



# Dark Sorcery Special

# MORPHEUS TALES

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## Dark Sorcery Special Issue

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Proofread By the Morpheus Tales Proofreaders – [www.morpheustales.com/the%20team.htm](http://www.morpheustales.com/the%20team.htm)

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# Dark Sorcery: An Introduction By Tommy B. Smith

Within these pages awaits a revelation of magical secrets, tales and images of such sorcery as only a convergence of dark creative visions can bring.

Welcome to the Morpheus Tales Dark Sorcery Special Issue. Tales of fantasy and fantastical horror abound here, malevolent sorcerers and spells, arcane rituals, and beings summoned from the darkest realms of the imagination.

From its very first issue, which featured a stunning lineup of material and also a dark sorcery tale of my own, I saw in Morpheus Tales a hard-hitting publication that delivered the best in horror and fantasy. Who better, then, to bring you a special issue focused on dark sorcery, a theme which overlaps both of these genres?

It's an honor to have been a part of this special issue, and to have worked with the authors and artists who worked their creative magic to conjure what you'll find in its pages. With so much talent out there, it wasn't always an easy choice.

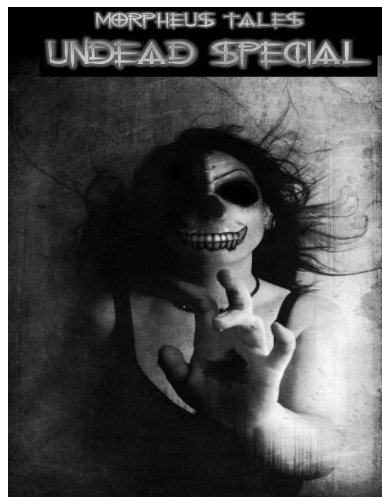
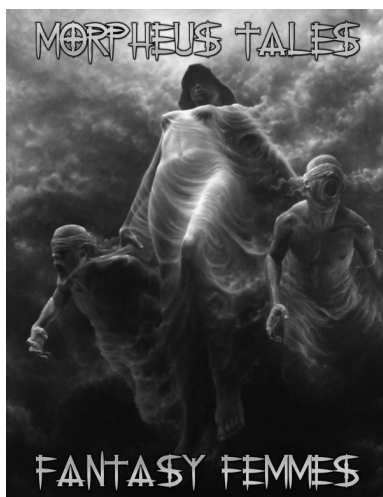
Last, and certainly not least, thank you, the reader, for turning the pages, and taking the plunge into the mystical currents below.

Tommy B. Smith

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# Power Drunk By John "JAM" Arthur Miller

Chance sat on the curb, shoes in a puddle. A taxi sped past, splashing up a wave of rainwater that struck him hard enough to propel him backwards. Seething, he sat up and reached into his wet trench coat, pulling out a bone-wand. He turned his head at an odd angle and glared at the yellow cab. He pointed the bone, whittled into something resembling a knitting needle.

"Damnatio membra corpus." *Damnation to limbs and body.*

Blood drooled from the corner of Chance's right eye as power vibrated through his body. Although hurting, he didn't stop; the painful energy continuing to flow, its magnificent potency intoxicating, enveloping him in white-hot rage. The wand trembled with murderous animosity.

"Ira infidelium." *Wrath to the infidel.*

The left wheel of the vehicle suddenly snapped off, and the cab skidded on the pavement, spraying sparks as metal raked the road. The vehicle careened into the median, where it flipped onto its side before striking a streetlight. Glass sprinkled down like sparkling mist.

Gasoline leaked from the cab toward the car's undercarriage where sparks continued to fall from the broken streetlight. The taxi remained still. A stream of gas reached the waterfall of sparks and erupted in flames, snaking back towards the car. The driver watched with wide eyes, trapped by the seatbelt that wouldn't come unfastened. The searing heat melted the cabbie's lungs in a whoosh, silencing his holler.

A group of people, screaming and yelling, came from all directions, running towards the wrecked inferno, but no one could get close because of the heat. A woman screamed and pointed at the burning cab as she exited a video store. The crowd grew and sirens blared in the distance, growing louder.

Hysterical laughter bubbled from Chance as he turned away from burning flesh and concerned citizens. The mob didn't know a god walked among them. Although adorned in the garb of a vagrant, Chance was worshipped at one time as Magnum Opus of the Hermetic Order. Such plebeians as those surrounding the burning wreckage wouldn't know, nor would they have the capacity to perceive his power, let alone espy the black aura rimmed with red veins enveloping his body.

# The Word By Aaron Gudmundson

A low-hanging tree limb, unseen in the gloaming, proved the downfall of Timus Mathen. After weeks of evading enemies, a single stretching arm of birch was all it took to level him. Not spear or arrow or flying dagger. A rogue branch, that was all. It caught him at the throat and slung him from his mount. The enemy closed in before he could draw full lung.

Whispered of in tavern backrooms as an opponent without equal, it was thus to the great relief - and conceit - of the Ganthum Imperial Army to have quelled him.

His captors had no interest in information, for they were well on their way to total conquest, its completion a mere formality. They tormented Timus out of pleasure. His humiliation was the Ganthumites' elation. It is said they took particular enjoyment in twisting passages from the *Book of Passing Ages* at Timus, who was as pious as he was deadly.

"Look," spat Captain Septimus Pond, the ranking officer and chief torturer. "It says in plain speech: '... and the Greater Armies shall vanquish the lesser stock, and take under their command those remaining who are neither weak nor lame nor ill of mind.' Do ye see?"

Mathen glared with the one eye not yet swollen shut. "Your interpretation does the Book injustice."

This comment garnered Timus a blow with the leather-bound spine of the volume in question. Normally such action would be seen as sacrilege, but on this occasion neither party paid it heed. The guards on either side of the door shuffled their boots but remained silent. Through the barred window, snow descended over distant forestland.

Pond edged nearer the bound warrior until their eyes were level. Timus realized that the Captain took no chances with his charge's teeth, making sure to stand at all times out of biting range.

"Maintain your insults, Mathen. You're ours. Your pathetic kingdom is spent. You were their one hope. We'll wear you out before we return that stupid head on your shoulders to your queen."

Timus allowed his own grin to surface, one more confident than perhaps a man in his position should grant. "We shall see whose head stays on whose shoulders, shan't we?"

Before further discourse could be tendered, a knock sounded and the Captain bid the comer entrance. The door opened to admit a figure of medium build, shrouded in a cloak the colour of evening.

"Elder Shard," Pond said, bowing.

The cloaked figure dismissed the guards, then turned to the commanding officer. "Captain Pond, I've come to share time with your charge. I'll ask you to leave us so that I may discuss the details of his funerary options come midnight."

Pond looked first confused, then content. "Certainly, Elder. I shall remain without should you call."

"Thank you, Captain," the cloaked man said and watched the officer depart, then he faced the captive. "Timus Mathen," he said, rolling his tongue through the name as though it were fine wine.

"I am," the bound man confirmed.

"I know that, sir. Everyone knows it. Your name is legend, from Wetherain to Westland and Desuinne to Alzaraad. You must know, sir, how far your reputation precedes you."

Uneasiness blossomed in Timus's chest. Something was amiss. "I am aware."

"Good. A man should know his place in the order of things. But are you aware, sir, of how far my reputation precedes me?"

Timus told him he did not.

# Secret Ingredients By Bill Ward

Kyle was in the downstairs pantry, rummaging. He'd found some table salt in a big cardboard container that looked pretty good, and some candles and needles and thread. There was more flour down here, a half-full bag gone solid as a clot of dirt, and he passed on it - the stuff in his room was fresher. He checked his list and looked around some more, sliding the disused and forgotten remnants of his parents' kitchen overflow around on the metal shelves - boxes of pasta and an old oven mitt, a dusty stack of pot lids and a greasy, clanking sandwich maker that weighed about forty pounds, warped cookbooks and condensed soup, and a Tupperware container rattling full of spices. This last he dug into with enthusiasm.

"Yes!" Kyle snatched a small plastic jar of powdered mustard from the jumble of half empty bottles of oregano, coriander and Italian seasoning. It wasn't exactly mustard seed, but he had a feeling it would do.

"You down here, Kylie?" His mother's feet on the stairs, clomping down in her high-heels. "Your father and I are leaving now."

Kyle slid the small pile of ingredients under the shelving with his foot and turned to smile at his mother as she came into view in her stylish black dress and sixty-dollar haircut. "Have fun." His heart was racing, but he didn't think it showed in his voice.

His mother gave him a distracted smile. "I don't know about fun, kiddo, but at least dinner will be good. Now look-" she paused a second as if processing their surroundings. "What are you up to down there?"

Kyle shrugged. He'd rehearsed the answer. "Mr. Silas gave us homework to compare the prices of common household items, and said especially if we could find prices on older items we should..." Kyle continued on autopilot, satisfied that his mother had tuned out somewhere after the word 'homework.'

# Moon And Shadow By Dennis McDonald

The darkness moved in the mouth of an alley.

Jarrad unsheathed his rapier from the scabbard on his hip. With a metallic ring, the razor-sharp weapon came clear. Searching for his twin sister, Jezzrae, he had journeyed to the city of Kathandria with no intention of dying by a thief's blade.

"No need to pull your sword, Jarrad Thorne." A grim voice spoke from the dark. "For I am no simple beggar or footpad after your paltry wealth."

The shadow stepped into the light of the two moons and far-off lamp. A robed and hooded figure now stood before him.

"Then who are you? For I know not your name, sir, and you have good knowledge of mine." Jarrad kept the point of his sword trained on the stranger.

"I am Kressal." Showing no weapon, two open hands emerged from the folds of the robe displaying black painted fingernails and palms tattooed with mystic runes. *A wizard*, he realized. *Much more unpredictable and dangerous than a common street thief.*

"How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know much more than just your name, Jarrad. I know you seek your twin sister, Jezzrae."

Jarrad swallowed back his surprise. How could this stranger know so much about him? For five years he had been on the trail of Jezzrae throughout the continent of Bythandor. He had searched inns, taverns, waterfront bars, shops, and marketplaces, asking the same question: has anyone seen a young woman who was his twin, except with hair as white as snow? The last clue to her whereabouts was that she purchased passage on a merchant sailing ship bound for Kathandria.

"How is this possible? By what dark sorcery did you learn about me and my quest?"

Kressal's hand dipped into his robe. He produced a small globe of crystal that gave off a greenish glow. In the pale light, Jarrad saw Kressal's features. Dark eyes, set in a weathered brown face, glittered in the glow from the orb.

"With this object forged by the Seer's Guild over a century ago." He turned the crystal slowly using his fingertips. "Within this orb one can see many things if only one knows how to look."

Jarrad gazed transfixed. Could this magical item reveal what he had sought for so long over so many traveled roads?

"What things, wizard?"

"Your sister, Jezzrae, perhaps." A thin smile played across Kressal's lips. "It is through this stone I have watched you closely, Jarrad. It is how I knew where to find you tonight. You possess a psychic link to your twin. This stone will magnify it. Look deep into the crystal's centre and you may see where she is."

The wizard turned the globe letting the green light splay across Jarrad's eyes. "Why have you watched me?"

"We will discuss such things later," Kressal replied. "First we must find your sister."

Within the center of the orb a scene formed and he felt his sister's presence touch his own spirit. Jezzrae sat at a table playing a game of cards with a placard sign showing a cup and sword mounted on the wall behind her. She was now more mature and beautiful than she was five years ago when he last saw her, at the storming of their royal house by Lord Balth. Her white hair was longer, reaching over her shoulders and tied down her back. Without notice the image shifted. Jarrad felt a sudden icy dread wash over his body as if he was watching something in a nightmare. He was now looking outside the gambling house. From his new vantage point, he saw men dressed in black hoods and strange ringmail armor moving stealthily along a wall. Hands slowly drew blades of steel.

# Veil Of The Weary One By Lee Clark Zumpe

Bitter, unseasonable winds slithered through the barren avenues of Shatley Creek. Certain menacing shadows pitched their uncanny weight against the dull street lamps, and the moon crawled along impotently behind a thin layer of purple clouds. Dogs howled anxiously from the scattered farmsteads dotting the tiny Appalachian cove. The whine of big-rigs traveling south along State Road 201 further up the slope of Richmond Mountain showered down over the valley.

Most of them never even noticed the turn-off for Shatley Creek, which was for the best. The townsfolk rarely welcomed strangers.

Colby arrived not long after midnight, but long after the only diner in town had locked its doors and fed the rats in the alley. Darkened windows and empty sidewalks rolled by on either side. Shatley Creek was devoid of roving teenage gangs that might haunt a larger city on a Friday night; no drive-in theaters or bowling alleys or late night fast food stands offered them refuge here. The night was painfully lonely, as was he.

Colby drove cautiously down the main boulevard, still leery of small town police and unexpected speed traps. The chill in the air made it feel like late October. The summer he had left behind in Florida seemed a lifetime away. Here, everything seemed a lifetime away.

Everything except the Darklings.

Loathingly, Colby turned down Piney Lane and traced the steady stream of his high-beams as they illuminated an elaborate wrought iron gate. The sign above the gate confirmed that he had made no mistakes. Spread before him was the final resting place known for more than two centuries as Serenity Gardens.

Colby parked in front of the gate and quietly got out of his rental car. The dusk embraced him the moment he abandoned the safety of the Dodge Sebring. He reached back in and retrieved a heavy knapsack from the passenger seat, then closed the door gently. He stepped through a clot of weeds to reach the gate, his eyes mindfully drifting down toward the ground.

He stopped.

They could be hiding anywhere, she had told him.

Those words had resonated through a dozen graveyards, melting like crystals of ice in the sun only to rise again from the stygian springs of twilight. He shuddered at an image of his former partner and lover, mauled and naked and shivering upon the cold earth, her eyes nothing more than black caverns ringed by crusted blood. Her dying words would plague him for the rest of his life, as much as her quest had become his own since they took her from him.

Colby hesitated for only a moment, burying both the warning and the image in his mind. As his fingers wound around the icy gate, a rustling of leaves and the eerie screech of an owl drew his gaze deep into the cemetery. The shadows beyond shuffled menacingly, coiling about ancient and crumbling headstones. Unchecked vegetation grew thick and high and obscured many of the markers. Litter congregated on the ground before the gate, seemingly eager to leave. Years of neglect were painfully apparent.

He suspected there was no one left who had reason to visit these graves; either that or something here kept them from setting foot on the land. He wondered if the Darklings had infected the townsfolk with their grim, apocalyptic nightmares.

The rusted chain that bound the gate remained intact. He might have managed to break the old thing with the tire iron in his trunk, but he did not want to make enough noise to stir the townsfolk. It would be best if they stayed tucked safely beneath their blankets, snug in their homes and far removed from the danger. Colby was lean and fit, and so he easily pulled himself up and over the wall.

# Jackie's Lost Children By Lee Thompson

James threw a rock in the bog and cursed the magic spilling from his mother's aching spirit. Heavy moss choked the trees beneath a blood red sky, and an unsettling feeling worked its way loose inside him. He sat on a rotten stump and moisture soaked through the seat of his pants.

*You need to do this. Nothing proves your love like death.*

The bundle of money in his pocket, rolled and held captive by a rubber band, pressed against his thigh. He hated waiting; hated the feeling that he'd either lost control or never had it to begin with. Wind rattled branches. Dark waters rippled. He scanned for gators and spiders, and thought how stupid it was that he'd come this far.

*You're gonna end up just like your uncle.*

He thought he heard his momma calling, her voice like melted copper bleeding through the oppressive foliage, and humidity.

A branch broke behind him and a dark man sat down next to him and stared out over the swamp. James smelled burning leaves and the preacher's unwashed body. The older man tapped the log with his fingers. "Many people have been baptized to death in those waters."

"My uncle was baptized in there when he joined your old church."

"Bet he wishes he'd not have done it."

James cracked his knuckles.

*Bet he wishes he hadn't done a lot of things.*

The preacher pulled his cloak off the ground and held it in place in his lap. A golden medallion sat against his chest, and his eyes looked wasted and weighed by everyone's sins. They were yellowed, like his fingernails, and shone with a bright intensity that flared with every quiet breath he sucked in over his lips. "How is Emmanuel?"

"Free. That's about all he'll ever be. That's what my momma says."

"You believe that too? Or do you think your mother's ghost is lying?"

"I think everyone's trapped."

The preacher nodded, looked out over the water. "Everyone is trapped. By passions they don't understand and an endless grinding that beats their bones to dust." He looked at James.

"Did he tell you my situation?"

The preacher toyed with the gold medallion, caressing it, drawing out the future and the past and things that never were.

*Our lives are filled with parallel paths that live as ghosts, wanting their own substance, wanting their longing to become experience, felt through the flesh of man.*

James scratched his knee.

"Your interest in this is off-key, like a person trying to learn to play music on a broken piano."

"I think I love her and I'd give her anything. She wants her daughter back. I can understand that."

"It's not because her skin is white and you know your momma's ghost hates her? You know, later you may blame her. You're gonna have to remember it was your choice to scratch at a scab that will never stop bleeding once it's pulled away."

"I know that." His voice came out as hard and unforgiving as the dead stump they sat on. James pulled the money from his pocket and sat it between them.

"I don't need your money." The preacher cleared his throat. "Little lives that never had the chance to live. God didn't want them to. You understand. I know you think if you trade places, you're gonna help her. But you need to think about what *you* need. It's not this."

"What do you want from me?"

# One Last Trist By Samantha Wood

Another stillborn child in a village plagued with stillborn children.

Kiney began to cry, slowly at first and then with real force. She ordered the aging midwife out. She rolled onto her side amidst the stained sheets. Her tears fell rapidly, tears of frustration and despair.

It was her third attempt.

If only they had known the true power of the witch, the unstoppable force of a death curse... but if she had been so powerful after all, why did she restrict her meddling to withered crops and insomnia? Unless, worst thought of all, the witch had not been responsible for any of that.

Kiney wallowed in her depression, fuelled by the same guilt and hopelessness which had struck every childbearing woman in the village for nearly five years. The cemetery between the twin oak trees was filling up with rows of tiny stone markers cut with nothing but surnames and dates.

She thought dully of the weeks of breast pain that would soon follow when her milk came in, and the emotional pain that would descend when it finally dried up.

Then: a faint knocking at her door.

"Leave me be," she groaned.

The knocking persisted and the knob turned.

It was not the wrinkled, jaded face of the midwife or even that of Kiney's husband, but somebody new and unknown to her.

His skin was pale, his lips thin and pressed together beneath a long, aquiline nose. His eyes were hidden beneath the brim of a wide hat. He wore a long coat with bulging pockets, and held his hands out with his palms raised up in supplication.

"Kiney," he whispered. "Do not cry."

She wiped the tears from her face. "Who are you?"

"A friend."

He stepped past the foot of the bed and as he did so she caught a whiff of something sweet. The pale, mysterious intruder exuded a scent of flowers and honeycombs.

He stopped beside the midwife's basket, which had now seen as many cold infants as squalling ones. His fingers, long and pale as his face, pressed down gently on the little bundle. Kiney moved to protest, but the words died in her throat.

"I need a room," he said. "Someplace quiet. Someplace private."

She nodded toward a doorway at the left side of her bed. It was little more than a storage closet for their clothes and personal effects, but the intruder was satisfied. He lifted the midwife's basket tenderly, carried it into the small room, and pulled shut the drapes.

Now the midwife's face appeared around her open door. The old woman's eyes were wide, her expression warring between cynicism and hope. Kiney wondered what the strange man had said to get past her in the hallway, but there was no time to ask.

Beneath the drapes to the storage room a soft blue glow began to peek. Every candle in the room brightened, throwing the midwife's face into harsh relief. The familiar smells of wax and smoke and bloodstained sheets were overridden by those of sugarcane, roses, and fresh rainwater.

A single thunderclap shook the cloudless night.

The candles dimmed. The sweet odour began to dissipate.

And a baby began to wail, awake and hungry at last.

###

The witch's name was Trist. She lived in a cottage on her own, a little place comprised of only a kitchen and a bedroom, which was now overgrown with weeds and only visited by the

curious and foolhardy. She had a long blond braid that reached down to the back of her thighs, and wore men's breeches when she worked in the garden.

She died under a tumult of stones, but they could not stop the pained, furious curse she uttered with her last breath.

"Every child will come to term," she gasped, "but none will take their first breath."

There would be no unmarked grave for this one, oh no. They could not risk a slain deer or rabbit dripping its lifeblood into the soil above her head. And so the men sweated day and night while her corpse lay in the open air, until they had built a rough stone mausoleum in which to secrete her remains. The stones they stacked were rough and mossy, held together with a thick, dripping mortar. They carved no religious symbols into its walls and laid no flowers on its floor.

They prayed that the trouble was over. Nobody mentioned the curse. But within months their pregnant wives began reaching their terms, and the plague began.

###

For years they sought help. Every holy man in the region tried his hand at it and every holy man failed. A death curse, they explained, was powerful magic. There was no telling how long her final life spark would sustain it.

And then this man in the long coat arrived, and refusing all explanation he seemed to undo the magic they'd been told was unassailable.

He only came to babies born deep in the night and he only worked in utmost privacy. Nobody knew where he fled to after working his little miracles or how he knew when each child was being born. The midwife claimed never to have seen him before.

Six-year-old Via, previously the youngest remaining child in the village, was fascinated by the advent of babies. She had never seen the little things alive before and took to following the midwife on her calls. When the miracle man returned one night, she did her best to spy on him through a peephole.

According to Via, the man washed the tiny corpse in glowing water. He lit seven soot-coloured candles. He removed his broad-brimmed hat (though he never turned his face toward the door), and covered his eyes with a red handkerchief. Then he whispered words which raised the hair on the back of her neck, but which for the life of her she could not recall.

"Like another language," she said, "but not human. More like something a snake would say."

The miracle babies were highly coveted, but also somewhat shameful. In their desperation the villagers had accepted the sorcery they once condemned.

And oh, these children were odd. After their first life-affirming wails they grew quiet and calm. They fed without fuss and slept half the day. Their mothers clung to them greedily, at last granted living progeny, but reached their wits' ends teaching them to speak.

The man with the long coat saved more than twenty children over the next six years. Each one grew up thin and pale and utterly distracted.

"Time to eat, darling," a woman might say, and then she would have to repeat herself several times and snap her fingers in front of her child's face before the child would muster enough energy to obey. It wasn't rebelliousness that slowed them down, but weariness. Even after twelve hours of sleep they dragged their feet at everything, breathing deeply and only focusing their attention with great effort.

The children gravitated toward one another during the day, the older ones cradling the younger ones. The village was devoid of the usual sounds of child's play. There was no laughter, no shouting, no crying. Simply a small group huddled close, nearly touching, some with their eyes closed, whispering to one another more than they ever spoke to an adult.

If anyone tried to interrupt them, the children fell silent and might not eat for days.

# Black Maggie's Secret By Robert Walton

"You gonna watch an old black woman die?"

Joaquin Murrieta removed his hat, dabbed at his sweaty brow with a red bandanna, and again looked down at the woman sprawled beside the trail. When he spoke, his voice was mild. "You seem far from death, Senora."

The woman grinned a gap-toothed grin. She said, "Closer than I'd like. My ankle's broke." Her smile widened and one gold tooth sparkled. "My name's Maggie."

###

Maggie's sharp chin poked Joaquin's left shoulder. She spoke next to his ear, "We leave the trail here, Mr. Murrieta." Joaquin nodded and shifted the reins. His patient horse ambled up an embankment.

Joaquin said, "I've taken this trail from the Coast to Jolon many times. I didn't know there was anything up this valley."

"Nothin' much, Mr. Murrieta. Just my cabin."

They followed a faint trace beneath oaks into deep, scented shade of laurels. The canyon narrowed. A stream murmured between mossy boulders. They turned a corner and confronted a box canyon stoppered by a steep cliff. The stream, backlit by late sunshine, plunged down the cliff and spread like a silver veil. A low, weathered shack stood not far from the pool at the falls' foot.

Maggie nodded, "That's my place. Set me down next to the door. Then if you'll cut me a crutch, I'll fix us some supper."

###

Joaquin sighed and set his plate down. Dusk gathered beneath the laurels. He glanced over at Maggie. She was seated in her rocking chair, staring out at the violet sky. He said, "How did you come to live here?"

Maggie thought about the question. At last she said, "Was born a slave in Georgia. Master brought me out here before the war. I run off after Mr. Lincoln set us all free. Spent some years in San Francisco. Come down here to work in the Dutton Hotel over in Jolon. Did that for quite awhile. I got tired of washing pots and clothes. Took up with Henry Lebec and come out here to live. He run mules across these mountains to supply folks on the coast. This cabin was his, a way station. He died several years back, apoplexy. I stayed on."

Joaquin's horse, hobbled in a patch of grass next to the pool, raised its head and knickered. A horse answered from around the bend in the canyon. Joaquin asked, "Expecting visitors?"

Maggie shook her head. "I'm expectin' them, but they ain't visitors."

Joaquin looked at her, waited for her to explain.

"I went down to the Dutton last week for supplies, flour, beans and such. They was following me after I left Jolon to come back up here. Run off Daisy, my mule - she should show up sometime tomorrow - but they didn't catch me. Scramblin' through the brush got my ankle broke, though. I'm too old for that sort of foolishness."

Joaquin asked, "They want something from you?"

Maggie nodded. "They do and I'm right sorry I got you to help me, Mr. Murrieta. This is my trouble, not yours."

Four horsemen rode into the vale. Joaquin pulled his heavy Colt .44 from its holster and laid it across his knees. The four riders approached the cabin and halted a few yards in front of the porch.

The men wore wide-brimmed hats. Rifles rested across their saddle bows. Their faces were in shadow. The one farthest on the right said, "All right, Black Maggie, you come with us."

Joaquin raised his gun, aimed it at the speaker. He said, "You will die. The man next to you, too. If the others can't shoot, they will die as well. Turn your horses and leave."

# My Master's Work By Justin Simpson

People simply are no good. I've seen it too many times. The symbolist perspective of magic studies theodicy, trying to prove the existence of God when there is so much suffering in the world. See, folks have a hard time understanding why bad things happen to good people. They don't realize these people aren't any good and never were. There is a God, oh yes. His name is Norman Plaster, and I am his slave. I work for him every night, seeking those filthy beings and bringing them to justice.

Norman Plaster, the "Necromancy Master" holds a portion of the travelling Dark Tent Circus, moving through unsuspecting towns under the facade of harmless family entertainment. Folks gather by the hundreds every night to see my Master and his loyal subjects. Every night he summons one of us to do his bidding, creeping into the filthy minds of these horrible people and bringing them to a place where they really belong, emancipating them from the chains of humanity and freeing them from their evil former selves. They'll work forevermore under the careful hand of my Master, freeing others who have fallen into the evil realm of human indecency. Filthy humans. I've seen it all.

It was one of Master's other subjects who came for me many years ago. I, like many of the helpless souls before me, was just a mortal human, a mortal human with a filthy past that is. My wife was gorgeous. She had a face I would kill for and the body of a mythological goddess. But I was sick. I felt that I couldn't appreciate her beauty in a reasonable way and I hated myself for it. I wrote her poetry, brought her flowers, bought her the world, but when I'd watch her sleep at night, and her lips puckered as she slumbered, I couldn't help but feel that I wasn't doing enough. Late one night while she slept, I was overwhelmed with the urge to bring these feelings to an end, and I gently slid the shiny blade of a knife my father had given me into her stomach. I softly cupped my hand over her mouth and watched as she drifted into an eternal rest.

Days went by and her corpse still lay in our bed, her body stuck to the sheets by the dried blood that had exited her wound. Still beautiful. Still painfully beautiful. I had to get out of the house. I was in shambles, hadn't bathed for days, and smelled of alcohol and urine. I stumbled down my street, searching for a way out of this mind, and ended up across town. The lights were as bright as could be. The people were many. There was dancing, music, shows and games; a real "family" atmosphere. All too much to take in while in my condition. I stumbled into a tent and found a seat on an old plank beside another gentleman who appeared to be in the same condition as I. Outside and all around the signs read "Norman Plaster, the Necromancy Master brings creatures back from Hell!" and "Witness Illusion! Experience Confusion!"

A man by the name of Plaster came out onto the stage in front of us and immediately began murmuring something. Dressed like some sort of Steampunk fanatic, he opened his jacket, revealing atrocious attire, almost like a wardrobe from the industrial revolution, mechanical in appearance. The words he spoke were sweet like a lullaby, yet terrifying. "From dust with hand I raise this sand," he spoke, almost as if directly to me, "the folks from town have gathered 'round to listen to you sing!"

# Seeds of Apocalypse By Kesh Butler

## So it Begins

It started like a scene from a book or a movie. It seemed there was *life* on Europa, as though the Arthur C. Clark classic had come to life.

I laughed because I knew the truth.

An unmanned probe had been sent to drill below the frozen moon's surface, that of the system's fifth planet Jupiter, the system's largest entity after the sun itself. But the similarities ended there.

The twenty-four hour news feeds said that the submersible equipment had been attacked and potentially devoured by a massive tentacled beast. It almost looked like it had a body from the footage that had been transmitted and cut off in the middle, like you see in the movies.

The ten seconds of video made my chest swell with the pride of a parent. The demons had matured well, feeding off the souls I had provided them.

At first, people reacted with fear, but then they organized and discussed the topic until it was tired, until finally, they cried for the governments of the world to do *something*.

Remarkably, all the politicians came to a consensus within a week. They decided to send a second mission as quickly as they could. The rockets blasted off and began the slow progression towards the mini-system, arriving at the small moon a little over a year after the original transmission; the fastest mission in human history, they claimed. Human curiosity got the better of them, and it made me smile. My plan was unfolding perfectly.

By the time the second capsule had landed, many had forgotten the beast that destroyed the first probe, catching their breaths as the forgotten questions and fears welled up to the surface of the world's collective consciousness. Everyone watched with baited breath as the probe drilled through the alien ice pack. The landing zone was only miles from the first probe's remains.

As the second drill broke the surface, the frozen terrain beneath the device shook, causing the surveyor's internal systems to halt its programming and retreat to a "safe" zone away from the vibrations. At the same time, the orbiter began to spring back to life, focusing its cameras toward the surveyor. The digital feed started rolling, catching footage that could only be described as "phenomenal" by the techs at NASA, and "history making" by the media across the globe.

The debates began, annalists tearing the footage apart, trying to find hidden meaning behind the seven tentacled creature's actions. Some claimed it was the end of the world, while others stated that all it meant was that life did exist elsewhere, it was at least semi-intelligent, and it wasn't going to accept exploration of its territory, period. The question that hung in the air was: *Where had it gone when it jumped off the surface of the planet, and how had it destroyed the orbiter?*

No one had any ideas. No video of the creature had been captured after the probe stopped transmitting. Many across the planet panicked, worried that the creature was heading toward earth to get reparations for invading its home. What *they* did not realize was that I had called forth my four demons of the apocalypse: Leviathan, Bilial, Lucifer, and Satan.

## Three Years Earlier

They gathered around me, twelve of my most trusted followers: six women and six men, all equal in power and fame across the planet - movers and shakers alike.

Several were heads of state and international conglomerates, others were various celebrities, one was a televangelist (a fire and brimstone preacher, he was the true score), and two were writers. All had the eyes and ears of the world on them at all times.

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