

THE GOAT OF ST. ELSTER

by Micah S. Harris

Illustration by Gary Lee



I. The Return of the Barbusquins

The tavern door thrust inward, interrupting the sawing of cutlery and hoisting of tankards. The monk followed, appearing in the doorway like an apparition.

“The Devil has come down!” he proclaimed. “England will fall to those who yet dance upon the heath! Woe unto the people of this isle!”

Frowns were exchanged around the room, then all turned as a group to glare at the panting monk. One did not speak in public in such an incendiary manner, not in this day and time of revolution across the channel.

Only two men reacted differently to the priest’s arrival and announcement. They were strangers to each other, but both recognized something more in the monk’s words than the threat of revolt—a clue to that which had brought them to Caerleon, though for far different reasons.

Both rose and made their way toward the monk, followed by suspicious eyes. One of the men appeared a holy man himself, robed with a hood that lay gathered about his shoulders. When raised, the hood would swathe even his chin, so that, at first glance, it would appear the monk was bearded even though he was clean-shaven. A sheathed broadsword hung at his hip. His forehead was high, accented by a receding hairline. He was tall and gaunt with sunken cheeks, but his eyes, when not contemplating trouble, were no strangers to glints of mirth.

The other man was a Falstaff in girth. He wore a heavy beard of brown hair, which, along with that on his head, was touched with silver. Each took an elbow of the distraught monk and eyed the other to take stock of this unexpected ally.

“Here now, good man,” the heavy man said. “You are obviously upset, but you can’t just burst in shouting doom down upon England, not in this day and age.”

“In the monastery in the wood, by what remains of the Roman road,” the monk said to the heavy man. “The contagion is yet contained there. There is hope, but we must act with haste!”

“You need to calm yourself,” the gaunt monk said. “Come with me to the back, and I will try to help you.”

“As will I,” the heavy man said, and his and the gaunt monk’s eyes met again.

“Who are you, friend?” the gaunt monk asked.

“Quentin Moretus Cassave,” the heavy man said.

“My name is Brom Cromwell,” the gaunt monk said. “Lately of France.”

“Ah! I am come from Belgium. Well met.”

They led the distraught man to a table in the back, where the tall monk had been sitting. The man had calmed down now, and the patrons of the tavern saw that the note of panic he had sounded was apparently a false one. They returned to their eating and drinking, and Brom Cromwell turned his attention to Cassave.

“I noticed you earlier,” he said as the three were seating themselves, and pointed at a tusked boar head mounted on the tavern wall. “You were carefully studying the work of the tanner on that boar’s head with the appreciation of a connoisseur.”

“Hmmpf. The hog is close to a species once well esteemed in these parts by the Celts as the form of their god Moccus. I wanted to see that his memory was well-attended.”

“And how did you find it?”

“The jowls sag due to inferior stuffing of cloth or sawdust or cotton. The tanner displayed no understanding of the boar’s underlying anatomy or the correct application of underwire. Further, his approach to his subject is too cold, too mechanical.” Cassave shook his head and winced. “That boar exhibits no personality whatsoever! That fool tanner managed to labor under both the fallacies of atomism and the transubstantiation of matter at the same time. It’s as though he’s never even read Paul Belon’s text from 1555... What?”

The corners of Brom’s mouth were turned up, touching his gently rutted cheeks, and the glint of mirth was now in his vivid blue eyes. He pointed the fingers of his folded hands at Cassave:

“You, sir, are one most erudite in the craft of tanning the hog.”

“I noticed you earlier as well,” Cassave said. He pointed at the rosary with a crucifix that was wrapped around Brom’s wrist. “You appeared at your vespers... or perhaps you just kept falling asleep.”

“Oh, no, no. I was making a mental picture of the inside of the tavern. Testing my memory.”

“And how did you find it?”

Brom tapped his forehead and grinned. “Perfect recall. Mind still like a steel trap.” He turned to the young monk. “Now, good fellow,” Brom said. “You know who we are, but who are you? What has happened in your monastery?”

“His monastery?” Cassave asked. “I thought you had recognized one of your own order.”

“Not mine. I am of the Barbusquin Order of the Cistercians.”

Cassave cocked his head. “That Order is a myth.”

“So I have heard,” Brom said and grinned.

“Next you’ll be saying that you have truck with the Eldila.”

Brom grinned again. “Only on occasion,” he said.

“The Revolution seems intent on making a myth of your Order if it wasn’t one before.”

“The Reign of Terror is determined to wipe out of *all* forms of Christianity—such is the extent of its madness. You know of the atrocities of the Vendée?”

“Certainly—but *madness*?” Cassave said. “The Revolutionaries are men of reason, and it is reason’s time! Surely, you must acknowledge that your corrupted Christian faith has failed in achieving the universal goals they promote: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*?”

“*Ou la mort*,” Brom said. “That is the last part of their slogan. Do not let the tail fall off. Now, sir,” he addressed the distraught monk, “what has happened at your monastery that has sent you fleeing from it?”

“They have joined the dance on the heath,” the monk said.

“All these histrionics over your fellow monks taking up a reel?” Cassave asked.

The monk turned and grasped Cassave’s forearm. “Understand me: they dance to the piping on the heath.”

Both men leaned into the monk. “Whose piping?” Cassave asked. “Could it be Pan’s perhaps?”

At this question, Brom cocked his head, then detached the monk’s hand from Cassave, causing the monk to turn to face him. “You need to start from the beginning, my friend, and calmly, please, if I am to know how to help you.”

Staring into Brom’s eyes, the monk began to calm. “Yes,” he said. “It’s just—what I have seen—I cannot say it, but indirectly.”

“So, there is no one actually *dancing on the heath*, then?” Cassave asked, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. “No Pan pipes? No... Pan?”

“I must speak of these things in a figure, sir,” the monk said. “I must—to describe it literally—such words on my lips would be an affront to God!”

“From the beginning then,” Brom said.

II. *The Curse of Old Lady Netty Gat*

“I am called Frater John, and I have lived in the monastery since a lad of twelve, having taken my vows and withdrawn into the community which has been my world now for nearly ten years. My order is that of Saint Elster, one given to prayer and fasting. We farm our land, raise our own livestock, make our own clothing... we are an island of righteousness in the fallen world that surrounds us. But now, the serpent has been loosed and felled our paradise as well...”

“You speak in figures,” Cassave said. “Who do you mean by *the serpent*? Pan?”

“We knew him’er as Old Lady Netty Gat.”

Cassave frowned. “*Lady Netty Gat*?”

“Old Lady Gat, sir. That be right.”

Brom and Cassave looked at each other for a silent moment. Then Brom grinned. “*Gat* is old English for goat—particularly the female goat.”

“But you said you knew *him’er* as Old Lady Gat,” Cassave said. “What do you mean by *him’er*?”

“Yes. Old Lady Netty Gat be *both*, sir.”

“Hermaphrodites are not uncommon among bred goats,” Brom said.

“You are one most erudite in the lore of goats, sir,” Cassave said.

Brom smiled again and shrugged. “Our order, too, was self-sufficient as that of Elster. We also farmed and raised our own livestock here in England, though my interests lay more in the Cistercian furnaces we were also developing. The industrial revolution

would have arrived much sooner than it has, had not Henry taken our monasteries and lands.”

“From the tone in your voice, you sound as you were there, sir,” Cassave said with a tilt of his head.

Brom Cromwell’s blue eyes glinted. “I am older than I look, I will admit.”

“No man bred Old Lady Gat,” Frater John said. “She roamed freely to and fro since the Earth were young, until Saint Elster pinned her on our grounds, and there she remains...” Here, Frater John stared into space, his face contorting. “...Unto that wretched day.”

“You have yet to tell us what exactly has overtaken your monastery,” Cassave said. “You spoke of the old Roman road before. Now, I have heard that it led to an ancient temple of Pan in pagan times. Is your monastery built near that site?”

“Our monastery sets upon its foundations, sir,” Frater John said.

Cassave slapped both palms down on his heavy thighs and smiled. “Ha! I knew it! Something older than Christ has risen up, and Pan has taken his revenge on Christ’s disciples! That is the cause of what distresses you, eh?”

“I have spoken of those things as I only can, sir, in a fig...”

“In a figure, yes, we know,” Cassave said, crossing his arms. “Now, this *Netty Gat*—when she is in her male phase—she is spoke of as Pan, yes?”

“Baphomet-Sammael be his’er’s proper name, sir...”

Cassave leaned forward. “*Sammael*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Baphomet is a satyr.” He leaned back in his chair and began tugging his lower lip, speaking in a low tone to himself. “Baphomet could have been how the Templars knew Pan in transposition from Greek to Christian mythos, as the creature adapted to survive...” He looked up to see Frater John and Brom staring at him. “Well,” he said and focused on Frater John, “get on with your tale, man.”

“You see, *Netty Gat* be kept pinned so that heshee has little room for exercise. Heshee is fed only the poorest of grains, for heshee must be kept in a weakened state in this yet-naughty world. Heshee is our sacred charge since Saint Elster delivered him’er to us.

“But the monk before his’er last keeper—Father Beaumont—who was of advanced age, who had kept vigil three score years, took an

apprentice. This young man had attended seminary in Geneva. Young Charles Wiseman we called him—not because we thought him wise, but he thought himself so.

“Young Charles held that the fashion among learned men was now that our holy scriptures were but tales and that our faith stood only on much superstition that was best put away. For the coming world was a new place and our faith must change were it to continue on.”

“I have found that it is the nature of the gods to dwindle as their worshippers become enlightened and turn away from them,” Cassave said.

“So Old Lady Gat’s keeper passed away and young Charles took charge,” John said. “He had long felt much pity for the goat. You could count its ribs and its hip bones jutted out. Charles wondered that it could still walk, and that heshee yet lived for such longtime of malnourishment at our order’s hands. But Netty Gat found a friend in young Charles, who thought also to grant us the boon of enlightenment.

“Then it came to pass that we sat down to feast at Michaelmass. And we were served the fruits of our labor, and though we enjoyed all the food and beverage of our repast, nothing was so savory as the dairy milk. The very richness of cream was in its taste, yet it flowed with the most proper consistency of milk at its most fresh, full savory. And so cool as though it had been chilled in a brook. The brotherhood partook and were well satisfied.

“Yet, from the first taste, unnatural as a fairy broth it seemed to me, with an under taste that was bitter. If only the others had ceased to partake at that moment as did I... Instead, they freely chose to ignore such temperance that would staunch their pleasure. So, they did drink on until well sated.

“Then we heard the tintinnabulation of the bell...

“Mugs were halted when young Charles entered the mead hall, leading on a leash Old Lady Netty Gat, the bell about his’er neck.

“Fleshy heshee was now, and pranced in on that leash with vigor. And from his’er swollen rows of dugs still dripped hot milk, that hissed when it struck the cold stone floor.

“I tell you, that heshee-goat surveyed us with a sullen triumph in its yellow eyes. Young Charles Wiseman was all a-grin. ‘My brethren, you have drunk well, I see, of that milk which I substituted for that of

our cows. Behold this goat: from this creature whom I have nursed back to health came the milk you have enjoyed. See you not now that this poor thing which you have feared some demon is but a goat as any other? Come, now, and drink more, for her teats perpetually well with this frothy goodness.’

“Then Netty Gat broke loose from his’er lease. And a voice came from the goat, saying:

“I, Baphomet, have risen again, and you, my warders, shall serve me, some as my new Knights Templar. These shall become undead and have their eyes plucked out, so that they might not find their way from Hell, and my hold on them will be eternal. Now is Saint Elser’s order defiled. Now is my revenge complete.”

“Young Charles Wiseman’s eyes widened. He stepped back, saying, ‘You have all played me a trick, and this goat is trained. One of you can throw his voice! You mean to disabuse me of my reason, but I will not be made mad as the lot of you!’

“Old Lady Netty Gat turned upon young Charles, saying, *Thy usefulness be at an end!* And heshee charged Charles, shoving him against the wall with his’er horns, and pressed him passingly hard so that we heard his bones crack, and blood did gush from divers places until he was dead.

“Then I fled, and no one did follow. I hid in the forest for long time, a full year, praying, fasting and meditating before I came back to the village nearest our monastery. I disguised myself so that my presence might not become known to the monks. But I soon discovered ’twas good I was not known to the villagers.

“I inquired if anyone had seen the monks of Saint Elster of late, and no one would answer. Finally, one villager said, ‘I can tell you are not of this province, young sir, for otherwise you would know that the monks of Saint Elster have become debauched. They have forsaken our Lord, and replaced him with their tutelary: Baphomet-Sammael, deceiver, seducer, that crafty one of ancient Edom.’

“‘How do you know this?’ I asked.

“‘They have seduced our good girls away from their Christian homes, luring them with dainties, pretty dresses, and introductions to young men who bring them to ruin. Aye, and the monks do also participate in their ruin. The girls return with swelling wombs and no

husbands. Their parents will not then own them. Many drown themselves with the child they cannot feed.'

"Thanking the man, I went to see if it be true what they had said. I did not see Old Lady Netty Gat, but I beheld my brethren as they... they..."

"They what?" Cassave said.

"They joined the dance upon the heath, sir."

Cassave gave a heavy sigh. "You must speak of these things in a figure."

"Yes, sir. I must, sir."

"Then we must see for ourselves," Brom said with a smile at Frater John.

Taking a small bag from within his robe, he pinched a couple of coins and dropped them to the table. He then pushed his chair away from the table and rose.

"I will come with you," Cassave said. "My curiosity has been aroused, as you can well understand, Brother Cromwell."

Brom looked sidelong at Cassave. "The encounter that awaits us at the end of this journey is not one for the idly curious. I would, suggest, rather, that you seek out a fancy show, Cassave."

Cassave frowned. "My curiosity is not that of the idle. I am a scientist, sir. The opportunity to place under rational observation something uncanny, a thing otherwise lost in the ancient past is one I can scarcely pass by. Hold at the door, both of you, and let me collect my things, settle up with the barkeep, and we will go see this thing together."

Brom shrugged. "As you will, then. But, have you faith, man?"

The heels of his hands pressing down on the table as he pushed himself up from his chair, Cassave said, "I have reason."

"As do I," Brom said. "But faith in God and His Christ is necessary as well."

Cassave's eyes gleamed with a cold light, and he raised his chin and sniffed. "Tell that to your fellow Christians who are faced with either being driven out of France or executed because of their belief. See how many of those have learned that faith is a thing that one can do without when reason rules."

From the tavern's door, Boor watched Cassave with narrow eyes as the portly man readied himself for the journey. He noted Cassave

paused for a last, brief studied glance at the mounted boar's head. Brom closed his eyes, committing this tableau to memory. Seeing Cassave was now heading their way, Brom turned and exited the tavern.

III. Along the Ancient Road

The moon was the curved sliver of a nail paring when Brom, Cassave, and John began their trek along the "road" that was nothing more than a wide, rough dirt path, rutted by the turning of countless wagon wheels, with loose stones underfoot and sparse grass growing in clumps.

The night sky was greedy with its stars; only a few, distant lanterns shown here and there, lit against the infinitely ongoing dark.

"*So shines a good deed in a naughty world,*" Brom said.

"And, as with the stars, so shall good deeds and their effect be ultimately snuffed out by the darkness," Cassave said. "No one will even remember, nor care, that they were ever performed. And those who received some temporary succor by another's efforts on their behalf will fall prey eventually to something they cannot escape. What is the point, then? Everything fades and dies. Even, as I said, the gods."

Brom nodded. "Pagan gods, yes. Their point of reference makes it inevitable. But Jesus Christ is *the same yesterday, today, and forever*. Neither you or I will be lost to the progression of ages, as you say, Cassave, *for God is not a God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto him.*"

"Are you so important, then?" Cassave said, his tone sharp. "Do you think yourself—aye, your entire world—the center of the universe? You seem a learned man; has not modern science disabused you of this vain notion?"

"The Aristotelian-Ptolemaic idea is anything but vain. In Aristotle and Ptolemy's system, the *center* is understood as *bottom*. Earth's place is far from exalted." He smiled and clasped Cassave's shoulder. "We are a sunk hole for the universe's lower elements, my friend. And, as for man being at the center of all things, it is your

French rebels who promote this anthropocentric view, not the clergy. The Revolutionaries' problem is not that the Christian world view has been *man-centric* but *God-centric*."

"Which god is it that you speak of?" Cassave asked, then raised his palm before Brom could speak. "No, it matters not. Every divinity is even less significant than its followers, for, as I said, they fade away when humanity moves forward. It is true of the pagan's gods; why should it not be true of the Palestinian tutelary, Yahweh?"

"Yahweh of the Hebrews was no tutelary, no entity bound to particular place, but one who possessed Heaven as his throne and Earth as his footstool. As it is written, *the God who made the Heavens does not dwell in a temple made by men*. Recall that graven images of Yahweh in earthly form were forbidden by Moses' law. But the pagans either made their gods in their own image, or the images of nature about them. Yes, civilizations fade, and the earth and heavens will pass away. Therefore, the pagan gods had a finite reference point. But as for the Christ—*En Arche ein ho Logos*."

"*In the beginning was the Word*? Then the Word also has a finite reference point though it goes back to the very beginning," Cassave said and grinned.

Brom smiled and raised his finger. "Your Greek is rusty, my friend. Another option for an English translation, one arguably more precise, is: *When all things began, the Word already was*."

"Very well. But within their limits, the pagan gods are most resilient. They shall return."

"Without followers? You said their time had passed because no one believes in them any longer."

Cassave smiled. "Oh, they will have new followers. Followers who do not realize they are keeping the old gods alive."

Frater John, who was walking ahead, suddenly realized that he was trudging on alone. He looked back to see Cassave and Brom leaning against what was left of a medieval wall along the road. He stopped and slowly began walking back to his fellow travelers.

"Friends, we must not pause if we wish to have cover of darkness when we reach Saint Elster," Frater John said.

The three men resumed their journey and soon began to notice Roman bricks scattered loosely over the path. Then they reached a spot where the ancient brick road remained intact.

"Ah, we are close, now," Frater John said. "The monastery be less than a mile away." He looked up at the sliver moon, still high in the western sky. "We should still have sufficient darkness to cover us when we arrive. There, you will observe, my friends, those things that the monks dare do only in the night. That which I can only speak of in a figure..."

"Yes. The *dance upon the heath*," Brom said and sighed. "We know."

Soon, they heard a faint, discordant noise, as though the wind blew through massive organ pipes. As they drew closer, the sound became throbbing bourdon notes before resolving into something resembling a Gregorian chant, but one in which the austere, sober quality became threatening, like the humming of a giant hornet.

No wonder, then, that all three came to a stop. Even Cassave, who had been almost giddy at the prospect of meeting something pagan and other-worldly, , became hesitant, staring straight ahead, and tugging on his lower lip.

"Let us move on," Brom said. "But stealthily from hereon. Frater John, we should remove ourselves from the road in our approach. Is there a less visible route?"

"Through the woods to our right be a rough path, with little to no clearing. The darkness is deeper under the boughs, the way uneven, which may cause a tumble. No one will be using it at night."

"Then that is the route I say we take. What say you, Cassave?"

"I like not my girth and an uneven trek. Especially through a dark wood. Go that way if you will, but I shall keep to the old Roman road. I do not think anyone will be watching it. Why should they? From what Frater John says, the nearby villagers fear the monks of Elster, so the monks cannot expect a threat from them. The sounds of their occult ceremonies cover any noise I might make and this night sky grants enough darkness to conceal my approach as well. Will you not reconsider, my friends? By going through the woods in the dark, you also risk taking a fall."

"What say you, Frater John?" Brom asked. "You know best the lay of the land."

"There is still an element of risk of discovery in Cassave's plan. Through the forest, there is none."

"Then I shall take the woodland path," Brom said.

“And I will keep to the road,” said Cassave.

“I will guide you, Brother Brom,” John said.

“But we should regroup upon arrival. Frater John, where will we come out of the woods?”

“At the rear of the monastery proper, sir, near our cemetery in the woods.”

“Cassave, meet us there.”

Cassave nodded with a grunt. Brom and John quickly scrambled down the dirt embankment atop which the Roman road was laid. Then they entered the woods and, immediately, it was as though the night had swallowed them.

Cassave looked after them, grunted again, then began to make his way down the road.

Brom and John pushed their way through low-hanging branches and tore free of undergrowth that momentarily snared their feet. Occasionally, briars and brambles seemed to leap out at them, affixing themselves to both flesh and clothing, causing Brom and John to pause and pluck themselves free.

They now pushed through the low hanging vines and tender low branches of the trees and into the monastery’s graveyard. The woods had reclaimed the cemetery, grown up so much that it appeared the older graves had been laid down within the forest without disturbing the trees.

Frater John’s eyes brimmed as he surveyed the new graves, and his throat was thick when he spoke.

“There are friends here who have passed on since you left?” Brom said, placing his hand on the young monk’s shoulder.

John nodded. “I recognize here the names of my brothers—these were all so young. And died within a month of each other soon after my departure. Did a pestilence sweep through the monastery?”

“Your flight may have saved your life,” Brom said.

Frater John leaned in closer to one of his friends’ headstones. His eyes widened. “No,” he said, and quickly began inspecting two others. “Heshee has made good his’er threat!”

“What do you mean?” Brom said.

“Old Lady Netty Gat, sir! Look!” He pointed at a word chiseled into the gravestones he had examined: “*Abraxas*.”

“The Knights Templar’ occult word of power,” Brom said.

“Netty Gat said heshee would raise up her new knights from our order,” John said. “Heshee has done it!”

“Easy, man,” Brom said. “If they are interred, they are beyond that creature’s power now.”

“No! Heshee said she’d put out their eyes so they’d never find their way out of Hell!”

“Only God has the power to condemn to Hell, lad. Be at ease.”

But though he spoke thus to calm Frater John, his hand was at his sword hilt, for the Templars’ word of power on those gravestones troubled him.

“Listen,” Brom said and paused. Then: “How long has there been no singing from the monastery?”

“I know not, sir ” John said. “I ceased to pay attention as my ear became accustomed to it.”

From the direction of the monastery came the piercing crowing of a cock under darkness. Brom drew his broadsword from its sheath. “Something is happening; something unnatural. Stay close to me, John.”

A near-distant rumbling was moving closer. Then the ground beneath the men’s boots was trembling; full-on tremors followed as thundering from the ground below grew louder, the shaking of the land sending them reeling...

Robed and hooded undead men on horseback erupted from the three recently dug graves, spewing clods of earth skyward that rained down and pelted Brom and John as they dropped back.

The Knights Templar had risen.

IV. The Blind Dead Strike!

The undead Templar Knights rapidly encroached on Brom and Frater John. Their equally undead horses reared, forelegs kicking, one hoof striking Brom’s forehead. He stumbled backward, and Frater John, arms raised and waving, thrust himself between Brom and the hooded dead man on horseback. The Templar Knight reared his horse again and pummeled John’s chest with its fore hooves. He fell to the

ground. The dead man reared the horse once more, this time to come down on John and trample him to death...

Brom Cromwell ran forward, and, with a sweep of his broadsword, sliced off one of the horse's forelegs at the first joint. The horse was dead as its rider, but it still required four legs to stand up. And it could feel pain. With a shriek, it toppled over, sending its rider tumbling over the ground.

Now the two remaining Knights Templar inched forward on horseback toward Brom. He backed away, aware that the Knight Templar he had felled was already rising behind him. The hollow sockets of the still horse-mounted knights tilted down unseeingly at him. Brom grinned.

They put your eyes out, so that you could not find your way out of Hell. You have to hone in on sound like those blind hopping vampires that plagued the Shanhai Pass back in 1699—those Jiangshi!

Bending down, he grabbed up a large, hard dirt clod that had been flung out of the grave when the Knights rose. He threw it beyond the cemetery and into the surrounding forest where it beat the undergrowth before coming to a stop.

The blind knights on horseback turned their horses and charged after it. Then as Brom snapped a twig under his boot, and the Templar Knight on foot behind him charged. Brom whirled about, swinging his broadsword and halting his enemy's blade mid-arc. The Templar Knight withdrew his weapon, but before he could attack again, Brom was on top of him. He hacked down hard, unrelenting, again, again, *again*, beating back the dead man whom he allowed no moment to raise and regain mastery of his weapon.

Then he heard behind him the trampling of hooves: the other two knights were returning, honing in on the sound of battle. Seizing an opening, he sliced off his opponent's sword hand. The Templar Knight shrieked and withdrew. Before his enemy's weapon could hit the ground, Brom snatched it out of the air and turned to face the two Knights Templar on horseback just as they reached him.

A sword in each hand, he met both blades as they dropped, immediately halting their descent. But now he was now on the defensive, and his enemies on horseback presented him with less than an even playing field.

Riding abreast, they were driving him back. He could not pause to look back to see where they were herding him. Then a gray hand lashed out from behind, grabbing one of his wrists. The undead Templar Knight he had disarmed had returned for his sword.

Struggling with his assailant, Brom could no longer effectively defend himself against the two on horseback. A slash to his arm from above, and the reflex from pain caused him to loosen his grip on the revenant's sword. The Templar Knight wrested it away.

From its decayed throat something croaked out that the two on horseback recognized as an order. They drew back. Bent, heaving from exertion, Brom faced the undead knight.

"I'm glad you were right-handed," he said beneath his breath.

The Templar Knight raised his sword in his left hand, then twirled it about adroitly before bringing it to a stop pointed straight at Brom.

"Ambidextrius," he sighed. "Even in death. Just lovely. Of all your faculties to have retained..." He sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward. "Why, oh Lord, why?"

Taking a deep breath, Brom raised his broad sword over his shoulder, then drove himself forward.

Swords clashed, slashed, thrust—with no wound dealt on either side. But now Brom was again the one driving back, manipulating the Templar knight to where an old headstone had almost sunken entirely into the earth over the decades, leaving only six inches still above ground.

The revenant's heel hooked on the raised tombstone...

...and toppled backward.

Brom's sword swung out, severing the Templar Knight's head in the second the undead creature hung in the air. The remnant's body folded, and the head struck the ground, rolling until it came to rest against another tombstone.

"Brom! Beware!" Frater John cried out, and, in the next moment, Brom felt the dart stinging his sword arm.

Immediately, he knew the dart's tip had been coated in an apothecary's preparation. His arm quickly numbed and his sword dropped from torpid fingers to the ground.

The two on horseback were now rushing Brom, ignoring John who was on his knees..

Rising, John trained his eyes on the revenants. Brom, seeing the boy apparently planning to tackle the undead from behind, shouted, “Frater John! Run! You can’t help me now! Watch and wait for an opportune time!”

John hesitated, then turned and dashed into the forest. Brom could hear him crashing through the woods.

Good. If they pursue him, they’ll have to do so on foot and lose the advantages of horseback.

Brom snatched up his sword with his hand which still retained feeling; he was not left-handed, so his swipes were awkward and easily outmaneuvered. The Templars repeatedly beat down on him with the butts of their swords’ handles. He felt his own sword tumbling from his failing grip as the blows to the head succeeded in stealing his consciousness.

V. A Prisoner Underground

His eyes opened first on a lit candelabrum of six candles, setting on a crudely hewn wooden table. The candles were the only source of light in the room. Then Cassave’s full face with its bearded jowls appeared beside the candelabrum.

“My friend, you are awake at last!” Cassave said. “Tell me: where is Frater John? Have they captured him as well?”

Brom’s brow wrinkled and his eyes narrowed. “Where are we?”

“Imprisoned in the monastery cellar, I’m afraid.”

“So you have no idea where John is.” Cassave shrugged. “He may be imprisoned elsewhere. I suppose it makes sense that they would deal with John separately. Perhaps give him an opportunity to rejoin the order. He is one of their own after all.” He paused, stared ahead and tugged his lower lip. “Unless...” he turned back to Brom. “...did he escape?”

“Perhaps...” Brom said. “We parted ways, I was beaten unconscious by these undead Templar knights who attacked us, and have no idea of what happened to him next.”

He felt his hip, found both his sword and its sheathe gone. He sighed. *No real surprise there.*

“But what is the plan? There is always a plan, isn’t there, in these type of situations? With you adventuring types?”

Brom shrugged, rolled the shoulder of his wounded arm, and massaged it with his other hand, finding the numbing was all but gone. “If there is, it is entirely of his invention.”

Cassave nodded, licked his lips, and stared ahead into space again. “So he may still be out there, making ready to effect a rescue, armed with nothing but his wits...”

“*Angels and ministers of grace preserve us,*” Brom said as he continued to rub his arm. Then he rose, pleased to find himself steady on his feet.

Cassave burst out into laughter and wagged a forefinger at Brom. “Very good, my friend. If he is our only chance, we are as good as dead, eh?”

Brom smiled without mirth and nodded.

“Or, at least, *you* are.”

Brom cocked his head. “What did you say?”

Cassave reached out and patted Brom’s shoulder. “I am saying you were right. I should not have taken the Roman road. I was taken before I reached the monastery. My very life was in danger... so, I had to make a deal.”

Brom crossed his arms. “Which involved telling these evil monks that I and their former frater were coming via the less traveled route.”

“I had no idea they would call up their blind dead to deal with you. They sound like horrible, horrible things.”

Brom pointed. “The two who did me in are right behind you in the doorway.”

Cassave glanced over his shoulder. “Oh. So they are.”

“They’re with you, aren’t they?”

Cassave tucked his head and grinned, flickering flame gleaming in his eyes. “I’ve formed a new alliance since you last saw me, yes.”

“I thought as much, when you made no remark on my first mention of these undead knights. You don’t have Frater John, do you? You were feeling me out for information earlier by playing my fellow captive.”

“We shall have him, soon, I think, with or without your aid. As you said, he does not come across as the most competent rescuer. And his face is well known here.”

“You should look to yourself, my friend. Why do you ally yourself with beings whose existence is an affront to God?”

“God was always your concern, my friend, not mine.”

“Yes, you were always concerned with *gods*—plural.”

“Oh, dear Brom, you do not know the half of it.”

Arms still crossed, Brom smiled. “Well, you are so enamored of the Enlightenment, why not enlighten me?”

Cassave smiled back. “I believe I shall. You, I think, shall appreciate what I have accomplished. I do not say, though, that you shall like it.”

VI. Cassave’s Great Experiment

“I am a very old man,” Cassave said, then nodded at Brom, “as you insinuate you are as well. And, as you also say, we are both younger than we look. In my time, I have learned much, and ridden the crest of each new wave of knowledge, from medieval alchemy to that mix of magic and science that was the Renaissance, to the rise of the preeminence of reason in the present age. Each yielded its own peculiar aspect needed to resolve the great mystery. Thus I became a thaumaturge, great in power. And my mastering of these disciplines, various and sundry, led to my ability to find and resuscitate the dwindled gods of pagan days.

“I see the doubt in your eyes, but I tell you it is true. Their hour now is, in the enlightened new age that opens before us. And will they find worshippers? I tell you, they shall in the post-Christian age.”

Brom’s tone was sardonic: “The future you predict sounds more like the *pre-Christian* age.”

“The *future*? My friend, it has *already* begun. The Enlightenment is here! I think that is how I was able to find the goddess that I did, found her spread as dew on a green field. She was in a vineyard in Marseille, where the tilling of the soil had uncovered her fallen idol, with its lion’s head and woman’s body. This is the Phoenician’s Tanit-Astarte, their representation of the goddess first known to men as Ishtar. I had to cut the image free from the vines that choked it to the ground. And when I had ripped away the last vine that grasped the

idol, I heard a gasp, and seeking out its source, found nearby the essence of the forsaken goddess herself, deflated, and stretched thin along the ground.

“Through my knowledge of alchemical sciences as well as sorcery, I was able to rescue her, collecting what was left of her essence in a stitched-skin of a woman suit. This suit I was able to transport easily, as it folded most flatly...”

Brom Cromwell started. “What?” When he saw that Cassave’s expression was unyielding, he grimaced.

Cassave chuckled. “I see the distaste in your expression. But the obtaining of these skins is no different than the efforts of those who obtain corpses to increase our knowledge of the human body. Their work is for the betterment of humanity, and my own shall surpass theirs when I am done. Really, Brother Brom, it’s not as though those whose skins we employed had any further use for them.”

“We?”

“My kinsman Philarète is my collaborator. He has a gift for tanning and animal preservation. Under his tutorage, I developed my own skills in the craft. The skin he had prepared, I had alchemically treated to receive the essence of the goddess. I held her in that vineyard, newly reborn in my arms, watching her eyes open and blink uncertainly until they focused on me.

“I was a stranger, but all was strange to her, so she welcomed my concern and accepted my aid. It became clear that she had no memory of who she was—*what* she was. Although... there were times I would see her gazing into space with a haughty expression, as though recalling her superior position among humankind, seeing as one the crowds that reached back through the ages, a forest of peoples stretching beyond the horizon, with arms like uplifting boughs holding the bloodied babes, birthed and slain in her honor.

“But when those moments passed, she was again a lost woman. Later, I told her that her name was Etienne de Lys, and she was much relieved when I found distant relatives of hers in France who were eager to take her in. Of course, they were in truth *my* relatives, childless ones, to whom I delivered the divine waif. They were very wealthy, and the form which we had prepared for her was comely, so she soon moved about in the aristocratic circles in Paris.

"I kept up with her progress, waiting for some sign that the goddess had emerged. I found none. Rather, she pursued a most mundane path. She married one Pierre de Saint-Ange, a much older man. By this time, she had become a confidante of the young women with whom she consorted. Thus, I assumed her life was chiefly of talk of clothes, and shoes, and whoever's latest tryst.

"Despite this lack of encouragement, I did take opportunity to personally reacquaint myself with my foundling when business brought me to Paris. Under pretense of wishing to surprise my 'niece,' I happened to come upon her unawares, and purposed to seize the opportunity to take a frank account of her.

"I found the new Madame de Saint-Ange in confidence with a young woman to whom she referred as 'Julianne.' Julianne was on her knees before Etienne, her head nestled in her lap. I watched as Etienne gently hooked Julianne's chin and raised her head to meet her eyes.

" 'Do not over distress yourself, my dear. Stop it! It would only spoil your figure, and its removal is no more than the paring of a nail, or the cutting of your hair. Are you mistress of your head but not your body? The difference is arbitrary. *All* is arbitrary. Do not fear infanticide—it is an imaginary crime, no different than evacuating any other matter from our bodies.'

" 'But my dear Madame de Saint-Ange,' Julianne said, "perhaps I have tarried too long. Perhaps it is already recognizable as a baby.'

"My Etienne shook her head. 'Were your child in your arms, the right to destroy it would be yours. It is a privilege secure in nature. Have you not observed a runt of a litter is denied its mothers' milk that the more robust spawn should survive? How it is most natural that maternal instinct should be suspended when there is need?'

"I saw Julianne's tear-smeared face as she looked my way, staring into space. 'I would rather rescue and nurse the abandoned runt.'

" 'Then do it!' Etienne said, grabbing her young friend's head between her hands, turning her face to her, then releasing Juliette's head with a shove. 'Save the bitch's whelp and bring the pup for my blessing, but never tell me again that you are with child unless it is to seek remedy for this misfortune as you do now! Otherwise, I tell you, Julianne, I will cease to be your friend at the moment you conceive!'

"I would not have thought that the adamant, fierce rancor I witnessed in Etienne's voice and face were possible in a human being. I was much encouraged.

"I watched as Julianne produced a handkerchief to wipe her face as she nodded. 'Good,' Etienne said, taking a card from her person and passing it to her young friend. 'Show this to the man at the door at the back of the Rue Morgue.'

"Julianne regarded the card. 'What means this triangle with the straight line across the apex and the circle atop the line?' she asked.

" 'The man at the door will know. That is all you need know to gain you entrée into the Tophet. Do not worry, dear. I will join you there. And in a week or so, we shall have a ladies' day at the baths, eh? We will both have applied a fashionable depilatory plaster. Your lover will be much pleased.'

"The Tophet! I heard her say the Tophet! And what she described on the card was the ancient sigil of Tanit—her own sign! I was well satisfied without need to approach my former 'ward.' I knew then all that I needed to. I knew triumph! I had seen the goddess returned in this present age, in all her terrible, austere beauty of blood, mystery and glory! And so I have been encouraged to press on to achieve an even greater incarnation!"

Brom frowned. "Before we met in the tavern, you were already seeking this monastery, were you not? You knew it was built where Pan's temple once stood. You hoped to find here a tangible manifestation of Pan himself—or Baphomet-Sammael, as it were. To turn him loose upon the world as you did Tanit-Astarte." He unknitted his brow, smiled, and with his hands behind his back, stepped toward Cassave, leaned in over his shoulder and said in his ear, "You know that is completely unacceptable."

"Do you think so?" Cassave said, and returned the smile as Brom leaned back.

"Oh, yes. You see, I also was seeking this monastery before we met. I had heard of its resident satyr and came with intent to destroy it. To seek out these pagan things that linger yet and plague Christianity, *that* is the express mission of a Barbusquin."

"Hmmm," Cassave said, then made an ostentatious survey of their surroundings. "But you'll admit, you are in no position to frustrate my endeavors."

"I am bound," Brom said. "But God is not bound."

"Your Yahweh has no power here! At most, he is a mere, local tutelary of Palestine."

"Did you not hear young John say that the villager to whom he spoke identified Baphomet-Sammael as the tutelary of ancient Edom? So he was. But Edom crumbled into history, and, by your own belief, Baphomet-Sammael crumbled with it. More, this is the isle of Britain, so, if it could survive, how does the tutelary of Edom come to have power here?"

"Baphomet-Sammael, that great spirit, came out of the desert to the shores of the Tiber, and thus gave its patronage and power to Rome," Cassave said. "The Greeks recognized him as their Pan, and so he became known as he lived and grew large with Rome's dominion. So Pan came to Britain. So here he has also revived. And now the hour has now come for Pan to walk among men clothed in human flesh!"

Brom cocked his head and regarded Cassave with eyes narrowed. "You are *not* going to provide another pagan creature with human skin," he said.

Cassave smiled. "Correct, Brother Brom: *you* are going to provide another pagan creature with human skin."

VI. A Murderous Monk with Knives

Brom was left alone, locked in the cellar, to contemplate his coming flaying. With effort he turned his thoughts from the horrific fate. Instead, he took stock of his surroundings. The basement room was fairly large, with wine barrels stacked on their sides, half-way to the ceiling along the wall to his left. A lit, bright candelabrum, the only source of light in the room, remained at the center of the long table. There, he supposed, was where he would be stretched out.

Elsewhere, the room was cluttered with cast off furniture and abandoned décor. He found a crucifix, discarded no doubt by one of the reprobate monks of Elster, picked it up and dusted it off.

"Ah, Lord Jesus," he said, looking at his crucified Christ, then draw the cross to his chest. "Help me now. Give me guidance that this evil be not loosed upon the world."

A stuffed boar's head lay on its side on the floor. He petted it: "Didn't I see you at the tavern?"

Brom paused, shut his eyes, remembered and nodded. Opening his eyes, he noticed something on the floor. He picked it up: a small, golden pig, crafted by ancient hands.

"*Moccus*," he said. "Cassave was coming for you here as well. Then before Pan, the Celts worshipped you on this spot." He looked again at the cast aside Boar's head: "You've come down in the world."

Then he narrowed his eyes on the boar's small tusks. He extended his forefinger to one horn, pricked the tip of his finger, then tried the other one and found it similarly sharp. He then grasped one tusk in each fist, and began working them back and forth and around, until the veins on his forearms plumped. The boar's tusks began to loosen in his grip.

After a few more minutes, he broke free first one and then the other, smiled, and put one each in a pocket on either side of his robe. He then patted the boar's head again, and began to look about the room.

He took stock of each object, noting its place. He closed his eyes to picture the surroundings, opened and tested his recollection. He repeated this as he laid down on the floor.

And then, the crucifix by his side, an exhausted Brom fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of footsteps heading his way. Two sets.

He climbed onto the table, moved the candelabrum to the corner of the far end, and obligingly stretched out on his back.

Then the door opened, and an undead Templar knight walked in.

Now a monk entered the room, wheeling in a small table holding the honed flaying knives, someone's brownish blood scabbing them. He locked the door behind him, then put the key in a robe pocket.

The monk was a bald man of pasty complexion and bulging eyes, plump and with a sheen of perspiration that glowed in the candelabrum's light.

"You should know," the monk said, producing an already damp handkerchief and swabbing his moist, pasty face with it, "that I asked for this task. I have much experience in the skinning of game. More than a mere chore to me; it always gave me pleasure, though I never spoke of my private joy. Since I have been released by Baphomet-Sammael—blessed be the name of the great god Pan!—I have

indulged openly. On still-living creatures. I have flayed my first human, but one who was dead already.

“You, however, are alive, and shall remain so and awake throughout your ordeal. I tell you this, so that you will know that you are giving me pleasure with your every scream, for every contortion in your face accompanied by your mute, gaping mouth, when your pain has passed beyond the threshold of vocalization. You will beg. Know that will also give me pleasure because you knew the futility of begging before you did so, for you know that I am implacable.”

“Yes, that’s all well and good, but is that *my* broadsword at that dead Templar’s hip?”

Withered lips bared the blind dead man’s yellow teeth in a rictus grin.

“That is my sword! Look!” Brom, said, pointing at the Templar, and looking back and forth from the blind dead man to the monk. “He’s grinning about it!”

The monk cocked his head, and he wondered how Brom could not have understood the threat he represented to his person, why Brom was not begging him, why... he was being ignored. He squinted at the Barbusquin, shook his head, quickly wiped his face again and began once more:

“I asked for this task. It gives me pleasure,” he began again. “The skinning of game... No, no, *you* will bring me pleasure. That’s it. Not skinning dead game. Skinning you...”

“But skinning dead game *did* give you pleasure. You said so,” Brom said. “Earlier.”

“With all that begging you are going to do,” the monk said, raising his voice, “with your screams, with the yawning mouth beyond the threshold...”

“What are you trying to say, exactly? I mean, that just doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“You will beg!” the monk shouted. “Know that will also give me pleasure when I know because you knew that I know that you knew... *know* ...”

“I’m afraid I can’t follow you.”

“you KNOW...knew...know that...you knew...”

“...*the futility of begging before you did so, for you know that I am implacable.* Got it!” Brom said, pointing at his head. “Mind like a steel

trap. Got it the first time. When I commit something to memory, I never lose it. But, it would seem, you do not share my mnemonic gifts. So, later, when you’re the one on this table, and you’re wondering, ‘How could this have happened? How did I end up here when everything was going so well?’—that’s how. That’s it. That, right there.”

The monk’s face was now red, his cheeks puffed, and he shouted to the blind dead man, “Apply the restraints!”

The dead Templar lunged forward. With a swipe of his heel, Brom knocked the candelabrum to the floor, immediately extinguishing the flame and dropping a blanket of darkness over the three of them, as he rolled over the side of the table.

“Fool!” the monk shouted. “He’s blind! A dark room makes no difference to him! He’ll find you with his preternaturally keen hearing!”

“Not with you yelling in his ear,” Brom said, who had moved behind the Templar knight, yanked back the dead man’s cowl, and then, pulling the boar tusks from a pocket on either side of his robe, he thrust their pointed ends into the dead man’s ears, piercing his ear drums.

Suddenly sensory deprived, the Templar knight staggered back. Brom grabbed with both his hands his sword at the revenant’s side. Drawing it free, he then slashed up and out, where he judged from memory the neck would be, and a moment later heard something hit the floor, followed by the sound of a collapsing body.

Then the air whistled with the swift passing of a small blade in an arc before him.

“Oh, I have not forgotten about you,” Brom said.

“You will yet feel the bite of my knives!” the monk said.

He swung the knife out again, but now it met the flat of Brom’s broadsword, which slapped hard, sending the flaying knife flying from the monk’s hand.

Now he swung back and forth at the monk, driving him backward, until the monk found himself pinned in a corner, cringing and shrieking.

Brom grabbed him with one hand by the upper garment and pulled him into his face. “Now, you are going to unlock the door, then step back and hand me the key.”

The monk quickly nodded. Brom shoved him forward. With trembling hands, the monk produced the key from a robe pocket, turned it in the lock and began to pull the door back.

“That’s enough!” Bram said when it was at the slightest crack. “I don’t want to be obvious, you understand. Just to let in enough light. Turn to me, both hands up... that’s it. Now, hand me the keys, and I want you to back up to the table. Lie on it! Flat on your back. Good... Now, I believe you mentioned something about restraints?”

VII. The Gadarenes Maneuver

Brom had no sooner shut the door on the dark room that now held the gagged and bound monk than the chanting began. It was the same that they had heard on the old Roman road: a basso note Gregorian style chant, a malicious hum. By the time Brom had discovered a stone stairwell that housed several crude, wooden flights of steps, the sound was rattling the timbers of the monastery. Brom felt he was ascending the inside of a giant’s rumbling throat.

As Brom reached the planked landing with the door behind whence the chanting originated, it stopped. Immediately laughter filled its place. Sword at the ready in one hand, Brom cracked the door with the other, peering into the mead hall Frater John had described. His eyes widened and then narrowed, his forehead creasing at what he saw.

The fallen monks of St. Elster were sporting with girls they had brought there to ruin. The girls squealed, many with one or both breasts exposed and their skirts hiked up on their thighs, the monks groping and pinching the women’s flesh. Others downed skin flagons of wine, then let drop their deflated flagons to the flagstone floor.

The long tables displayed a glutton’s banquet, foodstuffs toppling from their baskets spilling into one another, the table cloth smeared with stains, meats and bits of vegetables strewn over the table’s top and gravy dripping down its sides. The monks’ robes were also streaked with filth. Uncombed beards had caught and still held crumbs, bits of meat, and were tangled with dried gravy and juices.

Brom looked up. Above this frenzied tableau, mounted on the walls, and ringing the room, were boars’ heads in whose glass eyes flickered the flames from the feasting hall’s large fireplace.

And presiding over it all was Baphomet-Sammael, the Great God Pan. The goat creature had grown extremely large in size, its length now twelve feet. Rearing back on its high legs, but reclining on a couch, its exposed, gorged belly revealed rows of swollen teats and its spread legs displayed its androgynous genitalia. Its goat head was bowed in sated satisfaction, jaundiced eyes absorbing the depravities of its former jailers.

Cassave was nowhere to be seen.

Frowning and teeth grinding, Brom kicked the door the remainder of the way open. The struck door boomed loud enough amidst the cacophony that those close enough heard it and turned to see Brom’s entrance, his sword drawn.

The women screamed, and they and the men with them fled from him. Brom grabbed the table cloth of one of the long banquet tables and pulled it along, upsetting dishes and cups, sending them clattering onto the floor. Heads turned and the monks and their women rose to their feet in his wake, staring after him. But no one moved to stop him; none dared challenge his authority.

Baphomet-Sammael had watched Brom’s approach with no remark. Brom brought his sword point down to the floor so that he held it by the pommel, perpendicular to the floor. Then the creature tossed its head at his boldness, and the goat-thing’s black upper lip curled.

“You come in the name of the blind god, the idiot god, my misbegotten male offspring! Here! I protect myself from all rebellious masculine energy with the sigil of my name! The sigil of AZ!”

Extending a foreleg, the goat thing sketched in the air with flame two diamond shapes, one on top of the other, and drew a line through the middle. The flaming sigil hung in the air between Brom and Baphomet-Sammael.

Brom nodded. “So you’re ‘AZ’ now. Of a truth, you have had many names,” he said, stroking his bearded chin. “Let us see... No. No. Don’t help me. Mind like a steel trap... AZ, Baphomet, Sammael. Pan... Oh. I believe ‘Old Lady Nettie Gat’ was your latest delightful sobriquet? Are you not also Nodens, god of the deep?”

“I am!”

“I have met Buddhists who know you as *Dorje Phagmo*. You are Choronzon, watcher at the abyss. But you were Chozzar first, to the Mesopotamians. Before Pan the Goat, before Moccus the Pig, you were Chozzar the Hog! From beyond the aether, your dwelling place, you came, Ab-human! As you are identified by Saint Sigsand in his book, *Ye Hogge had once a power upon ye earth, so doth he crave sore to come again. But ye Almighty hath upon ye Hogge power, and recall His Christ, for of all signs, the cross alone hath power over ye Hogge and is unto him a horror!*”

Brom dipped his hand into his robe, withdrawing the crucifix he had found in the cellar, and threw it at the flaming sigil hanging in the air. The crucifix struck the sigil, and, with a hiss, the fire was extinguished and Baphomet-Sammael robbed of its shield. The crucifix clanged to the floor and the visage of Christ shone in the goat thing’s face. It bleated and dropped to all fours, charging at Brom with lowered horns.

Brom let the rosary he kept wrapped on his arm drop from beneath his robe’s sleeve where he had concealed it until now. He grasped the rosary’s crucifix along with the handle of the broad sword. As he drew his sword back over his shoulder, he felt an intense vibrating in the palm that gripped the crucifix, as though he grasped a hornet buzzing angrily, crazed to be free and sting. Brom somehow knew not to open his fist but clinch his sword handle tighter. When it came, the sting shot like hot, purifying venom from his hand through his arm, sending the sword sweeping forward, and, as though the blade were red hot, seared off the charging goat’s horns as he dodged aside. The horns clattered to the floor.

A gasp rose from the monks who watched, and shame seemed to descend upon them, prickling first their scalps and then their ears and cheeks.

Baphomet-Sammael tossed its head. The stumps of its horns were smoking from their searing. Further, the goat no longer seemed quite as large as it had been before.

Facing the goat, Brom again held his broadsword out, upside down and before him, this time with the rosary and the crucifix dangling over the hilt onto the blade. “In the name of God and His

Christ!” Brom shouted. “You are called into account! Come before me, goat!”

Baphomet-Sammael lowered its head, yellow eyes hooded. Obedient, but conscious and resentful of divine coercion, it began to slink toward him. A low, extended bleat issued from between parted black lips, like a dog’s threatening low growl. Still, it came closer, now completely returned to its proper size.

Wary of the rosary crucifix, it stopped a few feet away, continuing its threatening bleat. It tossed its head, but with its stumps for horns, only succeeded in an impotent gesture of defiance.

“The monks of Elster have failed in their sacred charge, and are found unworthy.” Brom indicated the men around him with a toss of his head.

“We acknowledge our sin,” one of the monks cried out. There were multiple words of assent from around the hall. “Lord Jesu, have mercy on our souls!”

“He will!” Brom shouted. “You have confessed and asked for his forgiveness—now only believe! Then make what restitution you can to the families of those women you have ruined; acknowledge and take responsibility should any of your seed come to fruition! Jesu also stands ready to forgive you young women; his compassion on this earth for those fallen of your sex is written in the scripture; his contempt for those who scorn you recorded in that same Word. Return them yourselves, men of Elster, to the homes from which you seduced them!”

Now he turned his full attention back on the goat. “Your hold here is lost!”

The goat began to moan, tossing its head side to side, the voice of a distressed old woman dragging from its throat: “*Wolde ye swynke me thilke wys?*”

“Do not seek pity from me! You will find none.”

The goat shrieked and fell on its back, writhing. It gnashed its teeth and spat its curses up at Brom: “*Agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas’s dholas ort, agus leat-sa!*”

“Be gone to your own place!”

Now, the goat leapt back up, froth dripping from its lips, rose on its hind legs, and began to stretch and contort. The head and hind legs remained those of a goat, but the torso and arms were becoming less

hairy, more man like. It pawed the floor with one hoof, and tossed its head back and forth.

"It is Satan himself!" a monk cried out and the others wailed in concert.

"Our repentance came too late!" shouted another. "The Devil has come to deliver us into eternal torment by his own hand!"

Brom did not move from before the satyr but steadfastly held his rosary draped sword handle up, the crucifix exposed. "Silence, you fools! Do not allow your fear the mastery over you! You are in the Chapel Perilous—stand your ground!"

Brom advanced with his sword still held handle up, shoving the crucifix at the satyr. Its head recoiled to the side. Then it began a slow chortling, and quickly turned back to look Brom in the eye.

"You show me none but Atys of old!" The satyr hurled the name at him as its goat head nodded at the crucified Christ, one side of its upper lip curling. "Your new God is but a mask for the old!"

"Do you say so? Atys is not crucified, liar. But if you believe it to be so, why do you not look at the crucifix and call him by his true name?"

Brom extended the crucifix further, but the satyr would not look on it. Instead, it threw its goat head backward, opened its mouth wide, and from deep inside issued the chortling of a herd of swine, a churning cacophony of snorts and grunts.

"Chozar of the Mesopotamians? A pallid porcine mask! Ab-human, I adjure you in the name of Jesu, whether demon or creature of deep time it matters not: yield and reveal your true self!"

The satyr let out a barnyard cacophony of goats bleating and pigs snorting, its throat swelling. Then it fell on its face before the crucifix, flopped over and writhed, shouting out:

"I am the Ubbo-Sathla, mistress of form, and from me all forms proceed! I am the primordial genetrix!"

"Demiurge!" Brom retorted. "Little, blind fool god."

"I am I!" the contorting satyr said. "I was at the beginning!"

Brom laughed. "Is that *all*, goat? I say to you, *En Arche ein ho Logos!*" Brom shouted, unwrapping the rosary from his sword. "When all things began, *the Word already was!*" and he cast down the crucifix onto the satyr's chest.

The creature screamed, and where the crucifix struck, its body began to split apart. Divided, it liquidated, spreading over the mead hall floor. The monks and women drew back for fear this ooze might touch and absorb them.

But before it reached their feet, it began to flow back together before Brom. Sizzling, it churned and bubbled, then gelled, becoming an indistinct writhing fleshy mass of bristling fur, scales, talons and rustling pinions. Fins that became wings rose up out of this wad of fish and fowl, reptile and mammal, and beat at the air as though seeking to take flight. Then from this roiling aggregation emerged brutish, sub-human faces whose eyes seemed to light for a moment with consciousness just as they melted back into the agitated, primordial glob.

I am I! I am the Ubbo-Sathla, the goat's disembodied voice carried through the hall. *I am that utter abyss of all being!* The monks chilled at the voice, and they drew closer to each other and placed the women in the middle of them.

"Behold, my friends," Brom said, gesturing at the squirming mass, "the cornfield adder. This thing is no more than an impotent snake I have encountered in the former colonies of America. When encountered, it rears and sways, mocking the action of the cobra. If you do not retreat, it will fall to the ground, bare its fangs, and hiss. Its final gesture is to play dead. *This* Ab-human is afraid and blusters to conceal it, for it knows where the power of Christ will send it!"

"No!"

All in the hall turned in the direction of the voice to see Cassave entering with something like a heavy garment draped over his arms.

"Even Jesus had mercy and did not return those spirits to the abyss when they begged," Cassave said. "He gave them respite in swine of the Gadarenes! Brom Cromwell, I have prepared for this one a body! Follow, now, the example of your master!"

"*Prepared?* You have *stolen!* Who...?" Brom's eyes narrowed.

Grinning, Cassave held out the suit of skin. Hanging over his arms, upside down, the deflated face retained the expression of fear it had held at death, when its possessor knew it was inescapable, and his last sight in this world would be that of his killer. It was the face of Frater John.

Brom's eyes narrowed as he slowly cocked his head then slowly shook it from side to side. "The monk you sent to flay me said he had already performed one skinning. On a dead man!"

"Exactly! Frater John no longer has any use for his skin. Do not interfere with me, Brom Cromwell, I warn you!"

Brom's hand tightened on his sword's handle as he regarded Cassave with wild eyes, his face crimson. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and relaxed his hand on his sword.

The wrath of men does not work the righteousness of God.

"Come Nodens, come Chozzar, come Baphomet, come great Pan! A body I have prepared thee!" Cassave was chanting and the light in the room was dimming as a chill wind began to blow through the mead hall, causing the fireplace flames to ripple and beat the air. A thick, grey fog rolled in, ankle high.

Sword point on the floor, one hand over the other on the handle, Brom bowed his head and began to pray.

Immediately, the darkness in the hall faded to twilight, and the wind stilled to a breeze.

Cassave continued to chant, but looked toward Brom and frowned.

Now the mist seemed to be sinking into the floor, and the turbulent flames in the fireplace were calming.

"What are you doing, Brom?" Cassave broke his chant and demanded:

Brom murmured out of the corner of his mouth, "I'm praying."

"Stop your damn interference! Stop it, or I will strike you down at your childish vespers!"

Cassave took a step toward Brom who made no move to defend himself. He did not even open his eyes. Instead, a smile crossed his lips as they continued to move in silent prayer, and a gust of wind thrust open the shutters of one large window above their heads.

Then descended a tall cone of blue spiraling light, striped with green luminous bands that also turned at their own speed. All who looked upon it felt the earth slip for a moment under their feet. With a vertiginous rush, all sense of size and proportion fled, for the geometry of angels had seized them in the presence of the light. The cone of light flowed into Brom's sword and set it aflame with azure and emerald hues. He withdrew both hands from it at once. For a moment,

it stood erect, perfectly balanced on its point, then it turned itself upward, rising in the air, sweeping back and forth before Brom.

Cassave, eyes wide, stumbled back. "An Eldil! The Protective Force that is the ancient enemy of the Ab-human! The chariots and horsemen of Israel of old!"

The presence was wielding the unmooring of his senses as with all the others. He fell to his knees. One hand fell flat against the floor and kept him from a complete collapse. As the still blowing wind whipped his hair about him, he shouted:

"Brom! Do not propel it into the utter abyss! Will you be less merciful than Christ?" Cassave shouted.

Cromwell shook his head, still bowed, his eyes still closed. "No," he said. "I will be no less merciful than my Christ."

There was another gust of wind, this one foul with the scent of a barnyard, and the squeals and snorts of a seething unclean horde of swine, a rapid stamping of many cloven hooves upon the mead hall floor. The monks and their women stepped high, as though expecting to feel the thrust of a herd of swine shoving against their shins.

Then there was silence in the hall. Its occupants looked at each other and at their feet, still expecting to find swine among them. Then someone shouted, "Look!" and pointed up.

The mounted heads of the feral swine were twisting about on their mounts, tossing their tusks at the air, animated by the entity whose name of late was Old Lady Netty Gat. They shook powerfully, so that some of their bead eyes fell from the sockets and tap-tap-tapped over the floor. The boars' maws tore loose their lips' stiches, spilling sawdust, and from around the mead hall their voices united in one squeal, cringe-inducing to hear, like fingertips scratched over slate.

"Damn you, Brom!" Cassave shouted as he rose.

Now the remaining darkness in the mead hall faded, and the light returned to complete brightness. The flaming sword extinguished. Brom reached out and grabbed the sword's handle while it still levitated in the air, then returned it to his side.

"You have to admit," Brom said, sheathed his sword, then grinned at Cassave. "He was becoming a bit of a bore."

He walked over to Cassave. "Give me Frater John's remains. I will not have you desecrating his body."

Cassave gnawed his lower lip.

“Cassave?”

He thrust the folded skin into Brom’s arms. “Take it!” he said. “But I *will* win, Brom! You and your ilk are out of step with the advance of history. The old gods *will* return. And I shall usher in an age unknown until now, by breeding gods with humans. Not by the foolish couplings of myth but through the wisdom of man’s science!”

“Cassave,” Brom said. “This Christian Abby is built where a temple to Pan once stood. The Romans brought him with them. And in the cellar I saw a golden pig image that reveal it as a hallow place of the Celtic Moccus. And for a moment it *was* Moccus’ place and Pan’s again. Whatever pantheon you introduce will be incorporated into the cycle, and will also have its day then crumble.

“The nature of this present world has always been that of mutability. Never was it intended to last, including whatever man introduces into the cosmic scheme. I wait for a stone not cut with human hands to enter from without and shatter the cycle forever, for a city whose builder and maker is God!”

Epilogue: As It is Written...

Cassave was imprisoned in the basement to be kept as the charge of the monks.

“And do try to do a better job keeping up with this corpulent fellow than you did with Chozar, lord of the abyss,” Brom admonished them.

“We shall,” said one of the Elster monks.

Brom sighed. “Well, I have this comfort at least: he cannot run very fast.”

The monk who had flayed Frater John, whom the monks had found still bound to the table where Brom had left him, was also jailed in the basement. The monks of Elster expressed hopes of turning them both to God, but Brom cautioned them to beware of Cassave’s subtlety.

The grave of the remaining Templar revenant who remained unaccounted for was salted by prayer and thus sanitized, severing the revenant’s hold on the earth. Frater John’s remains, however, were

respectfully interred in the monastery’s graveyard. He was honored as a hero of faith and a martyr who had brought about the redemption of the abbey of Saint Elster.

While the chapel and monk’s cells were ceremoniously cleansed and rededicated to God, the mead hall proved beyond redemption. Not that God’s power was lessened, of course, but because the monks could never be at ease at its table with the enemy who had authored their degradation watching them through multiple eyes—even if they were only beads.

So, the monks knocked it down into rubble, burying the possessed swine’s heads, and within them the goat of Saint Elster, now securely entombed. There to be held, as it is written of Chozar in the Sigsand manuscript:

Until the Outer Monstrosities held between earth and ye moon—the Dark Archon’s domain, ye outer atmosphere, that abyss that is the abode of demons, identified by the apostle as ‘the Kingdom of the Air’—will have the barrier that now restrains them removed.

Then Chozar, that vile hogg of old, that ancient goat, will rise up in its flesh. For he will also be loosed at the end of all things to walk ye earth with his brethren Outer Ones. For with them, in ye earlier life upon the world over the world did ye Hogge have power and shall again in ye end. In that day when our blessed Lord Jesu does return to trample all his enemies under his feet.

Amen—so shall it be!

I, Sigsand, attest what I here have written here by my own hand.

We of the Barbusquin Order affirm what he has written is true.

I, Natvilcius aver that I have from the original autographs translated it into Latin by my own hand.

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