, a lump of misshapen flesh, soft and malformed.

He was meat, and nothing more. It seemed the simplest thing, and he wondered how it was he had not seen it sooner.



Malcolm Ashford's eyes, though closed, moved rapidly beneath their lids, as if he dreamt of some far off place. It was unclear whether he sleeping, or awake and in the thrall of delirium. He spoke in fits and starts, nonsensical mutterings and mumblings about a mother in the stars, and a vast library in the void. He did not acknowledge his wife or Lady Grimsby, or the bluecoats who had rescued him from the dark below. His presence so unnerved the men that it became necessary to move him to a bedroom on the second floor of the estate, as much to settle the nerves of the bluecoats as for his own comfort.

The bedroom they put him in was a narrow affair, with pale green wallpaper and two windows for natural light on the wall opposite the doorway. Mr. Brisbois stood in the door's arch, eyes distant, as Lady Grimsby laid out her kit on a chest at the foot of the bed. She took a pair of sharp, delicate looking scissors and cut away what was left of his overclothes. Lady Ashford gently washed her husband with a damp cloth.

"I do wish you'd let me strip the bed before bringing him up," Lady Ashford said peevishly. "These sheets will have to be tossed."

Evelyn laughed sharply. "You are to be commended for the practicality of your concerns, Lady Ashford. I will be mindful of the linens moving forward."

"I would appreciate that," Lady Ashford shot back. "In addition, while I am grateful you and your men were able to recover my husband, I must add, I would have appreciated more discretion. It is the reason I hired you, and instead you and your *Mr. Wulf* have invited half of Volgstadt into my home."

This comment elicited a flat, unfriendly glance from Lady Grimsby as she continued with her work. She cut Lord Ashford's shirt down the middle, and up each shirtsleeve so she could examine his chest and arms more easily. His muscles had wasted to almost nothing. His skin was dried and cracked, so badly stretched it looked nearly translucent in places. If that were not horrific enough, the whole of him was covered in tumorous lumps—dozens—each the size of a child's fist.

"What are they?" Lady Ashford whispered, "What's happened to him?" Confronted by the gravity of her husband's condition, her manner softened. She reached out and touched his cheek, as she needed to reassure herself he was still there.

"A reaction, perhaps, to something he encountered below," Evelyn replied—but as she leaned closer to get a better look at the man, the truth of his condition became clear. The tumors were not tumors at all. They were soft to the touch, like pimples ready to be popped. A kind of amniotic puss filled them. Within those tumors, where his skin was most translucent, strange shapes could be seen writhing and wriggling. Whatever had found Lord Malcolm Ashford in the dark below had kept him alive to carry its children.

"Lady Ashford," Evelyn said loudly, forcing a cheerful tone, "I will need several buckets of boiled water, and all the towels you can manage. Mr. Brisbois," she turned to the foreman, wiping her hands on her trousers, "go downstairs and tell Mr. Wulf to fetch Captain Hilstrom of the city watch. I think it best we alert the authorities as to our encounter with the creature."

"Creature!" Lady Ashford exclaimed. "What creature?"



"I think it was a kind of termite, perhaps," Evelyn replied. "Regardless, there are matters we must attend to before we can afford to waste time on speculation. Lord Ashford's condition is delicate. We must see to these...*tumors*...in careful fashion. Mr Barghest, my chamberlain, was a surgeon attached to my foster father's company during the war. I will need him as well, to assist me in Lord Ashford's care."

"We should leave," Mr. Brisbois muttered, "it is not safe here. If there are more—"

"If there are more," Evelyn said evenly, "we will deal with them."

The foreman snorted in disgust as he moved to leave.

"Do not hold your tongue, Mr. Brisbois. If you have a problem, let's have it out."

Mr. Brisbois' eyes flashed hot and he turned back to face her, his hands balled in fists. "I tell you we should go fill the hole and go home. Men are dead. They are dead because you do not listen."

"If I had done as you wished, Lord Ashford would have been buried alive." Lady Grimsby removed her gloves and crossed the floor to the foreman. "What you saw below was terrible, but your eyes are open now, Mr. Brisbois. There is no closing them. Ignorance would not diminish the danger we are in. A farmer does not know when a drought is coming, but it comes all the same."

"How can you be so calm?"

"What choice do we have, Mr. Brisbois? What will panic get us? We are small—it is true—and our world is vast and filled with danger...but even very small things may have a deadly bite." She took his hands in hers and squeezed them reassuringly, "Refine your bite, Mr. Brisbois. Remind the universe you are not to be stepped on."



Mr. Barghest arrived at Lady Ashford's estate within the hour. Mr. Gage, the banker who oversaw Lady Grimsby's financial affairs, was visiting when the runner arrived, and elected to tag along in order to satisfy his curiosities. The two men made for an unusual pair; Mr. Barghest with his unnatural pallor, tall and gaunt, Mr. Gage with a disheveled mein and a nervous energy that bespoke an active, if impatient, mind. Mr. Gage brought with him several books: ancient tomes bound in Carolingian leather, inscribed with thaumaturgical runes. Mr. Barghest stood behind, lips drawn straight as a razor, a black doctor's bag tucked under one arm.

Mr. Wulf greeted them at the door. "Excellent timing, Mr. Barghest, she was just asking after you."

"I came at once," the chamberlain said, "I did not think she would want to be kept waiting."

"Indeed," said Mr. Wulf, "and you've brought Mr. Gage—an unexpected surprise."

"I begged him to let me come," Mr. Gage explained, sniffing into a handkerchief, "my curiosity as to the nature of the venture demanded satisfaction. I was up all night sending runners and putting in orders so you would have everything you needed for today."

Mr. Wulf rumbled his approval, "You did an excellent job, Mr. Gage. I would caution you, however, our work has taken a dangerous turn."

"Dangerous?" asked Mr. Gage, "How so?"

"Best I show you. Come along."

Mr. Wulf led Mr. Barghest and Mr. Gage up to the bedroom on the second floor of the estate, where Lady Grimsby and Lady Ashford were tending to Lord Ashford. Evelyn had filched a pair of end tables from the hall and organized towels and buckets of boiled water on them. She looked up as the men entered, green eyes peeking over a pair of specialized bifocals.

“Mr. Barghest,” Lady Grimsby smiled, “thank you for coming so quickly. I’d hoped for Captain Hilstrom, but I see you’ve brought Mr. Gage.”

“I was unable to discourage him, Ma’am,” droned Mr. Barghest in reply.

“I brought the books you’d requested—the old ones,” offered Mr. Gage.

“I will have to look at them later; for now, we have more pressing concerns.”

Mr. Barghest moved to Lord Ashford’s bedside and began his examination of the man. He poked and prodded, mumbling and harrumphing with disapproval as he did. “What has happened to this man? I have not seen anything like this before.”

“What is your opinion of the tumors?”

“They are not tumors at all,” Mr. Barghest muttered, holding Lord Ashford’s arm to the light. “It looks to be a type of parasite. It’s as if something has laid eggs under his skin.”

“Those are eggs?” Lady Ashford croaked in disgust, taking a step backward.

Evelyn nodded, “That was my suspicion as well. If your husband is to survive, we must remove them.” She looked up at Mr. Barghest, who was scowling. “Can it be managed?”

“It’s hard to say. This man is not well, and this is far outside my area of expertise.”

“I would venture that it is far outside anyone’s area of expertise, Mr. Barghest.”

“He cannot afford to lose any blood. We must be very careful with our cuts.”

“Are your hands up to the challenge?”

Mr. Barghest flashed her a scowl, his pride wounded, "I should think so. I can do the first one, so we know what we are dealing with." The chamberlain unpacked his tools from his black doctor's bag and laid them beside Evelyn's on a chest at the foot of the bed. His instruments were cold, iron tools he'd maintained since the war; each fashioned for a specialized purpose. From these he selected a sharp, wicked looking razor which would have looked at home in a barber's kit.

A thin layer of dermis over the tumor split easily as the razor passed across it. For a moment, it was as if nothing had happened...then a rush of yellowish brown amniotic puss spilled out, thick, like melted butter. The room watched as the first of the shapes turned toward the surface of the cut and wriggled its way out, widening the incision as it went. It slithered from the tumor on a thousand whisper-thin legs, each the breadth of a hair. Lady Grimsby moved with lightning speed and plucked it up with a pair of tweezers, before depositing it into a specimen jar.

She held it to the light and examined it closely.

"Do you recognize it?" Mr. Gage asked, joining her.

"Yes, I think so. It is called Mama Sibi by the Creoti of the far west."

"Mama Sibi?"

"It means '*Mother's Eyes*'. The Creoti believe they are the custodians of Bagshubathra, the Many-Eyed Mother."

"A servant of the Old Gods," said Mr. Gage.

"Indeed. And her eyes are upon us."

Lady Ashford had turned pale. "I cannot watch this. I am sorry Malcolm, but I cannot." She pushed her way out of the room, trembling as she went.

"Mr. Wulf," Lady Grimsby said, glancing toward the doorway, "see to her."

Mr. Barghest cleared his throat. "Shall we do one more together?"

"Yes, of course. I will perform the cut."

It was perhaps an hour of steady work before they heard a heavy knock at the front door. Mr. Wulf arrived a moment later with Captain Hilstrom in tow. The watch captain was a grim-faced footman, with broad shoulders and a humorless mien. He wore a heavy grey coat which stretched past his knees, under which could be seen a brightly burnished breastplate and a pair of black boots polished to a shine. He removed a feathered helmet as he entered, and paused to run a hand through his thinning black hair.

"Captain Hilstrom," Lady Grimsby said, not bothering to look up from her work, "your timing is perfect; we are almost finished."

"Lady Gri—" the watch captain caught himself, seeing Lord Ashford, "What in God's name is going on here? What's happened to this man?"

"Lord Ashford has contracted a parasitic infection of sorts." She paused to collect another specimen, catching it with her tweezers as it wriggled free. "We have the matter in hand."

"Well—I must speak to you at once," Captain Hilstrom said.

"Indeed, that's why I called you here."

"Called me here? Madame, you misunderstand; I have been looking for you all day."

Evelyn turned to face Captain Hilstrom with a raised eyebrow. A slight smile danced across her lips. "You're here about the murders."

"I am, Madame. We have a witness. A girl. We thought she'd been killed along with her father, or taken, but she survived and spent the night hiding in the quarry. A group of laborers found her this morning. She refused to come out. They found her covered head to toe in blood. We thought she might be injured, but it was her father's blood. Not a scratch on her."

"Did she tell you what she saw?"

Captain Hilstrom straightened, uncomfortable. "She did, Madame..." He shook his head, "...but what she described is beyond my understanding."

"A monster," Evelyn said, "a kind of insect, perhaps."

The watch captain blinked in disbelief, "Madame? I'm sorry, but how could you—"

"Our tasks are aligned, Captain Hilstrom. Tell me everything."

"She and her father were walking home from Five Coins. It was late. He'd worked a shift at one of the public houses. Her mother died a few years back, and since then he'd brought her to work with him on most nights, to keep an eye on her. It was dark by the time they reached the quarry road. They needed a torch to light the way. That was where it happened."

Captain Hilstrom sat on one of the end tables, wiping the sweat from his brow. "She saw a monster—as you said—a kind of insect. It came up out of the quarry and attacked them. Crawled up over the edge like something out of a nightmare. Her father was a big man. She said it picked him like a ragdoll and he just...fell apart. It split him in two at the waist. She ran off when it attacked, but she could still see what happened. He was still screaming when it dragged him off. I didn't know a man could still scream, cut in half like that. It took him down into the quarry and left her there."

Lady Grimsby set down her tools. "My information on the missing bluecoats suggested they all worked at the quarry in some capacity. Is that correct?"

"It is, Madame."

"And the murders? Were they in proximity to the quarry?"

"Near enough."

"We have killed a monster like the one the girl described, but it is possible, likely even, there are more."

Captain Hilstrom's face hardened, "Where?"

"Beneath this very estate."

"I'm sorry—beneath the estate?"

"There is a hole in the cellar, old and deep. It leads to a cavern and a network of tunnels; that is where we found Lord Ashford, and where we killed the creature. The tunnels beneath the estate must connect to the quarry somehow. It's possible operations there have disturbed something which has been sleeping beneath Volgstadt. This is an old city, built on the bones of civilizations ancient beyond our reckoning. I have read of them in my books, and I have long sought the way."

"I don't care about your books, Lady Grimsby, or whatever you think is buried beneath Volgstadt. I care about the people of this city, and if there's something down there that means them harm, I mean to see it ended."

"I am of the same mind, Captain Hilstrom."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Better," she answered, a mad twinkle in her green eyes, "I have explosives."



Nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the tools and supplies that had been brought into Lady Ashford's estate that morning, were six long, rectangular crates marked in large, friendly black letters, with the word: ADDITIONALS. Captain Hilstrom, Mr. Brisbois, and a pair of greycoats from the city watch flanked Lady Grimsby as she approached the crates and cracked the first of them open.

Inside were a dozen tubes filled with clear, viscous, chestnut-tinged liquid. They were tightly packed with scraps and rolls of fabric, and the tubes were capped beside, but the faint scent of sulfur and copper filled the air as the crate was opened. To Mr. Brisbois, it seemed as if the devil had been invited into the room.

At the sight of the crate's contents, Captain Hilstrom took a step backward. "By God, woman, you have lost your mind! This is nitroglycerine!"

Lady Grimsby arched an eyebrow. "You are familiar with it?"

"There are enough explosives here to level the block!"

"Two blocks," she corrected him, opening another of the crates.

This one contained ten freshly manufactured rifles and pistols, grips and stocks in polished wood. They had been stamped with the imprimatur of a foundry in Streissberg. Captain Hilstrom recognized it as the same one that supplied the city of Volgstadt's militia. He knew they'd recently begun mass production, but to see so many weapons in the hands of a private citizen shocked him.

"This is madness! What reason could you have for such a stockpile?"

"I am in the business of solving problems," Lady Grimsby said flatly, conducting an inventory of the firearms, "and I have found even the most stubborn problems can be expeditiously solved via the proper application of gunpowder and explosives."

"These weapons belong in Volgstadt's armories."

Lady Grimsby's eyes narrowed dangerously. "They are mine. Paid for privately, and offered freely for the good of public service. Do you want my assistance or not, Captain Hilstrom?"

The captain scowled, but said nothing. He gave a sharp wave to his men, and they moved through in a line, arming themselves from the cache. There were more than Lady Grimsby realized. She counted them as they moved through the cellar, helping themselves the armaments. Twenty. A round enough number, she imagined, for what needed to be done.

Evelyn was lost in thought when the sound of crashing plates and screaming started from above the cellar. Hurrying to the stairs, she found Mr. Wulf at the top. His face was red, and his fists were



clenched. He flinched as a plate flew past his head, showering the stairwell with bits of porcelain.

"Lady Ashford," Wulf bellowed, "that is quite enough of that!"

"Mr. Wulf," said Lady Grimsby, "is there a problem?"

"Yes," Mr. Wulf muttered, "there is a problem."



Rumors of what had transpired beneath the Ashford estate had spread to the bluecoats in the Penny Markets and the brewers at the public houses in Five Coins. A mob had gathered outside the house in response to the rumors, and it became necessary to post some of the greycoats outside to keep the peace. Evelyn emerged from the cellar to join Mr. Wulf and Lady Ashford in the kitchen.

"*The Bug Lady of Volgstadt!*" Lady Ashford screamed, "that is what they will call me!"

Mr. Wulf dismissed her concern, "It's just a few curious folks come looking to see what the fuss is."

"This is your fault," Lady Ashford hissed, wagging a finger at Lady Grimsby. "I will never be able to show my face in public again. I will never escape the whispering ladies of Volgstadt! Their tittering laughter will follow me from one end of the city to the other!"

Evelyn bent over to collect a few of the larger pieces of the broken plates and set them down on the counter, before pulling out a chair and taking a seat at the servants' table. "Lady Ashford," she said softly, "do you take sugar with your tea?"

"Tea! My life is in ruins and you want to drink *tea!*"

"Of course. There's always time for tea." Evelyn poured two cups from the pot Mr. Wulf had prepared, one for Lady Ashford and one for herself. "Rumors, like rashes, spread. You are right to be upset." She set out a cup for Lady Ashford, before taking a sip from her

own. "As with rashes, the best cure for a rumour is time. Be patient, and this will pass."

"*Patient?*" Lady Ashford snapped, "There are monsters in my basement! They have laid *eggs* in my husband!"

Lady Grimsby nodded sympathetically, "Life is filled with unexpected little trials such as these. Your husband is not the first man to have a few eggs laid inside him."

"You mock me, Lady Grimsby!"

"Forgive me, I have a dark humor," Evelyn leaned forward across the table and took the other woman's hands in hers, "Perhaps, Lady Ashford, after all this is done, a change of scenery might be in order?"

"A change of scenery?" Lady Ashford said.

"Certainly. Vittenberg, perhaps. Or Ingstradt. I have heard Ingstradt is beautiful this time of year, with all those trees covered in pink and white blossoms."

Lady Ashford blinked, turning the thought over in her head, "Are you suggesting we move?"

"Indeed," said Lady Grimsby, stirring another spoonful of sugar into her tea, "Volgstadt is a fine city, but there are many fine cities."

It was a simple enough thought, but the words washed over Lady Ashford like a spell, robbing her of her fury. She hesitated. "Malcolm and I had discussed moving to Streissberg. His cousin moved there recently, and wrote us about their sewers and a sort of fire-less light they have developed."

Lady Grimsby nudged the chair nearest Lady Ashford out slightly with one boot, "Streissberg is a wonderful city. I am friends with Lucy Dressler—the engineer who designed the sewers. She says one day it will be the standard against which all other cities are judged. This is the right time to buy. Mr. Gage believes the homes there can be expected to double or even triple in price before the year is out."

Lady Ashford sat and took a sip of tea, her hands trembling slightly, "The idea is not without merit, but it is hardly possible now. News of this business will destroy the value of our home. No one will buy a house with monsters in the cellar."

"Well," said Lady Grimsby, "that's not true at all. I might even pay a premium for such a house."

"You?"

"Why not?"

Lady Ashford's brow furrowed, confused, "You want to buy my house? How much would you pay for it?"

"I'd leave that to you and Mr. Gage. I would instruct him to offer a fair price, of course. If you'd like, we could make arrangements for you and Malcolm to stay at my house on Ragsman's Row until the matter of the hole is concluded."

"Thank you," Lady Ashford said, "that...is an interesting offer, Lady Grimsby. And very kind. You are not the witch everyone makes you out to be."

"I'll thank you not to repeat that, Lady Ashford. I've worked hard on my reputation."

After tea, Lady Grimsby and Mr. Wulf excused themselves and made their way to the cellar. As they approached the stairs, Mr. Wulf drew Evelyn aside:

"Are you actually going to buy her house?"

"I am."

"May I ask why?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes, "It has a mysterious hole and a cellar full of monsters. I should think the answer is obvious."

"We only just finished the remodel of the house on Ragsman's Row. Mr. Barghest will be furious when he finds out."

"He will be *livid*," Evelyn agreed in a conspiratorial whisper. "He will be *so* angry that he will turn a very *pale* shade of red. Let's not tell him until he's all puffed up, bragging about how he saved Lord Ashford."

"You're going to have to settle down at some point, you know."

"No, Mr. Wulf, I am not. I am past thirty and unmarried, do you know what that means?"

"That you're a mad spinster, who will die alone and unfulfilled?" Mr. Wulf offered.

"No," she replied matter-of-factly, "it means I am free. I have money and guns and they will keep me young forever."

"You'll be old and gray someday, Evelyn, mark me. And who will take care of you then?"

"Aloysius Wulf," she lectured playfully, "I was not made to grow old. You know as well as I that we're both bound to end up dead in a ditch somewhere, or in the belly of some hideous beast."

"Oh no," Mr. Wulf rumbled. "Not me. I'm going to find a nice plump beauty from the Penny Markets, drag her back to Grimsby's Hollow, and saddle her with a pack of pups and a comfortable home. I'll make my departure in the night, with a fat-bottomed wife snuggled up against me."

"Old age has given you vulgar appetites, Mr. Wulf."

"Comfort is not a sin, Evelyn."

"Be that as it may, Mr. Wulf, I have a feeling you are planning to do quite a bit of sinning in your retirement."

Mr. Wulf gave a deep laugh in response, "You're not wrong."

"Shall we get back to work?" Evelyn asked, inclining her head toward the cellar.

"After you."



Captain Hilstrom, Lady Grimsby, and Mr. Wulf devised a plan to split their resources into two teams. The first team, under their leadership, would re-enter the tunnels via the cellar and ensure there were no more of the creatures. The other team, under the direction of Mr. Gage and Sergeant Angvarr of the city watch had been sent to the quarry, to find and seal any entrances to the tunnel system there.

Mr. Brisbois was the first back down the hole. They'd wanted him to lead the quarry team, but he wouldn't have it. Something gnawed at his gut. Something old and primal, and he knew if he didn't go back, it would never let him sleep again.

The creature seemed smaller now that it was dead, and all he felt looking at it was relief. It was real, and he hadn't lost his mind. The frog-faced idols had lost their menace too. They watched him as he went about the cavern, re-lighting torches and lanterns left behind during the earlier expedition. The Old Gods grinned and Mr. Brisbois grinned right back. He understood those smiles now. How long had they slept? How long had those fat bellies hungered? They were not strange or mysterious. He was meat; why shouldn't they be happy to see him?

After Mr. Brisbois came Captain Hilstrom, Mr. Wulf, and then the greycoats. There were twenty in all, in long coats and burnished armor, their faces hidden behind barbutes. The greycoats congregated around the creature's corpse, inspecting it. Two of the men, Tom Carsby and Simon Pelstricht, laughed when they saw it.

"What in the hell is this thing? Is this what we're hunting?" Pelstricht said, prodding the creature with the end of his rifle.

"That's right," said Mr. Wulf, checking his armor.

Tom Carsby gave the big man a nudge, "You killed it?"

"Myself and Lady Grimsby, yes."

"How was it?"

Mr. Wulf chuckled. "A sketchy business, Mr. Carsby, I will not be using knives the next time."

Lady Grimsby was the last to make the descent, coming only once she was ready to oversee the process of lowering the nitroglycerine down the shaft. She held the pulley's rope with a white-knuckled grip, the crates swaying above. Mr. Brisbois joined her on the rope.

"Is it so dangerous?" Mr. Brisbois asked.

"It is nitroglycerine, Mr. Brisbois—as apt to kill you as anything we may find below. It is as indifferent as any monster, and far more fickle."

"Why bring it at all?"

"Best to be prepared."

Tom Carsby led the way, with a hatchet in one hand and a lantern in the other. Behind him were Mr. Wulf and Captain Hilstrom, both with long, leaf-bladed spears. Mapping the underground was a slow, unpleasant process. The tunnels narrowed considerably as the group ventured beyond the pit beneath the Ashford estate, and they were forced to proceed in double file. Making matters worse, the tunnels split into branches frequently, and the group was forced to wait for Mr. Carsby and Mr. Wulf to range ahead and determine the best way forward.

It was not long before Mr. Wulf picked up the creature's tracks.

"I didn't recognize them at first," the big man said, kneeling to examine the ground, "but it's these divots."

Captain Hilstrom joined him. "Are they from the one you killed?"

Mr. Wulf shook his head, "I can't say for sure. It's hard to read them."

"It doesn't matter. We have their trail now, we push on."

The tunnel spiraled downward into the earth, burrowing deeper and deeper like a corkscrew. The spiral became a maze, with

branches and splits at every turn. The longer they followed the creature's tracks, the more difficult it became to ensure they could find their way back to the descent. They were forced to leave a trail for themselves by scratching marks into the walls.

"Something strange about the clay," Mr. Wulf said as he gouged a mark into the wall.

"Indeed, Mr. Wulf," said Lady Grimsby, "it is made from feces."

Tom Carsby laughed, "Sorry, ma'am, are you saying it's shit?"

"Yes, Mr. Carsby, that is precisely what I am saying. It is a kind of clay made from wood and digested organic matter. Note the consistency and grain. This is how termites build their mounds. They are remarkably well engineered, cooled and heated as befits the needs of the colony. I have read accounts of Old Afrique, where there are records of mounds twenty or even thirty feet tall. But this..."

Captain Hilstrom brought the group to a halt. "That's what these things are? Termites?"

"A type, at least. Distant ancestors, perhaps. I believe this is a kind of shelter tube, used to protect them from elements and predators when they travel out from their nests. We are close now."

"The thing about termites," Captain Hilstrom said, "is there are usually a lot of them."

"Millions, in fact."

"There's something else," Mr. Wulf muttered. There was something under the clay on the wall. Smooth and perfect, like a buried treasure.

Mr. Brisbois joined Mr. Wulf and helped him chip away the clay until they could make sense of what he'd found. It was stone—not unworked stone, but cut, shaped stone. A simple block. The foreman worked the edges until he found what he was looking for: a line of mortar. Another block. There could be no mistake.

"I don't understand," Mr. Brisbois whispered, "what does it mean?"

Behind him, Lady Grimsby checked her pistols, "It mean we are close, Mr. Brisbois."

Mr. Brisbois shook his head. "This makes no sense. Men put these here. Not bugs. People—like us."

"No," Lady Grimsby said, her voice chill, "not like us. We are not the first to claim this world, nor is our claim secure. The world is old, Mr. Brisbois, and the stars are older still. Those that came before us are here still. They sleep, and while they dream, we build—but they will wake, Mr. Brisbois. And when they wake, they will be hungry."

"That is quite enough," Captain Hilstrom snapped, "of bogeymen and monsters and pointless speculation on the nature of the stars. We are here to do a job, not to indulge your obsessions, Lady Grimsby."

The watch captain snatched Carsby's lantern from his hand and continued the march. Carsby and Pelstricht and the rest of the greycoats fell in behind him. They marched in lockstep, lanterns and torches biting at the darkness.



After hours and an unknown distance, they came at last to the end of the tunnel system. Two columns flanked its terminus, obscured by dirt and clay but unmistakable nonetheless. Beyond lay a cavernous chamber, several hundred feet in circumference. It looked as if an underground world had been carved into the belly of the earth. A vast field of bioluminescent creeper vines and fungus covered the ground and bathed the expanse in queer green light.

At the center of the chamber, half-shrouded by the vines, stood a temple. It was in the ancient style, open at its center with a colonnade around the perimeter. Eyes were inscribed upon the cornice and the pediment. Mr. Brisbois crossed himself at the sight of



them. They were not human eyes. Not with such a terrible, alien shape.

"Look," said Mr. Pelstricht, gesturing to the chamber's ceiling.

More eyes. Dozens. Perhaps as many as a hundred. Only faintly visible. The strange light that filled the chamber made it seem as if they were the living organs of the earth itself.

"Lady Grimsby," Mr. Brisbois whispered, "what is this place?"

"Old Quorog," the dark-haired lady answered, almost reverently. Other thoughts consumed her. She glanced back over her shoulder to the tunnel as she entered the chamber, and seemed relieved to see it was still there. "Thousands of years ago our ancestors were penned up here, naked and bestial, little more than cattle."

"Cattle?" asked Mr. Brisbois.

"What else could you call it? They were kept fat and stupid in the dark, their babies stolen from their arms and taken for food unless their parents were too old to breed and were taken themselves. When Old Quorog fell, the survivors who escaped named the creature that watched over them Bagshubathra, the Many-Eyed Mother. There are those among the Savrathi who worship her still, making offerings at harvest time and begging for her blessings."

"Why?"

"According to their folklore, she was their mother. She kept them safe from the dark and gave them food and water and sang them songs to lull them to sleep. She loved them, inasmuch as a farmer can love a cow."

Captain Hilstrom advanced, scowling. "Is there a problem, gentlemen?"

"We've lost the trail," Mr. Wulf called back. "We're looking."

The watch captain ordered his greycoats to help pick up the trail. They looked like fireflies to Mr. Brisbois as they fanned out across

the cavern floor. Lady Grimsby approached the foreman and pressed a large brown satchel into his hands.

"The explosives, Mr. Brisbois. I think it might be best we begin setting them."

He nodded and took the satchel. It came with a sense of dread. He could feel her tension.

"The danger is close, then?"

"We are in the maw of the beast, Mr. Brisbois. Whatever comes next, we must make certain it will choke. You understand?"

"I understand."

Mr. Brisbois moved to the chamber's entrance and set the first two explosives at the base of each column, then ran primer cord a few hundred feet back through the tunnel. He didn't know if it was a safe distance or not. He'd seen explosives used before, but never worked with them himself. He continued along the chamber's perimeter, burying explosives in the walls as he went. His hands trembled as he worked. He had to glance back over his shoulder and look for the fireflies to settle his nerves.

Captain Hilstrom, Mr. Wulf, and Mr. Carsby gathered together farther out in the chamber, about halfway between the entrance and the temple. Mr. Brisbois could not hear what they were saying, but the watch captain's irritation was obvious. The sight of the men arguing was so mundane it almost made Mr. Brisbois laugh.

It would have, if not for the screams.

At the far end of the chamber, something snuffed out one of the fireflies. Mr. Brisbois watched in horror as a greycoat was lifted by a shadow in the darkness and thrashed about like a ragdoll. An alarm went up right away. The rest of the greycoats shouted and converged on their comrade's position. Captain Hilstrom and Mr. Carsby moved toward the action at a dead run, while Mr. Wulf hesitated, looking first to his mistress, then back to the struggle. He did not budge from the spot.

There was no mistaking the movements. Another of the creatures. Mr. Brisbois saw it skitter across the chamber's floor toward the bulk of the men. A few scattered shots rang out as the greycoats fired on it with their rifles, sending up gunsmoke from their positions. One of the shots struck true and took the creature in the leg, at the joint above its femur. Another two struck it in the head, and the monster crashed to the ground.

"Regroup!" Captain Hilstrom yelled, "Regroup and reload!"

Mr. Brisbois turned his attention back to the explosives, hands trembling as he lifted another cylinder from the satchel and began burying it in the wall. It was then he saw it. A round divot, gouged into the wall. And another, and another. The tracks Carsby and Wulf had been looking for.

"Above!" the foreman screamed. "They are above us!"

By the time he looked up, it was too late. All across the chamber's ceiling, strange shapes stirred from torporous sleep. Shadows fell from above, masses of chitin and claw, thudding silently into the clay below before unfurling. Others skittered across the ceiling and down the walls.

They came at every angle. If Captain Hilstrom had not already ordered the men to regroup, they would have been overwhelmed. The greycoats massed up and began fighting an ordered retreat, covering each other as they reloaded. Several of the creatures died under the hail of withering fire. As monstrous as they were, they were mortal flesh and blood.

There was no mystery to them, Mr. Brisbois realized. They died as easily as anything else.

Smoke from the gunshots filled the chamber; it hovered low over the greycoats. Each shot gave up a plume of smoke, and as the smoke settled over them like a fog bank it became harder for them to find clean shots.

Movement from the temple caught Mr. Brisbois' eye. A glimpse of something between the pillars of the colonnade. Little more than a shape, really. A woman's form, pale and ethereal. He saw her face for a moment as she peered out from behind one of the pillars.

Lady Grimsby saw the figure as well. The dark-haired woman advanced upon the temple even as the pack of greycoats slowly retreated back across the chamber. A creature caught sight of Lady Grimsby moving alone at the perimeter of the battle and darted toward her.

"Lady Grimsby!" Mr. Brisbois called out.

She did not appear to hear him over the sound of other shouts and gunshots, but Mr. Wulf did. He glanced at Mr. Brisbois and followed the foreman's eye-line to the creature. The big man bounded across the chamber to intercept. He was fast. Mr. Brisbois did not think such a big man could be so fast. The old soldier caught the creature unawares and took it full in the belly with his spear. The blow was not enough to kill the thing, but was enough to draw its attention.

He saw the shape again, alien and wicked, moving between the colonnades. Whatever it was, it was not human. Lady Grimsby advanced up the temple's stairs, her lantern forward, her pistol ready.

"BAGSHUBATHRA," she bellowed, in a voice that could have made the stars themselves tremble.

Mr. Brisbois gathered up his pack and the satchel and ran. Not for the tunnel. *Why not for the tunnel?* His feet moved so fast he almost tripped over them, stumbling over root and vine, kicking up a spray of bioluminescent fungus as he went. And then he was at the temple's stairs, making his way up the steps. Lady Grimsby was just a few feet ahead of him, pistol in hand. She had left her lantern by the foot of one pillar.

Inside the temple, something chittered and hissed.

Lady Grimsby glanced back at Mr. Brisbois. Her stoic demeanor softened at the sight of him. He could not tell if it was relief or regret he saw in her eyes. She took a second pistol from her waistband and offered it to him.

"Refine your bite, Mr. Brisbois."

The foreman nodded and took the pistol. It felt unfamiliar in his hands. He'd never held one before, but knew enough to make it work. He moved right while the dark-haired lady moved left. The temple's interior was overrun with vines. They caressed its columns and sprawled across the stone floor. Mr. Brisbois was reminded of the stories his father had told him when he was a boy. Of Perseus and Medusa, of her gaze, which could turn a man to stone.

*'Is that what this is?' the foreman thought. 'Have I stumbled into some myth?'*

Lady Grimsby had moved round the far corner of the temple. Mr. Brisbois heard her speaking in a low, steady voice. A strange language, and the strangeness made it sound wicked. The words poured from Lady Grimsby's lips in cold, unflinching rhythm:

*"Ag nur taenibra set, Bagshubathra. Igtul frethuut. Ayshal nur thot."*

Inside, something clacked and chattered in response. It *slithered* toward the sound, and Mr. Brisbois half expected to see the creature from his father's stories made flesh—but what it was, was so much worse.

She, for it was clearly *she*, was neither human nor insect, but some obscene marriage of the two. She was smooth and pale, her chitin the color of porcelain. She moved on four legs, each movement filled with a kind of grace both effortless and obscene. Her body was like a woman's from the waist up; the curves and forms, but none of the detail. A line that might have been breasts—supple, feminine arms, which parodied the human form. Her back half belonged to the world of nightmares; an insect's abdomen and legs. She was beautiful, nevertheless.

The monster spotted him through the vines, and the foreman thought his heart might stop. He froze. At the top of her neck, beyond gentle sloping shoulders, was a head unlike anything he had ever seen. Distended and oblong. Eyeless. A face protected by sharp angled chitin. Utterly alien.

"*Ag nur taenibra set, Bagshubathra,*" Lady Grimsby said again. The creature turned away from Mr. Brisbois, searching the far side of the colonnade for the dark-haired lady.

*Bagshubathra.* The foreman turned it over in his head. *An evil name.*

A shot rang out from the far end of the temple and struck the creature in the clavicle. Bile and blood issued from the wound, oozing slowly. She hissed, and Mr. Brisbois saw her maw in profile; rows of razor-sharp teeth and the fork-shaped tongue of a devil.

Then it spake: "*Igdraga shibeth. Dutet sashur.*"

The words dripped like molasses. Syllables stretched across precious moments with the patience of a predator. If the wound she'd suffered was a killing wound, it did not seem to bother her. She advanced silently upon the far end of the temple, ignoring Mr. Brisbois. He leveled his pistol at her back, hand trembling, but lost his shot as she moved. He cursed under his breath and ducked the vines, entering the interior perimeter of the colonnade.

Lady Grimsby was in motion. Mr. Brisbois saw her moving quickly, darting from column to column, keeping them between her and the creature. The monster saw the lady too. It crouched, legs tensed, and readied itself to spring upon her.

"Bagshubathra!" Mr. Brisbois yelled, standing from his place of concealment.

He fired and the shot took her in the waist. More yellow bile. The creature turned to him and chattered softly, her maw a terrifying grin. She was across the temple's interior and upon him in the space of a breath, and then, Mr. Brisbois was in her embrace.

There was pain unlike anything he had ever known.

He heard Lady Grimsby curse. The dark-haired lady cut her way through the vines and took another shot at the creature. The shot glanced off its arm, chipping away at chitin. It chittered again. It was laughing, Mr. Brisbois realized. It was laughing at them.

"*Dutet shabat. Igress aloor,*" the creature hissed. Her fingers caressed his face. Razors stripping flesh from bone. The foreman screamed.

So close to her, he saw now the rivets and scars in her carapace. This was not the first time she had been forced to fight, to kill, for her survival. Mr. Brisbois fumbled for the satchel, realizing he was doomed. The creature was peeling him apart. His face was hot with blood. The last thing he saw before his vision began to cloud was Lady Grimsby, eyes on the creature, calmly reloading her weapon.

His fingers found a tube of nitroglycerine between the spools of primer cord. Unstable. Deadly. As apt to kill him as any monster. Lady Grimsby had been so nervous watching it make the descent.

"Run!" the foreman shouted.

"Mr. Brisbois!"

"My bite!" he yelled, holding the satchel high up in the air with what little strength he had left.

Mr. Brisbois could not see, but felt the monster's hand inside his back, plucking at him as if he were a harp. Her breath was on his face, hot and musky, filled with something like excitement. She was eating him, he realized. She was gnawing at his bones.

He heard Lady Grimsby in the distance, shouting a warning to the greycoats. He hoped they'd had time to get far enough away. However far it was, it would have to do. He could take no more. He swung the satchel and smashed it against the ground as hard as he could. Glass shattered and fire blossomed and a sound like thunder pounded in his ears for the briefest of moments.

And then it was over. Mercifully, it was over.



The explosion that destroyed the temple sent stone and rock in every direction. Shrapnel pierced flesh and chitin with equal ease. Mr. Wulf and Lady Grimsby managed to make it into the tunnel only moments before the mouth collapsed. The bulk of the greycoats, including Captain Hilstrom, somehow managed to scramble to safety.

They waited an hour, listening through the sound settling rock for signs of any survivors—human or otherwise—before beginning the long walk back to the base camp. They paused at regular intervals to set off what remained of their supply of nitroglycerine, ensuring the tunnel remained sealed behind them.

In the aftermath of the events beneath the Ashford estate, an inquiry was opened into the consortium that ran the mining operation at the quarry. Mr. Gage and Sergeant Angvarr grew suspicious after they'd sealed the tunnels there and searched the offices. They turned up evidence that the management team was instructed to expand toward the tunnel system, though lucrative veins of coal and iron had been identified elsewhere. Captain Hilstrom interviewed the staff, but was unable to identify the owners of the mine. They'd been hired by a man named Edwin Geist, from Vittenberg, and he had since disappeared.

Malcolm Ashford recovered, blessedly unable to recall the creature that pulled him into the pit, or the days he'd suffered there. Lady Ashford reported he still had nightmares from time to time, and spoke in his dreams about the library in the stars. In the end, Lord & Lady Ashford moved to Ingstradt. They fell in love all again beneath the pink and white blossoms of the trees there.

Mr. Wulf spent the next few weeks down in the Penny Markets, asking about the foreman, Mr. Brisbois. There was no family to speak of. His father had died years ago. Those who knew him said



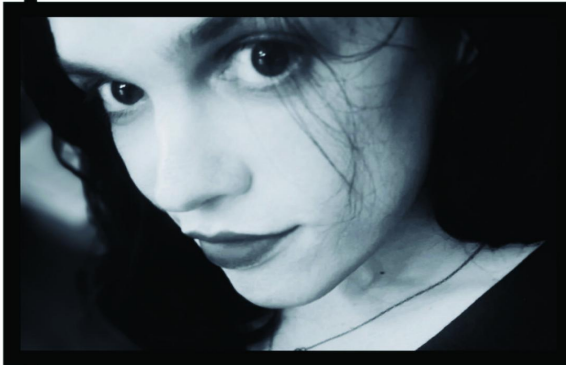
he'd lived a lonely, troubled life. There was some talk of a lady friend in Istlenberg, but they'd fallen out and hadn't spoken in years.

Lady Grimsby happily took ownership of the Ashford Estate, a move which caused property values in the area to plummet catastrophically. She insisted Mr. Barghest immediately begin a remodel of the entire household, then promptly lost interest in the process. Her singular contribution to the effort was to request that a new arch above the front door be engraved with the following:

*Curiosity is a wicked fault.*

**CASSANDRA BYRNE (WRITER)** is a trans author and voice actress who dwells in the shadow of Philadelphia, city of brotherly love. By day, she ministers to cantankerous, foul-humored digital spirits as an IT executive, while by night she pens works of cosmic horror and tempts roleplayers into the twisted wilds of her imagination. You can find more stories by her on Amazon, and in the pages of Tales from the Magician's Skull. You can also hear her voice on audiobook anthologies by the HOWL Society.

She can be found online posting about trans joy, Warhammer 40k, and other nerdy nonsense.



## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Instagram: @valsombra818  
Website: [www.theironchronicle.com](http://www.theironchronicle.com)



**PARRIS RYAN (ARTIST)**, the Cursed Queen of Philadelphia, is a trans artist and performer who channels her exquisite madness into art both on and off the stage. As an artist she brings other worlds to life with oils and acrylics—retelling her life's story as a mythopoetic journey of romance, betrayal, heartache, and revenge.

As Lamia, Philadelphia Magazine's Best Drag Queen with a Twist, she pours her heart into making sure each and every performance is an unforgettable experience. She can be found hosting events at a variety of Philly's hottest venues.

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