



House of Mystery #4
various

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"There are worlds beyond our understanding— beyond our wanting to understand. Worlds that have histories belonging in the darkness, and not in the light of the universe. Of the now."

"I... I... I don't understand... "

"You sought to bring something from the darkness into the light. If you succeeded, if it were not for the actions of others, the light would be snuffed out, and your masters— those you pray and worship— would writhe into being. That is something that could not be allowed to pass."

"You... you don't know me! You don't know—"

"I know enough. I know enough to know that you will never stop in your machinations."

"You can't stop me! I... I... have rights... !"

"No, you do not. So I offer you a choice. Wither away here, in the dark, in the shadows of the underside of eternity, or come with me."

"Come with you? Go where? What do you mean?!"

"Come with me, for I am the Phantom Stranger— and if you do not... then you shall die. Alone. Away from the world—!"

"Where... where are we going?"

"Through time, and space, and reality. To show you... well. Well, you shall see, will you not?"

Chapter 1

The House on Herren Street

"The House on Herren Street"

By David Charlton

31st October 2009

This accursed night will be one year since I fell prey to the wicked man who is my captor. How ironic that I, who had been hunting him— arriving in a place only after he had fled leaving a trail of woe behind him— should fall into his foul clutches?

I know not why he has kept me alive all this time, unless it is to torment me with my wretched fate. My cell is dank and unlit. Every day I test the pitted iron bars, but he has put a spell upon them, and they are proof 'gainst even my strength. Perhaps to taunt me, he keeps my sword and flintlock hanging on a wall just out of reach. I saw them once when that abomination on eight legs came down to test me; it scuttled away on the three I left it with, its torch guttering unattended on the slimy flagstones, giving me a fleeting look at my drear surroundings.

Basement or dungeon, it matters not: it cannot not hold me forever. And then my captor will know my Promethean wrath.

It was dusk and the trick-or-treaters were just starting to appear on the quaint and orderly streets of Ivy Town. They went from door to door, clad in ghost-sheets, and vampire-fangs, in their annual ritual. Proud and anxious parents walked discreetly behind the younger kids, waving to friends and neighbors as they passed.

“Too much competition on this street,” said a young boy in a Batman-mask to his two companions. One was a girl in a cowboy outfit, her hair tucked up under her hat and a prosthetic burn applied over one side of her face, and the other was a boy in jeans and a white t-shirt, a Green Lantern symbol drawn expertly on it in green marker. “Some people are already out of candy! We need to find some houses that haven’t been hit yet.”

“Strike out into new territory, blaze our own trail!” Susie agreed, drawing her guns and firing at smug looking trick-or-treaters with full pillow cases of candy. “Ptoo! Ptoo!”

“I have a plan,” Charlie told them, scanning the street through the slits of the Bat-mask. “Why don’t we cut across Burchette and work Herren Street?”

“Because it’s a dumb idea,” Ramon drawled, adjusting the rubber string that held the green domino mask over his face.

“What? Are you afraid to cross town?” Charlie taunted in his best, raspy Bat-voice.

“Green Lanterns have no fear!” Ramon protested, holding up the replica power ring his older brother had gotten him at a Superhero convention. “But that end of town is pretty quiet, not a lot of houses... How’re we going to fill our bags that way?”

Charlie shrugged. “If we’re the only ones working it, all the more for us!”

“I say we do it!” Susie slapped Ramon on the back. “What’re you, yella?”

Ramon threw his hands up and gave in.

The Ivy Town Grand Hotel was hosting its Third Annual Para-Science Conference, and leading minds from all over the world were in attendance to compare notes, deliver lectures to the public or announce

findings to peers and the press. This year Dr. Kirk Langstrom came alone. Francine had had enough of his “peculiar affliction,” despite the breakthroughs he had made. But Kirk knew his work had value... in the right hands, of course.

The night’s keynote speaker was the aged-but-venerable Warren Griffith, a well-known lycanthrope who had served honorably in World War Two with the US Army outfit the Creature Commandos. The veteran soldier and hero spoke for an hour about the continuing need for research about his own condition, then with a wry glance at the time excused himself to knowing laughter and a standing ovation.

Afterward, Kirk sipped champagne and mingled with the other attendees, browsing the exhibits and chatting with old friends from past years’ conferences.

“Dr. Langstrom,”

He looked towards the playful voice and had to cough to cover his immediate reaction—the woman was gorgeous. Her evening gown was cut to fit the curves of her form perfectly. Her long luxurious brown hair was done up in an elegant twist atop her head and her eyes sparkled with a knowing, sensuous glint.

“Dr. Zeul,” Langstrom cleared his throat and adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. “So nice to see you again. Missed you last year— Ah! I mean, sorry that...” His cheeks flamed as he tried to recover from his slip-up.

Doris Zeul watched him a moment, her lips forming a crooked smile, as Langstrom squirmed.

“Never mind, Kirk,” she finally let him off the hook. “Occupational hazard in our line of work. If you’re going to be a mad scientist, you’re going to step outside the law from time to time. If I’m not mistaken, you’ve done some time yourself, right?”

“My sentence was commuted,” Langstrom objected. “The court decided I couldn’t be held responsible for my actions as Man-Bat.”

“Also didn’t hurt that Batman stood up for you. Either way, we’ve both

paid our debts to society." Zeul sipped her champagne, staring at him over the tip of the glass. "So. Still married to that wallflower— what's her name?— Jeanine?"

"Yes!" Kirk spluttered, annoyed and trying to ignore how the rosy tip of Zeul's tongue ran along the bottom of her top lip. "I mean, she's not a wallflower. And her name is— You know, what? Forget it. Nice to see you again, Doris. See you next year."

Her eyes widened as he turned away, and he couldn't help but feel slightly pleased with himself— until he saw what had caused her surprise. Waddling upright towards them was a chimpanzee wearing a tweed jacket and a deerstalker cap. He rolled his eyes, and glanced around for an escape route.

"Hello, Bobo." Dr. Zeul raised her glass with some amusement at the chimp. "I'd heard that you were going to be here. I'm looking forward to your lecture on the Amplified Animals Project."

"Change of plans, Giganta," said the primate, not bothering to hide his irritation. "And you know damn well its Detective Chimp. Bobo was my slave name."

"What's up, Chimp?" Kirk asked, hearing the urgency in his colleague's voice. "You looked worried about something?"

The chimp's brow furrowed, and he took a cigarette from his breast pocket, lit it, and only responded after a long drag. "Worried? Yeah you could say that. Hope you two lovebirds didn't have any plans tonight, because I'm going to need your help..."

On the other side of town, Charlie, Susie and Ramon strolled along the cracked and weed-choked sidewalk, their trick-or-treat bags still less than half-full.

"See, I told you this was a dumb idea," Ramon muttered as he dug in his bag for something interesting, giving up in disgust after finding only a few sticks of gum and some Tootsie Rolls. "Lame."

"I admit, this hasn't worked out like I planned," Charlie conceded, checking his own bag and only coming up with some Starburst and a toothbrush. "I didn't realize this was such a rundown area. Lots of empty houses..."

Susie shrugged, twirling her six-shooters on her fingers and said, "It's not always about the treats, pards, sometimes it's about the tricks!"

They both stared at her.

From her bag she took out a carton of eggs, grinning mischievously. "We don't get the loot, there's always Plan B!"

"Let me get this straight," Kirk Langstrom leaned across the table and stared at Detective Chimp. "You think someone in Ivy Town is kidnapping children tonight for some nefarious scientific experimentation? And *why* is that exactly?"

The two of them, along with Dr. Zeul, had adjourned to the hotel bar, and sat together whispering and sipping drinks while a piano player tickled the ivories and crooned an old standard. On the table in front of him, Detective Chimp was tapping away on a small wireless laptop.

"Because it's Halloween," Dr. Zeul answered for him, sucking a martini olive off a toothpick. She seemed to be getting a kick out of this. "It's just *done* this time of year."

"Doris, be serious!" Langstrom hissed at her.

She leveled an innocent look at him as if to say she had been.

Detective Chimp took a long drag on his cigarette, then stubbed the butt out in the already full ashtray. "Because I recognize the signs. He never stays in one place very often. Last year he was in Prague. The year before that, Montevideo. I've been following the stories on the internet since I first read about the disappearances," he turned the laptop towards Langstrom, showing him article after article, all dated October 31st, with

more-or-less the same headline: CHILDREN MISSING.

“But what makes you think he’s here, in Ivy Town? And how do you know scientific experimentation is involved?”

“And what makes you think he’s a *he*?” Dr. Zeul added.

The two of them turn to look at her, stunned.

“I’m just saying.” She shook her head in mock exasperation.

“He, she, whatever,” Chimp grumbled, moving on with a casual wave of a callused paw. “Last year in Prague, it seems like there was an altercation. Apparently, someone else is also on the trail of our mad scientist. There was a fire, and an unusual artifact was discovered in the ashes. This.” He showed them the laptop screen, displaying a photograph of something that looked like an articulated ant’s leg.

“So what?” Zeul shrugged. “It’s the severed leg of a bug.”

But Langstrom peered closer, reading the Austrian article that accompanied the picture. “That ant leg is over a foot and a half long... and this can’t be right?” He looked up at Detective Chimp. “It had human DNA...?”

The simian genius sat back in his chair, allowing that to sink in.

“But I still don’t understand why you think he— or she!— is in Ivy Town tonight... ”

Wordlessly, Detective Chimp pulled something from his tweed jacket and set it heavily upon the table. It was a snapped-off insectoid antenna. It was over a foot long.

“That was connected to the monstrosity that attacked me in my hotel room about an hour ago.” Chimp pointed accusingly at the appendage. “It was connected to a human/ant hybrid, that I sent packing. But its appearance in Ivy Town tonight— the same date as all the other disappearances!— can’t be a coincidence. Whoever sent it knows I’m investigating, and it wants me dead!”

After so long in the dark, the light was blinding.

The door at the top of the stair was thrown wide, and the searing radiance forced me to look away. "Bring him, Ophidian. The time has come." Came the familiar rheumy voice of my captor, once my prey.

I heard a rasping hiss, as of scales dragged across stones, and I knew without seeing what approached. I had fought the creature in Prague, and it was a fearsome foeman— though no man was it! It had the body of a serpent with ten pairs of legs, and a reptilian face with eyes that robbed will and compulsion. My hands ached for my weapons, but the bulk of the thing blocked my way. Still blinded, yet did I hazard my chances: I threw myself at the beast but at such a disadvantage was no match for it in brute strength. It o'erwhelmed me, twining me in its coils and dragging me bodily with it up the stairs and into the light.

"Bind him into the Transducer." Wheezed the scientist-sorcerer.

*Through squinted eyes I spied such a hellish laboratory as e'en my Creator could not fathom in his most prideful moment. Electricity crackled from fantastic machines built of copper coils and glass tubing; in specimen jars floated pink, pulpy things with mournful eyes that stared back in despair. Grimoires sat open on work benches next to Bunsen burners filled with noxious, boiling liquids... And amidst it all scuttled and scurried **them**.*

The one called Ophidian who now bound me with chains onto the vivisection table was not the only aberration. Clacking about checking instrumentation was a man with the head and limbs of a praying mantis. On a far wall was a leech with human eyes, trailing slime. Chittering around me to secure my bindings were ant-men with enormous multifaceted eyes. Something that was three-legged and horn-billed cavorted across the room, menacing a cage filled with mewling, terrified children!

I thrashed in my chains, straining 'gainst the rusty links. Something crawled up the table and unto my chest— it was a hand, thrice the size of my own not inconsiderable appendage, with only a human head fused atop it, it's cranium elongated and hairless.

“Struggle all you like, monster! Nothing will stop my master from seizing the divine spark which resides in this husk!” It tapped my chest with two enormous fingers and leered at me with bulging, yellowed eyes and a mouth full of crooked teeth. “And we who are dying and mortal shall be granted eternal life!”

“Enough, my darling Cranius,” the depraved old man came into my view, his gnarled hand stroking the pate of the creature on my chest. “This spawn of my former student hardly knows the ineffable grace with which it has been endowed. Suffice it to say, the stars are at last aligned again for the Transduction. And he shall be the living battery with which I shall create an immortal legion of Un-Men!”

One of his minions threw a switch and current surged into my body. I screamed and jerked and thrashed— but all I could hear were the hysterical lamentations of the children in the cage across the room. Gods Below, but they knew what was coming next...!

Splat. Splat, splat. Splat, splat, splat!

It was the sound of eggshells cracking ‘gainst the walls outside.

The current ceased at a wave from the old man, and I fell silent, weakened. In a rage, he turned upon his minions, spittle flying from his lips. “It must be that damnable chimpanzee! See to it, my children!”

Charlie wound up for another throw, even as Susie and Ramon pelted the dilapidated old house again. They had chosen this particular house as it looked deserted and ramshackle, the lawn overgrown and no car in the driveway. They stood on the sidewalk, lobbing eggs and laughing.

“If we can’t get candy, then we at least have to have some fun,” Susie giggled and threw her last egg. It hit a first-storey window, and she watched with pride as the gooey yellow mess slid down the glass.

That’s when the glass was illuminated by a light from inside.

The three children froze in place and just stared for a moment.

Then the window shattered outward— as did two others and the front door. Horrible, misshapen creatures exploded from the house, slavering and gibbering, heading right for them.

As one, Charlie, Susie and Ramon screamed, turned and ran.

“I can’t believe you two talked me into this,” Doris Zeul said from the backseat of the custom-modified Hummer dubbed the Chimp-mobile.

In the front seat, Kirk Langstrom felt the same way. He wasn’t sure how much credence he gave to Detective Chimp’s story, but the primate was no fool. The pieces did fit together, and if there was a mad scientist on the loose in Ivy Town— *other than the ones in this car*, he thought ruefully— snatching children, then he had to do something about it... He imagined his own children Trick-or-Treating tonight in Gotham, and was relieved to know that Batman was on duty, and that no harm would befall them.

“I mean, altruism is not really my thing,” Zeul stifled a yawn. “We should just report this to the police and get back to the Conference. I don’t want to miss Professor Palmer’s lecture on the properties of White Dwarf stellar radiation—.”

They had just turned the corner onto Herren Street and Chimp was forced to jam on his brakes. Three costumed children ran by the front of the Hummer, yelling for all they were worth. They were followed closely by a pack of mutated child-sized monsters .

“Something tells me this is it!” Detective Chimp punched a button on his dashboard and the roof of the Hummer peeled back. “Go do your thing people!”

Kirk Langstrom did not have to be told. He triggered his transformation instantly and rocketed up and out of the Hummer, spreading leathery wings and loosing a piercing screech. Zeul stood and began to rapidly increase in size. Her evening gown stretched and ripped over her expanding flesh, falling away as she stepped from the Hummer.

“Oh, please. Did you think I hadn’t thought of this?” This to Detective Chimp’s disappointed look at her specially-designed leopard print spandex underclothes. *Men are apes, no matter the species.*

Man-Bat arced up and swooped back down, strafing the street straight at the pursuing Un-Men. The creatures reared back, unsure of what to make of this new arrival: was this a new creation of the master? But Man-Bat barreled directly into their ranks, his wings extended their full length. His greatest breakthrough with the serum allowed him to keep control of the feral monster he became— his second greatest breakthrough was that now he could trigger the transformation anytime he wished, as long as the serum was in his blood that day. He wheeled around for another pass at the confused creatures, noting with relief that the kids had gotten away.

He had to pull up suddenly as Giganta lumbered into view. One gargantuan foot slammed down upon a hapless monster, splattering it, while another foot scattered a half dozen of them.

“Eww.” Giganta lifted her foot to examine the bottom of it. “That’s going to ruin my pedicure.”

The Un-Men fled before them, unwisely heading back to the house. Noting their destination, Detective Chimp yanked the Chimpmobile into gear and floored the gas. The Hummer clipped one of the misshapen creatures and steamrolled a couple others. Letting out a wild ululation, Chimp aimed the vehicle through the hedges, up the lawn and slammed into the front porch of the house!

The old man was mightily wroth as he returned to my side, his eyes alight with infernal intent. “This but delays your fate, Spawn of Frankenstein,” he croaked, lips trembling.

“Adam,” I said, and in my voice he heard my pledge to rid this world of him. “My name is Adam.”

At that moment, the far wall erupted inward, sending wood spars, cement dust, steel tables and glass jars filled with effluvia exploding across the laboratory. I

was thrown, as well, knocked across the room by a yellow vehicle driven by... a monkey?

In the chaotic aftermath of this event, I had struck the opposite wall of the lab with enough force to leave me momentarily dazed— but the impact had freed me from my bonds. Wrenching free from the twisted metal of the vivisection table, and still hung with lengths of snapped chains, I roared my rage and exultation:

“Vengeance!”

My declamation shook the roof of the house— or so it seemed. In sooth, the reality was far stranger: as I gazed up at the ceiling, I saw it lifted away, peeled off like the lid of a jar and discarded with a ground-shaking crash. A giant woman peered down, and circling her head was a bat-winged man!

I heard the sorcerer-scientist cry: “Ophidian! Save me, my pet”

The ten-legged serpentine abomination emerged from a mound of debris and shattered equipment, launching itself into the air at the female colossus. She caught it, and it was little more than a toy in her hands— but she knew not its true danger.

“Look not into its eyes, lest it glamour you!” I called to my unlooked-for ally. But it was too late. She gripped it in her hands, looking down upon it, snared by its gaze! That lovely visage twisted and she turned upon her bat-winged comrade, lashing out with her enormous arm. The surprised creature was knocked across the sky, and the colossus stomped after it to finish her violent work.

I could spare these strange rescuers no more attention; my enemy was getting away. The flash of his white coat caught my eye as he fled downstairs.

“Anton Arcane,” I bellowed, rattling the remnants of chains on my wrists.
“Face your frightful judgment!”

His Un-Men scattered before my wrath, proving no impediment to my pursuit. I dashed down the stairs, back into the basement where I had been a prisoner, lo these many months. It was lit now with the garish glow of hellfire, and I saw that it was much larger than I had suspected: in the center of the wide chamber was a pit, from which came the flames. Arcane stood on the opposite side of the pit, hands outstretched and mumbling words that profaned the very air.

My flintlock and sword hung from the wall, and I paused only to take them up. He kept the pit between us, edging along the outer rim. In the depths of the pit, I spied what seemed to be the fiery forms of children, reaching up and demanding justice for the wrongs down upon their souls.

“Anton Arcane, there is no place left to run. Your dark deeds stink to Hell Below, and now you must pay the cost of your crimes!” I leveled my gun at him through the flames and squeezed the trigger. It was a fearful blast, as this was no ordinary pistol, handcrafted as it was in the Lost Smithies of the Homo Magi. It created a cloud of smoke, the recoil jolting my arm up. But Arcane was proof ‘gainst its puissance, the ball ricocheting back and striking me in the chest.

Blood spurted and I was felled. The villain laughed and laughed, the sound of it stinging my ears...

Giganta chased Man-Bat down the length of Herren Street, trampling across lawns, cars and deserted homes, the ground shaking beneath her feet. Kirk Langstrom looked back over his shoulder at the creature perched on Dr. Zeul’s shoulder and clinging to her neck. He had heard the warning shouted by the fearsome Frankenstein’s Monster, and knew that the serpent was controlling Zeul. He just needed to get rid of it.

Every time he gained altitude, Giganta grew to reach him. He dove and she shrank, her enormous hands snatching at him. He barely avoided her grasp, pulling in his wings and banking away at the last second.

“Come back, Kirk! I promise to make it quick!” Giganta taunted her voice booming out over the neighborhood.

By this time, the events on Herren Street were attracting attention from the rest of Ivy Town. There were sirens in the distance, and soon there would be helicopters and spotlights... Kirk Langstrom was not overly fond of Doris Zeul, but he did not want to see her go to jail again— especially as she had only been trying to help!

You owe me for this big time, Zeul, he thought as he wheeled 180 degrees and flew back at her. Unprepared for the sudden attack, Giganta

threw up her hands to protect her face, swatting at him. But Man-Bat swerved at the last second and instead hit Ophidian full-on, knocking him off the 100 foot woman. The two creatures fell, tumbling to the ground, grappling the whole way, screeching and hissing.

Their impact shook the street.

After freeing the children locked in the cage, Detective Chimp made his way across the shattered laboratory, towards where he had seen the Spawn of Frankenstein follow the sorcerer-scientist.

Anton Arcane, the monster had called the villain. Chimp knew the name from his studies: Arcane was a sorcerer from the Balkans, and much older than he even looked. It was rumored that Victor Von Frankenstein had been his pupil, and that he had sought the fabled Philosopher's Stone with Paracelsus. He had served the Nazis in World War Two as the director of their gruesome eugenics program. It was said that he sought to create perfect life, immortal, obedient and in whatever image he desired. Chimp saw his handiwork all around, in the hideous Un-Men who fled, abandoned and in terror, from the house.

But surely even Arcane could not stand against the fury of that enraged green-skinned horror...?

In the basement, Chimp found Frankenstein's Monster in a heap, surrounded by a spreading pool of blood. On the other side of a firepit, the flames shooting high, was Arcane, flush with triumph.

Chimp's heart sank at the sight. Arcane saw him, and his flabby lips curled.

"Did you think to best me?" Arcane's voice was high, hysterical. He shuffled around the pit towards Detective Chimp, leaning towards him with a menacing glare. "You? *A monkey?* All you've done is delay me! My work will continue, but you will be *dust!*"

Chimp saw the sword where it had fallen on the ground. He lifted it up, barely able to keep the long blade steady.

"I'm a chimpanzee, bub. And a detective. I was clever enough to find you, and if I saved even one little kid tonight, then I will die a happy camper!"

Arcane stared at the look of almost comical determination on Detective Chimp's face then burst out laughing. He raised his arms for a blast of magical might—

And was lifted bodily into the air! Blood soaking his clothes, his knees buckling, the Spawn of Frankenstein hefted his old foe over his head, staggering with the effort.

"To thy reward!" he yelled and heaved Arcane into the pit of fire.

The flames flared as if hungry to greet him, and the sorcerer-scientist's bloodcurdling scream echoed a long while— all the way down to Hell— until it faded into silence and the fire went abruptly out.

By the time Charlie, Susie and Ramon had cautiously worked their way back to the house on Herren Street, their curiosity getting the better of them, it had been surrounded by emergency vehicles and police cars. The back end of a yellow hummer was still sticking out from the front porch, and police and EMTs were tending to frightened, sobbing children.

"That could've been us," Susie gaped at a little boy who was crying in his mother's arms.

"Yeah," Ramon nodded, impressed. "Best. Halloween. *Ever.*"

Look," Charlie pointed up at the house.

Two mismatched figures limped from the shattered front door, the much larger one staggering and supported by the smaller— who was a chimpanzee in a tweed jacket and a deerstalker cap.

"Man, Frankie, with that wound, I thought you were a goner."

"My name is Adam," came the subterranean voice of the green-skinned brute. He was dressed in clothes out of fashion for almost two hundred years, and there was an odd, but dignified formality in his rumbling voice. "And I cannot be killed thus. Immortal life is my gift, but it is also my curse. Seek not for that which grants not wisdom, but withholds life's greatest mystery, and ye shall forevermore—."

"Kirk, Doris! You're alive!" Detective Chimp ignored what was apparently going to be a long platitude, and called over to two figure huddled together on the back of an ambulance. The man was in the tattered remains of a tuxedo, nursing some newly bandaged ribs, while the woman was dressed only in leopard-print underwear, adjusting her hair in a pocket mirror.

Charlie and Ramon could only gape at Dr. Zeul. Susie gave each of them an elbow in the stomach to snap them out of it.

"It was a pretty close call," Kirk Langstrom winced and fit his wire-rimmed glasses on his face. "Giganta here almost pulverized me a dozen times."

"I did say I was sorry, Kirk." Dr. Zeul did not actually sound contrite. "That horrible creature had me hypnotized. Thank goodness you were able to take him out. Imagine my guilt if I had hurt you."

"Well, I do have a concussion and three broken—."

"I mean— all things considered— would that have been fair to me?"

Kirk Langstrom stared at his comrade in disbelief, then shaking his head, turned to the approaching Detective Chimp and Spawn of Frankenstein.

"Looks like you were right about what was going on, Chimp."

"I usually am," Detective Chimp said without a hint of smugness. "And the four of us made a great team tonight," he inclined his head up at the sullen monster-man he supported. "Including you, big guy."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Charlie called out to their four

rescuers: "Are you guys with the Justice League?"

Man-Bat, Giganta, Detective Chimp and the Spawn of Frankenstein turned to look at the three children they had saved, taken aback by the question. Then they all started talking at once.

"I'm not a superhero," Doris Zeul snorted, looking around as if embarrassed by the accusation.

"Well, Batman once told me that if I ever—" Langstrom held up a finger to make a point.

"No, but you could be onto something there, kid," said the Chimp.

"In the annals of history and myth," Adam's sepulchral voice rose above all the others, drowning them out. "When evildoers rise up, there have always been those who stand against them. And oft times, it takes a monster to fight a monster."

There was a thoughtful silence at that pronouncement. But the wheels in Detective Chimp's head moved quickly.

"The Monster League of America...!" He held up his hands as if to frame the words. "I like the sound of that! Whaddya say, guys and gal? We worked pretty well together, and I think we can do some good..."

"Well, I don't know," Dr. Langstrom hedged, looking uncomfortable. "My wife has already put up with a lot..."

"I am *not* a superhero, and I most certainly am *not* a monster!" Dr. Zeul jabbed her finger into Detective Chimp's chest.

The Spawn of Frankenstein actually turned towards the three watching children and for a brief moment, his solemn, sullen façade was broken... by a wink.

Grinning broadly, the three children walked away. Between them, Charlie put an arm around their shoulders and said, "All in a Halloween night's work...!"

NOT THE END!

THE MONSTER LEAGUE OF AMERICA *WILL* RETURN!

Chapter 2

Silence Over Slaughter Swamp

"Silence over Slaughter Swamp"
Written by Michael Hewison

The roar of the engine drowned out the otherwise quiet night on the long empty road. Whilst the music of the band Rush flooded the interior of the Envoy, the lights of Gotham City grew fainter and fainter in the distance. Only their destination was of any importance to them. The driver, a person too young to be called a man, too old to be a boy, remained silent, focusing on the road as his four friends laughed and drank joyfully.

"Man, that was unbelievable, did you see his face?" The man in the passenger seat asked, sipping at his beer.

"I know, he did not see that one coming," the only girl in the car laughed. Her delicate features lighting up as she smiled.

"Good times, eh Cass?" Roger, the one sitting on her left replied.

"We're almost there," the Driver stated.

"Exactly where is there again?" Roger asked.

"Heh, I know where baby bro is taking us." The one in the passenger seat grinned.

"Yeah, I figure that it'll be a good place to chill out for the night. Hmm, how long's it been since we've been there Dave?"

“Dunno, four years or something like that,” Dave said with a shrug, and a sip of his beer.

“Again, where is that again?” Asked Roger once more.

“Slaughter Swamp,”

That simple name seemed to take the breath out of everyone in the car. They’d all heard the stories, the whispers. The legend of Cyrus Gold, the ghost of Slaughter Swamp. Betrayed, and murdered by criminal cohorts, forever chained to the place of his death. Now a shadow of his former self, rage incarnate.

“You know it’s all bull right?” Dave asked, quickly picking up on their trepidation.

“Yeah, and Superman wears a jetpack and really good body armour,” muttered Roger.

“K, you know there is a difference between Superman and some urban myth right?” Asked the driver.

“Mark, they called The Batman a myth before he started *#(&ing the Mob's businesses up, you know that right?” Dave shot back.

Cass let out a laugh, “You know Dave, sometimes you just need to relax a bit,” giving him a peck on the cheek.

The SUV rounded one corner, then another, the darkness of the night and the long, winding road making it difficult for the driver to navigate. A bump, and another—the large vehicle wasn’t the easiest to handle in such conditions. The silence of the night was occasionally interrupted by some unknown bird, or animal letting out their calls and cries in the darkness of the ancient wood. None in the car spoke, the music coming from the stereo system lowered to a near-dead quiet. The others had started to adopt Roger’s trepidation as their own now, the whispers, and legends of this dark place scratching at the back of their minds. Images of a

historically dressed undead butcher leering at them from the darkness, waiting for his moment to strike them down as mercilessly as he'd been. Or a savage beast, or one of the many other natural hazards of this territory. What was out there? Watching, waiting for it's opportunity...?

"You guys really need to grow a pair you know that right?" Mark stated, lighting a cigarette.

"Would I be as popular if I did?" Cass chuckled, nervously.

"Figure of speech hon," Mark replied, flicking the ash out of his window.

"Funny, I thought I showed what I'm capable of already tonight," Roger muttered, cracking open another beer.

"And just as quickly you started to punk out again. You know, no big deal or anything, just that you're not really a big deal," Dave grinned.

Roger didn't reply, instead he downed the can and lightly tossed it at the back of Dave's head. Who in response quickly spun around and delivered a quick shot to Roger's shoulder. Before it could continue, Mark slammed on the breaks, launching Dave forward, causing him to bounce backward from the impact of the dashboard.

"We're here," he announced.

Indeed, they'd arrived at a large clearing, with a ramshackle cabin in the center of it. Further on, only darkness, but here, the high beams illuminated enough of the dilapidated building. The weeds growing out of the rotting deck, and the vines crawling through the broken windows. The place gave off the vibe of a cliché horror movie, begging for them to enter it's dilapidated form.

"Classy guys, real classy," Cass said, shaking her head in disappointment.

"Huh, I guess we probably should have tried to maintain this crap shack over the years eh Bro? Dave said thoughtfully.

"What's the point? We only ever used it to lay low for a couple days

didn't we?" Mark replied with a shrug.

"Ever hear of doing so in comfort?" Roger asked.

"Fair enough," Mark conceded. With a shrug, he made his way towards the cabin, cracking open a beer as he did so.

The interior of the cabin turned out to be no better, the floor boards cracked and broken, the smells of mould, and other forms of decay permeated throughout the small, two room building. A beam of unnatural light from the headlights of the car drifted in throughout the broken windows and cracks of the walls. Shadows danced all throughout, making the building seem all the more unnatural and twisted. In one room, a broken chair lay at the feet of an old table, half rotted, and paint peeling away wherever it could. Roger walked over, and tapped at it with his knuckles, a dull, hollow sound reverberating sound filling the room. Gently he set a half empty can of beer on top it, hoping it didn't collapse on itself.

The night dragged on, more and more drinks passed between the friends. With more liquid courage, the less haunting the building felt, and the less they thought of the events that had brought them here...

"Be right back, beer flows right through me," Dave laughed as he lit another smoke, and stepped outside.

"Aim well man," Roger laughed.

"That's disgusting!" Cass said.

"Only if I miss," Dave replied as he left the building.

As he circled the cabin, the more dark the surrounding area became. With the high beams of the SUV being the only good illumination, Dave relied more on the small light emitting from the cigarette pressed between his lips to guide his way. Planting his left hand against the side of the cabin he muttered as he relieved himself. All the while, unknowing of the eyes that watched in the darkness. As he turned to re-enter the cabin, he heard a noise. A cracking in the darkness of the woods, but a few feet away. With curiosity he turned towards the shadow, leaning

forward, trying to see what had made the noise. He approached the darkness, stumbling, half from the poor light, and half from the inebriated state he was in. He stood on the edge of the wood, breathing lightly, he dropped his cigarette and drove it downwards into the earth with his heel.

“Hello?” He called out, waiting.

Nothing.

“Baby bro, ya trying to scare me, that it?” Dave chuckled.

Once again, not a sound. This time however, the faintest of movement caught his eye. What it was, had been man shaped, or so it seemed. With another step forward, he called out again.

“Rog man, if that’s you I’m gonna kick your teeth in you know that right?” Dave growled, anger and fear building in him. Once again, no sound, and this time no movement.

“God I must be drunk,” Dave muttered as he turned around, back towards the cabin. Not even before his first step, the darkness leapt out at him and covered his mouth. Unable to even scream, he was enveloped by the shadows...

They were oblivious, they didn’t know of the hazard that had taken David. That he wouldn’t be joining them. They instead continued to laugh and drink, Mark’s eyes drifting towards Cass, as her eyes met his. She smiled suggestively, and looked toward the door. He grinned, and rose to his feet.

“I’ll be back in a couple minutes,”

“Since when did we ever take “just a couple minutes?” Cass asked rising to her feet, wrapping her arms around Mark. His hands drifted to her sides, and shrugged.

“So much for subtlety,” He said, planting his lips on hers. “Roger, don’t

wait up buddy," Mark declared leading Cass outside.

"Oh yeah that's fine, I'll just stay in this creepy ass Cabin by myself then," He said with a shrug. Quickly he downed his beer and grabbed another. "No big deal or anything, after all, I've got all the modern luxuries in here don't I?" He muttered. He scanned the darkened room, casually walking about, studying the remains of what had might have been a nice vacation home at some point. More likely a hunting lodge, he reasoned. With another step, he felt a floorboard give way, tripping him up and sending him forward. Quickly, he braced himself against the wall and cursed as he saw the beer running down his leg.

"Could be worse I guess, could have broken my neck or something," he grumbled. He leaned down to readjust his shoe, and started to retie his lace. As he finished, the wall his back was facing seemed to explode, a pair of hands grabbing his shoulders, dragging him backward. He let out a scream of terror, and thrashed about desperately. It did him no good, the raw strength of his unseen attacker dragging him back, further and further into the night...

"The hell was that!?" Screamed Cass.

"Not sure, I think it sounded like Roger though," Mark said, reaching into the glove box of the car. Clutching the small revolver and a flashlight, he quickly entered the cabin.

"Wait in the car," He told her.

He clicked on the flashlight, and cocked the hammer of the gun back. Scanning the room with the light, he could feel the sweat running down his neck. The light started to waver, back and forth, he started breathing heavily, his panic building. He heard a creak in the floorboards behind him and swung around, levelling the gun at the unseen entity behind him. The light clearly illuminated the small terrified frame of Cass. She stumbled back, and gasped.

"Jesus! I thought I told you to wait in the car!" Mark yelled.

"I thought you tossed it.." Cass whispered.

"Look, I was going to do it here, at the swamp... Who'd find it out here?" Mark yelled.

"Where's David and Roger?" Cass asked weakly.

Quickly, Mark composed himself, and took a deep breath. "I'm not sure, I don't know what happened,"

"Do you think it was..."

"For God's sake Cass! Cyrus Gold isn't f#(*ing real! He's just a bed time story to scare kids when they won't go to bed!" Mark screamed.

"That's not who I was going to say..."

"What?"

Before either could say or do something else, a hand shot upward from beneath the floorboard. Gripping Mark's ankle, it pulled him downward with seemingly unnatural strength. Both flashlight and gun were thrown wildly. The light broke as it hit the ground, and revolver roared as the hammer slammed down on the impact with the ground. Desperately Cass grabbed Mark's arm and tried to pull him free from the beast beneath them, blindly Mark kicked down at the hand. It was so strong though, it continued to pull him down, deeper into the floor.

"RUN!" Mark screamed, pushing Cass back before he was completely taken. She let out a scream and spun around, running blindly into the open night. First she went to the Envoy, it's engine still running. She tried the door, only to discover it was locked. Her eyes locked on, with horror at the keys still in the ignition. A guttural roar emanated from within the abandoned cabin, and she saw the shadow of her pursuer. It was large, it's broad shoulders heaving, up and down with every breath. For a split moment her knees started to buckle. She was nearly paralyzed with fear when instinct forced her back into reality. Without hesitation she darted into the woods. Her legs were not her own, carrying her through the thicket, branches scratching her skin and tearing her clothes. She dared not look back, only forward. Away from the menace behind

her. An unseen branch rising from the ground caught her ankle, launching her forward onto the ground. She felt her knee twist on impact.

The menace behind her was so very close now. She couldn't run, even if her leg didn't throb with pain, it was too close now. Blindly grabbing at anything within reach, she gripped a fallen branch and spun around, swinging it blindly. The wood splintered as it hit the attacker in the side of the head. It stumbled backward, and Cass rose to her feet. Rather than fight, she chose to try to run once more. Ignoring the pain, and the fatigue she carried on. Then something seemed to grab her ankle, and she was hurled to the ground once more.

"What are you!?" She cried.

It now stood over her, staring down at her. "Batman."

Chapter 3

Dagon

"Dagon"
by Jay McIntyre

When one creates phantoms for oneself, one puts vampires into the world, and one must nourish these children of a voluntary nightmare with one's blood, one's life, one's intelligence, and one's reason, without ever satisfying them.

—Eliphas Levi

I am neither good, nor bad, neither angel nor devil, I am a man, I am a vampire.

—Michael Romkey

-1-

Dagon was perched atop the roof of Titans Tower, alternately staring at the city skyline or the stars.

Raven had been here earlier, but she had gone back downstairs to be with Kid Flash. Dagon didn't blame her. He wasn't exactly the best company, today.

It had been raining earlier, but now it was trailing off, leaving gaps in the clouds, enabling him to see the stars he was looking at. He liked looking at the stars.

In his relatively short time as a vampire, he had quickly learned how ridiculous most fictional treatments of them were. Granted, they were entertaining, but having lived the unlife, as it were, he knew that most of them were completely wrong.

On the one hand you had those tragic romantic treatments, where the vampires were brooding and feeling all sorry for themselves, and often were in relationships with mortal women. Now, that last bit he had wished for himself on a few occasions, but the absolutely sappy, emotionally abusive and codependent nonsense that went on in those stories, whether books or television... he shook his head.

But the alternative seemed even worse; those who wanted vampires to be truly "badass" turned them into little more than zombies with fangs, albeit zombies with some small spark of animal cunning.

The old Dracula-style movies came closest; power and elegant and self-assurance. Dagon didn't regret what he had become; he simply was. He accepted it. He rather strongly suspected that anyone who angsted to any serious degree over their transformation went sunbathing the first chance they got.

Not that he was a monstrous predator like Dracula, mind you; before the Titans had taken him in and given him access to blood plasma supplies, he had lived off the blood of animals and those humans who were willing to 'donate', never taking more than he needed. The sappy romance shows tended to get that part, right, at least. Those who did not... were the source of the legends of Dracula and the like, he suspected.

He had met two others of his kind in his travels before joining the Titans; both of them had been wary, but continued their existence in the same way that he did. He had been able to learn that much.

But in one way he was different.

He had not been created by another vampire.

He had been turned into an undead creature by entirely other means.

Six years earlier...

Strapped to a table.

Human.

Helpless.

"What is this, you bastard?!?" Dagon shouted.

The man called himself Professor Chaos. He had a shock of red hair and bulging, protuberant eyes. He looked like a fast food spokesman gone mad, without makeup. "Such protests!" He smiled and shook his head. "Forrester was so much more cooperative."

"Forrester is a total scum bucket, like you!"

Chaos shook his head. "Such a lack of perspective." He threw the switch.

David screamed.

Dagon blinked.

He had known Eric Forrester, yes. That one... he had not become a vampire, no. At least not in the traditional blood-sucking sense. He had become... something else entirely.

He had not found that out until later. After he had recovered from the transformation, and found out what he had become.

He had been a long time, alone in the dark.

He had warned the Titans of Chaos and Forrester when they had first let him in. Nightwing in particular had seemed to take the information seriously, entering it into some computer database or other.

That had been a turning point in his unlife, no question... .

-4-

"A vampire!" Beast Boy had said, turning into a python.

Starfire had blasted him with a starbolt.

Though the attacks had hurt him, it hadn't been enough to put him down. He had collapsed anyway, then rolled away and sprang back to his feet. Four arrows from Speedy had sliced at him, one burying itself in his abdomen; thankfully it had done no real harm. Which is not to say it didn't hurt, but he healed from such wounds quickly. Only silver and sunlight could really harm him.

"I give, I give!" he'd said. "I've been on the run for a long time."

"What trick is this?!" Starfire had been ready to blast him in the head.

"It's no trick," Raven said. Her shadow had flowed over him. "He is not the monster he appears to be." She had paused. "I know how he feels."

Dagon had no idea what to say to that.

But Nightwing had been looking at him thoughtfully. "Let's talk... ."

-5-

There had been lots of interesting members in those days. Arrowette. Plastique. Flamebird. Element. Woodchucker... .

Woodchucker. Dagon remembered what had happened to him, oh yes.

Of that "class" of Titans, only he and Beast Boy were left.

Shaking away the memories, he launched himself from the Tower towards the city.

He took his mist form, which in some ways was his favorite. It was hard to describe what he sensed while in this form; everything was shimmering in bands of white and black, yet he didn't miss out any details. The sharpness of his senses were always strong.

It was no difficulty at all to sense the three thugs mugging the old lady.

He came out of mist form right behind them.

"You know," he said conversationally, "There was a time when a thug with a gun didn't need two friends with him to rob the elderly. Even as criminals go, you're scraping the bottom of the barrel."

They stared at him, but to their credit they didn't waste any time on stupid replies; they simply fired.

All three of them. At once.

Instead of shifting to mist form, Dagon let the bullets knock him over, then got back up. "Ow," he said, smiling unpleasantly.

Two of the thugs had some small amount of wit, apparently; they ran. Their last friend remained rooted to the spot.

Dagon generally tried to avoid feeding on unwilling humans. The last time he had done it was during their escape from the HIVE base, and that was only because he had been trapped in that hellacious sensory-

deprivation coffin for so long. The one he had bitten had survived, easily. But Dagon also was sure he had been scarred for life.

This fool was no HIVE soldier. Which didn't mean Dagon couldn't hurt him.

Scare him.

Dagon grinned, showing fangs, and lifted the man by his shirt.

One handed.

The thug whimpered.

"Does the phrase, 'Go home and re-think your life' ring any bells for you?" Dagon asked sweetly.

"Uh-huh," the man blubbered.

"Good. Do that... .when you wake up."

Dagon threw him into the wall. The thug's head connected, and it was lights out for him. Dagon had judged it carefully; his heightened senses were perfectly tuned to judge.

The old woman was still cowering against the wall. Pale. Terrified.

Dagon sighed; but in truth, he was used to this. He gave her a fancy bow. "Go home, madam. I've got to catch up to his friends."

And with a puff of smoke, he was gone.

One of the thugs was running blind. He was easy enough to track down. Dagon almost laughed; in his panic, the fool was running towards Upper

Bay!

Dagon dropped out of mist form and gave chase on foot. He wasn't anywhere near as fast as Kid Flash, of course; but he was faster than the finest Olympic Sprinter. Twice as fast, perhaps. The wind whistled in his ears. Dagon began to truly enjoy himself for the first time that night.

In any event, the thug wasn't that healthy; even from here, Dagon could smell the heroin in his blood, not to mention far too many fast food burgers. It took Dagon less than three minutes to catch up with him.

He grabbed the thug by the back of the neck and lifted him casually, continuing his sprint. The thug screamed and flailed wildly with his weapon, trying to pistol-whip him. Dagon would've dodged the blows if any had come anywhere close. Even if they hadn't, he was sure he could have absorbed the damage quite easily. But there was always the chance that the gun might go off; and a stray bullet might go anywhere, perhaps killing someone.

So he changed his original plan, of dumping the idiot in the bay and letting Harbor Patrol pick him up, and instead made a hard right turn, heading for the New York Naval Station.

When he got there, he sent the criminal tumbling into the guard post. "One for lock up," he said to the astonished guards, and once again he was gone.

-7-

The last of the three criminals was actually somewhat intelligent; he had recognized Dagon as a vampire, and having some rudimentary knowledge of vampires, had decided to hide in a church. Saint Mary's Star of the Sea Church, to be exact.

It took Dagon more than half an hour to track him down, and he had to give the man some credit for tactical awareness. But he had made a

mistake in his assumptions.

The man was shivering in the second row of pews, almost right up front near the crucifix.

"Tell you a secret," Dagon said behind him, and the man yelped and withered. "It's not the cross that frightens; it's the faith of the person carrying it. You don't qualify."

"But I do," a new voice said. Dagon looked up and saw a priest, his face severe, his eyes accusing. "Leave this place."

Slowly, reluctantly, Dagon began to back up, compelled. "I wasn't going to feed on him. He's a criminal and I—"

"Yes, I know who you are. You're the vampire that hides behind the so called heroes." Now the priest's face was twisted in hate. "More proof that they aren't really on our side."

"Oh so it's that flavor of hypocrisy, is it?" Dagon shook his head, still backing up. "A pity. That one is the real predator here," he said, pointing.

"He confessed to me," the preacher agreed, "And the police have been called. You've put the fear of God into him, so much is certain. But speak not of hypocrisy, leech!"

"Then it seems justice is done," Dagon agreed, slowly turning away. "But consider this; if I wanted to feed on him, it would have happened before he ever got here. Yet, I didn't. Consider *that*."

"**BEGONE!**" the priest roared.

Dagon went. He wanted to chuckle as he did, but refrained, so as not to add any more fuel to the old man's fire.

As he left, he did wonder if the preacher might be lying, and in fact be affiliated with the Cult of Blood or some other horror; that sort of thing was beyond his ability to detect, such things being Raven's forte and not his own. But he suspected if that were so, the one he'd been chasing would already have been 'recruited' and disappeared, the preacher with

him.

As for the priest's hatred and mistrust not only of him, but all heroes; well, that couldn't be helped. Such sentiments weren't that strong, especially not in a hero-heavy city like New York; but there were always a few.

The preacher peered out the front door of the church, suspiciously; but Dagon had already gone.

-8-

Dagon returned to the roof of the Tower, in a relatively better mood.

One day he would face Chaos again, yes. And Forrester, too. Perhaps together; perhaps separately. There was no way to know.

But tonight at least... ..yes, tonight had been fairly rewarding.

It was October. Not quite Halloween yet. But soon. How appropriate, Dagon thought to himself, smirking.

Dagon slipped back into the Tower, and was mildly surprised to find Beast Boy playing video games. They had a whole old-fashioned arcade here, below the swimming pool. Gar glanced briefly away from blasting invaders. While the changeling had never been his friend, the shape-shifter had long since gotten used to him by now.

"Having a good night?" Beast Boy asked, conversationally.

"So far," Dagon agreed, smiling a genuine smile. "So far... ."

Follow Dagon back to Teen Titans— Monthly!

Chapter 4

The Tattooed Man-- Lives

The Tattooed Man— Lives.
Written by Charlie Wilkins

Abel Tarrant, the Tattooed Man, sat cross-legged in his cell, the same cell he'd been inside for how many months now? How many months since Green Lantern had thrown him in here? Away from ink. Away from magic. Away from the light. His skin writhed with withered tattoos wanting to leave their prison. They wanted blood. Sacrafice. Fuel for their existence.

"Abel, how are ya' feeling today?" asked his cell-mate, grinning from the top bunk.

"F-fine," mumbled Tarrant, watching his outstretched hand shake. "£\$%^ off."

"Mouth of a sailor, int'cha boy?" replied his cell-mate, jumping down from his bunk and crouching down in front of Tarrant. "Oh yeah, I forget, you were one, weren't cha?"

"S-seriously," reiterated Tarrant, "£\$%^ off, fish."

The cell-mate grabbed Tarrant by the mouth, and squeezed. "Don't cha talk to me like that, ya sonofabitch, don't cha talk to me like that."

Tarrant struggled to escape his cell-mate's grip, but his efforts were futile. "W-what do you, y-you think you're d-doing?"

"Right boy, names an' names an' names," hissed his attacker, "I remember the names you were callin' me way backs when, don't chu?"

"Wwwhuh?"

"When ya summoned me inta yer skin, boy!" snarled the cell-mate. "Yer in withdrawl from my power, I can tell. Like a drug addict. You need a hit, don't cha? Don't cha?"

"Why are you d-doing this?"

"When are ya going ta remember, Abel? When are ya going ta remember dat yer in *solitary*? And dat ya ain't got a *room-mate*?"

Abel's eyes widened. "What?!"

"Yew prayed fer power an' fer strength," hissed the man, "and I granted it for ya."

"What do you want?"

"Simple," said the man, his pink flesh shifting to crimson, his body billowing up, his eyes stretching and popping into an extra set. Horns pierced his skull, and his teeth lengthened times over, until he didn't resemble humour. "You **use** the power I gave you. Oh, and how you use it."

"I c-can't!" cried Abel. "I'm locked in here!"

"And you forgot to **pray**!" screamed the man— now monster— as he hurtled him across the cell, and into the wall. "I always listen! I always listen and you never prayed!"

Abel's eyes widened. "I'm... sorry?"

"Sorry... isn't... going... to cut it!" whispered the monster. "So things are going to change now."

"I... "

"—ME!" howled the monster, "not you, not I, ME!" The room began to shake, the walls began to close in, and Abel screamed as the creature clawed at his tattoos, tearing them off his body. Whispers of art cried out as they became separated from Abel, until the Tattooed Man was no longer—

"What's going on?" asked Warden Stiles, peering through the door of Abel Tarrant's cell. The Tattooed Man was curled up in a ball in the centre of the cell, shaking. "Typical, Tarrant. Waste of space."

"Wwwwait," whispered Tarrant.

The Warden hesitated, and looked down at Abel. "What now, meat?"

"I need... ink... " Abel moved impossibly fast, chains lashing themselves around the bars of his cell, and the hands of Stiles. The Warden was trapped, bound tightly to the door. "And... you'll... do... "

"What?! No! GUARD! *GUARD!*"

Abel took a knife from a tattoo on his arm, and slit the Warden's throat. Blood gushed down the door, and he collected the liquid on the tip— and went to work.

"Ink. And then... more. Power," whispered Tarrant, smiling as he began to glide the knife over his arms. He had half an hour before the Warden was found, exanguinated and hanging dead by Tarrant's jail cell. The door was still locked, but Tarrant was nowhere to be seen...

To Be Continued in the DC2!

Chapter 5

Lone Wolf

"Lone Wolf"
By James Stubbs

Somewhere in Germany, 1943

Private Warren Griffith listened faintly to the muffled ack-ack in the distance as he stared skyward. Somewhere up there, guys were dying as their planes were shredded by sudden black blooms of shrapnel. It was one hell of a way to go. There were times, not often, when the idiot sticks on his jacket were some small comfort. In some ways it was good to know that at least, when his time came, he'd die with both feet on the ground.

Or at least his belly, he reminded himself as the tall dry grass he was hiding in shifted in the wind. Even though scouting ahead was always anyJoe's dread, it at least got him away from that rat bastard, Shrieve. He'd always wondered why someone like Sergeant Velcro didn't put a few bullets into that guy's back and be done with it but the sad fact was that they had nowhere else to go. They were all freaks. He had been before but all of them belonged now that the Doc had done his dirty work on them. They had nobody but themselves to rely on.

Warren chuckled ruefully to himself. And he was supposed to be the good-natured one. Funny how the things they had to do took the sunshine out. Sure, he still smiled, cracked the joke every so often and kept up appearances but it ate away at you every day. It was only when he was alone that he could let his more melancholy side show.

Even though it made him sick to his stomach, he'd rather be a monster

fighting the Nazis than the ridicule and shun he got from his own kin-folk back home. So they stayed together and put up with Shrieve's cake hole and secretly hoped that, one day, some lucky Jerry would earn his pay on the lieutenant. Maybe the next guy wouldn't be such an asshole but he doubted it.

He absently pushed his pot down over his red hair and began to slowly crawl forward, cringing as the crackling of the grass seemed to boom throughout the night at the least movement. There was a farmhouse ahead and a dirt road to his left that he had been following. It was the traffic that was their concern. With most of the major roads and bridges getting blown to hell nightly, trucks were sure to take back roads. It was their job to radio in anything that might be worth a fly boy to take a pot-shot at. Oil, guns, gas, spare parts, it didn't matter. Anything to deny the enemy.

The homestead, however, could be a problem. Not to his surprise, it wasn't on any of the maps they had. Most of these that you ran across had been abandoned but you never wanted to take the chance that someone was there who would rat you out or make you target practice from a darkened window.

The house had seen better days but, then again, what hadn't nowadays? A faded and chipping coat of whitewash was its last grasp at respectability. Clapboard shutters swayed in the breeze, beating a lonely drum against the home, all attempts to secure them long since forgotten. A few examples of the scrawniest chickens he had ever seen slowly pecked at the lawn which was more dirt than grass. Hell, the chicken coop and small cottage that he could see in the back was in better shape than what was being passed off for a home here. Maybe he could bag a chicken dinner or some hen fruit if this place really turned out to be deserted. Anything was still a step up from rations.

It took him agonizing minutes to crawl to the back of the place to scout it out. There was someone there. An old lady was out back checking on the chicken coop that bordered his hiding spot and tossing out meager handfuls of corn. The damn birds were making a ruckus. No animals could stand the scent of him. They could smell the wolf. He flattened himself to

the ground and prayed that she'd finish feeding them, lock them up, and go away. He'd had enough of having to kill women.

There wasn't much he could do right now other than hunker down and sweat it out. As long as they were where any movement from him might be seen he had to sit and watch the clouds roll on into the evening as the sun sank into a thin bright line against the horizon. The farm wife puttered about, taking care of a small garden and collecting rainwater from an old barrel.

The sound of a car engine from the road drew his attention as he tried to make himself one with the ground. Warren popped his chopper and the snick of a round going into the chamber sounding like a gunshot. He winced but, if the old lady heard it, she gave no indication. He could see a staff car moving down the road. "*Just keep going. Keep going,*" he willed it as his heart began to thump faster in his chest., "*No reason for you to stop at a farm. No reason a'tall.*"

He cursed the Griffith family luck as the car pulled up into the yard. His skin began to itch and crawl. "*Dammit, Warren, don't flip your wig now! Observe n' report! Observe n' report only!*" His own mental swearing merged with those of Shrieve's mission briefing. Five people got out of the car. The driver, the guy who had to be the ranking officer and two armed soldiers flanking a pale girl, who was led into the cottage.

The driver stayed with the car and nervously fumbled at getting a cigarette lit while the officer stopped and was speaking to the old woman. Warren could overhear his words but damned if he could speak a lick of Kraut.

<"My daughter is tired from our journey. Could we use your cottage until the morning when she feels better?">

After a few moments of back and forth, the old woman seemed convinced of whatever he had said, nodded and said some words that Warren took as pleasantries and went inside the home. The officer nodded to his driver who went to the trunk and furtively removed chains and locks. The two of them walked to the cottage and entered. Whatever was

said to grandma was a damn lie.

"Oh hell no. Oh hell no." Warren kept on repeating as if to reassure himself that he was not going to witness what was surely going to happen. His fingernails grew, scraping against the fore-grip of his gun as his teeth grew. Coarse brown fur sprung from his arms and his ears stretched. "Observe and... report... my... ass!" his voice grew guttural and raspy.

The two soldiers came out of the cottage and took up positions on either side of the door while the driver hung around nervously puffing on his coffin nail. "Sie hat Holz vor der Hütte," the trooper said with a smirk. The other soldier grimaced and glanced meaningfully at the door, "ein geiler Wicht."

Warren tried to not pay attention to the prattling of bored sentries.

<"This is something I have to do until you get a man in your life.">

<"No father! Don't!">

A shriek of hysterical feminine German was all it took to push him over the edge.

Warren Griffith exploded from the grass, his nose and jaws extending as fur rapidly covered his body. The tommy gun in his hands, erupting into deadly life as he held the trigger down..

The front of the cottage exploded in a maelstrom of shattered stucco, dust and blood as the three men who had been there crumpled under the withering hail of bullets.

<"I'm sorry, Ilse, but I have to tie you down with the moon tonight... ">

<"No!">

<"Ilse, if I don't you'll end up like your mo... ">

Warren's gun clicked on an empty clip and he dropped it without a thought as the flimsy door gave way against his barreling body with a crash.

The officer whirled around from the girl chained hand and foot to the bed with a look of surprise as he fumbled with the pistol at his waist. The girl screamed.

<"Another?!"> he yelled and shot wildly in Warren's direction.

The vicious backhand sent the man violently against the wall as the gun clattered to the floor.

<"Don't!">

Warren laid a right cross across the man's jaw, snapping his head backwards.

<"You don't... ">

He followed with a blow to the stomach, doubling him over.

<"Her... mother... ">

The officer's body knocked over a nightstand as he was hurled into it.

<"... like... y... ">

"Shut up!," Warren yelled, his frustration and rage mounting as the man kept on trying to talk.

Warren beat the man mercilessly until his battered unconscious body hit the floor. He paused, breathing heavily, before speaking, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know," she replied in halting but confident English.

There had been a brief exchange of names and some still lingering trust

issues but, once he tried breaking the chains, Ilsa had helped him find the keys that were in the officer's coat pocket to undo the heavy locks that bound her.

"You must go," she pleaded with him while massaging her wrists, "More soldiers will come."

He hesitated.

"I will take the car," she insisted and took his furry hands, "I can go far."

Her assured words soothed his fears.

Warren reluctantly left her like that. Although there were many times over the following years where he wondered what had happened to Ilsa. Perhaps they could have been happy despite the differences but those things were in the past. He kicked himself for being a damn romantic sap. She was better off left to someone who could appreciate her for who she was rather than the bum like him she would have been stuck with .

Hauptmann Moritz Vibbard woke to the rattling of chains on his own arms.

In faint light of the moon streaming into the window he saw his daughter hunched over and convulsing. The sound of rending clothing and snapping bone echoing throughout the now empty cottage.

He screamed and tugged on the chains until his hands were bloody to no avail.

"Goodbye father." the she-wolf gurgled out of a throat that was no longer human but, by then, Warren Griffith was too far away to hear the final screams of her father or the old woman.

"You think that... you think that scares me?"

"I had hoped that showing you the lows that humanity can sink to would move you off the path you are on... "

"£\$%^ that, *Stranger!* Now I know there are depravities that I can still reach! Unholy depths that will ensure my masters smile favourably upon me! You have done nothing! Nothing!"

"A shame then. Because I still hold the power here. And with that power, I have to do the thing I warned you about earlier— goodbye."

"What? Where— no! No, where are you going!"

"Everywhere, whilst you, in the darkness, in the shadows and the black and the nothingness— will remain here, until your dying day, ever awake, ever knowing that you had a choice— and you squandered it."

"No! NO! NO—"

If you enjoyed these stories, you can find more tales of your favorite DC heroes at DC2 Universe.

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From the same author on Feedbooks

House of Mystery #1 (2006)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of ten tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Doctor Occult, The Phantom Stranger and many more!

Detective Comics Annual #1 (2006)

The explosive second year of Bat-titles starts here with three exciting tales written by the new creative teams on Batman & Detective Comics:

"Wings on Fire"

With Gotham City barely recovered from the Crisis, Firefly arrives to burn it down! Who is Firefly? And even more importantly, what is his connection to up and coming crime boss Oswald Cobblepot?

"Gotham Nights"

Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are invited to the Gotham Hyde Civic Center during it's grand reopening after the Apokolips War. Bruce is hoping for a quiet evening and a chance to improve his image but when new and old faces alike make an appearance and a deadly threat is uncovered, you know it's not going down without a hitch!

"For Love and Money"

Get inside the heads of two very different members of the GCPD in this back-up tale featuring James Gordon and Harvey Bullock.

DC2 Showcase Holiday Special (2006)

Seasons greetings from the DC2!

Take a peek at several tales that span across the DC2 universe this holiday season. It's a time for celebrating with family & friends, spreading good cheer, and maybe a few surprises along the way!

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative (2006)

This is it! The collected first mega-event to rock the DC2 Universe as the eternal struggle between The New Gods and the forces of Darkseid comes to Earth!

DC2 Showcase #1 (2006)

The classic anthology title that started the silver age makes its DC2 debut. Showcase kicks off DC2's second sensational year with four brand new tales from every corner of the DC2 universe:

Mechanical Dreams: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: Legacy:

A familiar character makes their DC2 debut with a tale that reveals his traumatic origin. Find out who it is in part one of a three-part tale.

Batman: Curfew

Written by: Kevin Hill:

When three young boys are caught out after dark, they discover that their only hope of rescue from the horrors of Gotham City lie in the hands of the modern myth, the Batman!

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe:

A soap star, a reality TV actress wannabe, and a script doctor, all share a house in West Beverly Hills with Daniel Patrick Cassidy, a special effects/stuntman who is about to accept the role that will change his life forever on the new movie, Blue Devil.

Superman: Obituary: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: Julian Balrup:

After the recent grueling battle that was Crisis, Superman begins to evaluate his life and decides to take it upon himself to write his own Obituary. Writing as Clark Kent, he chronicles key moments in his life that shaped him to become the hero that we know him to be.

DC2 Showcase #2 (2006)

The new DC2 anthology series continues...

Mechanical Dreams: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: Robert Harding

The DC2 introduction of Victor Stone continues. His life has been turned upside down as the mechanical dream turns into a nightmare!

Rip Hunter Lives!

Written by: Charlie Wilkins

One man travels alone in the time stream, all but lost to the world, until he's dragged into something that even he doesn't understand on the outskirts of eternity itself! Meet the new Rip Hunter as he meets the old Linear Men... Pulp action at it's finest!

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe

Daniel Cassidy's life appears to be looking up when he has two beautiful women fighting over him and Blue Devil the movie is back in production. But, a freak accident on the set reveals how far someone is willing to go to get a movie made in Hollywood. Will Cassidy pay for it with his soul?

Superman: Obituary: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: Julian Balrup

Clark has had a trial by fire, now he has a brush with the skies. Clark begins to decide how he wants to use his powers. He wonders should he use them to be mankind's savior or its ruler...

House of Mystery #2 (2007)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of nine tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Doctor Occult, The Shade and many more!

DC2 Special #3: A Very DC2 Christmas (2007)

The staff of DC2 come together again to give you a little taste of the holiday spirit in several stories that run the gamut of emotions. Join us as we give you our Christmas present.

DC2 Showcase #3 (2007)

The conclusion to Showcase volume one is finally here!

Mechanical Dreams: Part 3 (of 3)

Written by: Robert Harding

His life has been turned upside down by those closest to him but now he realizes what he has been made into and what will come next. As a great terror spreads through Vic Stone's life, he must decide what path to take and more critically, whose side will he join. This is the end of the beginning. Welcome Vic Stone, to the DC2.

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 3 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe

After being blasted with supernatural energy Dan Cassidy is trapped in the Blue Devil suit. He is now in the battle of his life on the movie set as the cameras film everything. When it's over his life will be changed forever. Will he be able to embrace his destiny when he discovers the truth about why he has become Blue Devil?

House of Mystery #3 (2008)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of six tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Deadman, The Phantom Stranger and many more!

DC2 Special #4: DC2 Holiday Special (2008)

DC2 Special #4: DC2 Holiday Special.

Spend some time with the both writers and artists of the DC2 & DC3 as they celebrate Christmas with several heartwarming tales... and one tale starring Ambush Bug.

If this doesn't put you in the holiday spirit, then your name must be Scrooge!

DC2 Special #5: Another DC2 Christmas Special (2009)

Join the staff of DC2 as we celebrate another year of holiday cheer with several short stories and vignettes that will take you from a certain farm house in Kansas all the way to the very halls of the DC2 offices in New York City.

Weird Western Spectacular #1 (2010)

To commemorate the new Jonah Hex film, a stable of the writers for DC2 joined together to create not just a celebration of everyone's favorite ugly as sin bounty hunter but a plethora of Old West heroes and heroines as well.

DC2 Special #6: The Naughty and Nice List (2010)

DC2 presents our annual holiday special featuring tales that span the DC2 Universe proper as well as our DC3 multiverse and Elseworlds. Enjoy and Happy Holidays!

DC2 Special #7: The Ghosts of Christmases Past (2011)

DC2 Special: The Ghosts of Christmases Past.

Join the writers and artists of the DC2 comics fanfiction community in celebrating the holidays with this collection of superhero tales that explore the joys of the season.



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