Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale
By Erol Engin

and

The Gothic Meets The Weird:
A Critical Analysis of Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale and its Influences

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

This book has been written with much love for Kate and Sam.

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Synopsis

This thesis for the Master of Creative Arts degree at the University of Newcastle consists of a young adult novel, *Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale*, of approximately 60,000 words length, and a critical exegesis, *The Gothic Meets the Weird: A Critical Analysis of Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale and its Influences*, of approximately 13,000 words length.

The novel is a blend of gothic, weird and fantasy fiction. It tells the story of a boy, Charlie, who lives in the Welkin of Gloom where there is no sun and no moon, only the gloomlight, a silver fog that illuminates the land. Charlie lives in a castle with his wicked aunt and uncle (The Slupps), who have put bars on his teeth. They make him look so bad that his uncle calls him a cheesegrater when he smiles. Through the course of the novel Charlie discovers that his teeth hold a special power, one that enables him to control the gloomlight, though he does not know how.

The critical exegesis examines gothic, weird and fantasy fiction and these genres have influenced *Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale*. In particular, the exegesis focuses on how the novel has been influenced by the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. Through an analysis of gothic, weird and fantasy fiction, the exegesis will show that though *Charlie Cheesegrater* contains elements of these traditions, it also rejects and re-evaluates them.
I know not where I was born, save that the castle was infinitely old and infinitely horrible, full of dark passages and high ceilings where the eye could find only cobwebs and shadows. The stones in the crumbling corridors seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up corpses of dead generations. It was never light, so that I used sometimes to light candles and gaze steadily at them for relief, nor was there any sun outdoors, since the terrible trees grew high above the topmost accessible tower...I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time.
Once upon a time there was a boy named Charlie Cheesegrater.

Charlie lived in the Welkin of Gloom, where there was no sun or moon, only the gloomlight - a pallid, silvery fog that never lifted. Charlie's aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Slupp, kept him locked up in a cage in the highest turret of their crumbling castle. Everything that Charlie knew - the Castle, the Turret, his Cage - was bathed in the gloomlight's sickly grey pall.

Lord Slupp, who hated Charlie with a passion, told him that one day he had decided Charlie's teeth were growing too straight, and so he set about making a set of special fittings out of some warped iron bars that would make sure Charlie's teeth grew 'crookeder and crookeder', in his uncle's words. When he had finished putting the special fittings on Charlie, Slupp clutched his enormous belly and howled with laughter.

'Ye looks like a cheesegra'er!' he'd said, laughing and snorting.

And that was how Charlie got his name.

Charlie rarely left his Cage; it was all he knew, and it seemed to him that he had been kept there all of his life. He spent most of his time making marks in the Turret's wall with a sharp rock, trying to keep count of how many sleeps he had had. This way he thought he could keep track of how long he had been kept in the Cage. But his uncle often came up and forced Charlie to blast the wall clean.

When he was not counting his sleeps, Charlie languished in his Cage, in his usual position - long, bony legs drawn up against his chest, toothpick arms drooped at his sides, forehead stuck to his bare, knobbly knees.

He never spoke to another soul.

Unless you counted the rat, which in the last little while had begun to visit Charlie. It stared at him through the black bars of his Cage - a rat with long whiskers and pink feet, wiggling grey ears and mischievous little pinhole eyes. The rat never came into the Cage; it simply stared thoughtfully at him.

Charlie had come to like the rat. It made a strange puffing sound that sounded like 'beg-beg-beg-bee', and so Charlie began to call it Begbie. He looked forward to seeing him whenever he decided to come sniffing around. Eventually Charlie began talking to him, and the rat seemed so intelligent with his sharp, blinking little eyes that Charlie could have sworn
he understood him. The rat seemed curiously fascinated by his teeth, and would stare as if entranced by them.

Unlike the gloombeasts. The flying, horse-like creatures often roosted on top of Charlie’s Cage, staring hungrily down at him with their odd, single eye – a dagger-shaped bauble filled with roiling gloomlight. If Charlie bared his teeth at them, which he sometimes did, for fun, they would spread their powerful wings and scatter into the sky, their dirty pale white coats blending into the gloomlight.

Charlie did not like gloombeasts. They were ill-tempered and fierce, and had a single, deadly horn that protruded from their horse-like head. The horn was never straight; it always looked as if the gloombeast had flown into a cliff-face and crumpled it. But still, the horns were sharp, and Charlie had many nightmares about being run through by one of them.

The rat aside, Charlie’s only companion was a very old book called *The Grim War*. He had discovered it under a loose cinderblock by his Cage. He did not know who had put it there, but it certainly was not his aunt or uncle. They did not seem to know about it, which was fine with Charlie. If he leant over, and stretched his arms out of the Cage as far as they could stretch, he could just push off the cinderblock and lift it out.

He came to love the old book. With a finger he would trace the odd stitching on the cover – a queer pattern of circles within circles. Sometimes when he did it – it must have been his imagination – letting his finger run over the circle patterns, he thought he could feel a strange tingling or warmth that would run though his finger and shoot up his arm. Other times, however, nothing would happen, and he would feel curiously disappointed. He would simply stare at the book’s stitched title - *The Grim War* – and at its jewelled clasps – one black, one white, and one grey.

He loved the feel of the book’s creased old leather binding in his pale, slender hands. It was his one and only joy, sitting in his Cage with only the pallid gloomlight to read by, losing himself in the book’s weird tales of other worlds and adventures. Charlie read about unicorns, which were like gloombeasts, only much more magnificent and with straight horns. He also read about knights and dragons and princesses, evil crones and witches, ogres and trolls, and lots of other stories of adventure.

But Charlie’s favourite story, which he read again and again, was about a boy who lived alone in a castle in a gloomy, sunless world. More than anything – even more than a companion – the boy wanted to see sunlight, so one day he decided to seek out the light, climbed up through the highest tower of his castle, and discovered a new and beautiful sunlit world at the top. It was a sad story, because the people in the new world found the boy ugly
and repulsive. And when the boy saw himself reflected in a mirror, he saw not a boy, but a hideous monster.

Charlie knew what it was like to be ugly and hideous—thanks to the fittings on his teeth. He felt sorry for the boy in the story. He was also captivated by the beauty of the world that the boy discovered. Charlie yearned to live in such a world. He hoped that one day he would escape from the Castle and the Welkin of Gloom, just like the boy in the story, and live in a land of sunshine and green swards.

It was just after he had finished reading this story once again that an extraordinary thing happened.

Charlie had been in his Cage, slumped in his usual position, when he heard a flapping noise. It was so sudden and so loud that it cut through the gloomy stillness, as if a thousand birds had suddenly taken flight.

Amazed, Charlie lifted his head from his knees and looked around, something Charlie rarely did (there was not much point—he never saw anyone or anything except gloombeasts, the Turret, the Cage, or his uncle or aunt). He blinked his lamp-like eyes in disbelief.

He saw a birdcage in the sky.

A birdcage of white gold, with white wings that glowed with the brightness of a cold, fiery white star.

The wings sprouted out of the top of the birdcage, and had an enormous span. They seemed almost to stretch across the vast gloomy sky. And with each flap of the great wings, the birdcage vaulted forward, swinging gently with the rhythm of the movement.

Inside the birdcage shined a light—a white light—pale but brilliant. Charlie at first thought that the birdcage carried something, perhaps some glittering gem, or even a star, it shined so brilliantly. But as it vaulted nearer and nearer, he saw that it was a person, arrayed in a grand, sparkling robe that looked like a solid sheet of finely wrought white gold. The being clasped the bars of the cage with its luminous hands, its fingers glittering with the light of many rings, its wrists with bracelets, all white gold, and of the same ethereal brilliance.

Charlie blinked again and again. He must be dreaming, he thought.

But there was no doubt. The birdcage swung through the gloomlight, which swirled and danced about it like a silver mist, curling round its golden bars, as if it too wondered whether the birdcage were real. It was heading directly for Charlie’s Turret, if not for Charlie himself. But he was locked in his Cage, and there was nothing he could do.

He would have cried out, except that his throat was dry as one of the pages of his book. He just was not used to speaking. He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but all
that came out was a thin, desperate squeaking noise, a noise that a mouse with a sore throat might make.

The birdcage soared high. Its powerful wings, Charlie could now see, were a brilliant white, tipped with a fine dusting of gold. Suddenly, it came plummeting down out of the gloomsky, like a shooting star. The vast wings were now fully extended and they knifed through the gloomlight, which had now turned itself into thick sheets of silver fog, as if it were trying to impede the birdcage’s descent.

Charlie’s bottom jaw began to tremble. He closed his eyes and stuck his head between his knees. The birdcage was probably some new torture devised by his uncle and aunt. He was terrified that this would be the end of him.

The flapping grew louder and louder, and then, suddenly, it stopped. All grew eerily quiet.

Charlie dared not raise his head. He hoped with all his heart that the birdcage had disappeared.

But it was not to be.

Charlie tilted his head and slowly pried one terrified eye open.

The birdcage had perched itself on a jagged peak of the Turret wall; its magnificent wings still spread wide, as if it were going sweep Charlie and his Cage into them and carry him off. Golden bird feet and talons had sprouted from its base, and they dug into the crumbling black stone of the old wall.

Charlie was awed by its magnificent presence. Perched on the wall the birdcage seemed to dwarf the Turret with its monumental base, and the being that it held inside loomed above Charlie, glowing like spirits that he had read about in his Book. It was even encompassed by an aura of the same pristine white metal that composed the birdcage, but it glowed with more than the usual brilliance of gold. It blazed, as if it tapped into the source of some powerful, unnameable energy.

What did it want with him?

His knobbly knees knocking, Charlie tried to crumple himself up as small as he could get. But he was just too long and gangly. His uncle and aunt had stretched him on the Rack too many times. For once in his life, he was glad that he lived in a Cage. He buried his head in his knees again.

The being inside the birdcage spoke. Its voice was soft but commanding.
‘I am the White Sage’s messenger,’ it announced, spreading its arms wide. Its skin was pale, almost bloodless, and from its appearance and manner it was impossible for Charlie to be certain whether it was male or female. ‘Come, Gloomruler, and meet the White Sage, Lord of the Welkin of Light that once was, and shall be again.’

Charlie tried to swallow, but his throat seemed as big and rough as one of the Castle’s cinderblocks.

‘I won’t look,’ he said to himself. ‘It’s not real!’

The being spoke again, its voice somehow pale and shimmering like its robe.

‘Come, Gloomruler, and fulfil your destiny. Destroy the Welkin of Gloom. Restore the Welkin of the White Sage.’

The birdcage’s ornate door swung silently open.

The silence was then rent by a loud cracking that made Charlie jump, followed by a creaking that sent shivers down his spine.

He thrust his head up from his knees.

The lock on his Cage had been broken, and the door pried wide open.

‘Come,’ said the Messenger. ‘You are free!’

Charlie could only stare. What was happening was too outlandish to believe. All Charlie had to do was to get up, walk out of the Cage, and the magnificent, magical birdcage and its luminous being would carry him away to freedom.

He felt his legs straighten and his heart pound. Then he was moving, almost on his knees, almost ready to push himself up to stand. It had been a while since he had last stood up, and the joints of his matchstick legs were stiff and creaky. He had bowed his head and could watch the progress of his legs and body. He looked like a marionette slowly wobbling first to its knees and then its feet.

A growling noise, coming from nearby, halted him.

He saw the dark body of Begbie the rat crouched sideways in the Cage’s doorway. He had lowered his head nearly to the Turret’s blocks, and had raised his bulky hindquarters. He was growling, and Charlie could see the whites of his sharp-looking teeth under the pink gums. It seemed poised to strike at Charlie and at the birdcage, should either move.

Charlie stared at the creature. For a moment – it might have been an illusion – Charlie saw a light flash in the rat’s pinhole eyes, a grey, smouldering light like the gloomlight itself. At the same time, a lump or bubble ran down the rat’s curved back. It seemed to disappear into its tail.
Charlie blinked, and the rat returned to normal – if it had truly changed at all. It was crouched and growling by the Cage door, blocking Charlie’s egress.

The Messenger saw it, and its crystal-like face shattered into a rictus of fear.

‘Draggoth,’ it whispered.

The birdcage’s door swung silently closed.

‘No!’ Charlie croaked, raising a hand.

But he could not stop the birdcage. With a great swoop of its wings it leapt from the Turret into the sky.

‘No!’ Charlie cried again, his voice stronger.

He had gained his feet, and was about to chance running past the rat when a thumping noise came from beneath the trap door that led down into the Castle. A powerful, thunderous voice shook the Turret.

‘CHEESEGRA’ER! CHEESEGRA’ER!’

The trap door flung open and banged against the cinderblocks. In the next moment, his uncle thrust his head out of the door’s darkness.

‘Cheesegra’er!’ he thundered, ‘what are ye gawkin’ at?’
Slupp's head was stout and squat, topped by a crown of fiery red hair so severely cut that the ends were pointy and sharp, like quills. He grunted and flared the gaping black nostrils of his swinish snout of a nose.

Then he saw the birdcage, which hovered above the Turret like a moon.

'What's that?' he bellowed, snorting.

Slupp tried to come up into the Turret to have a better look. But he was enormously fat. He tried to force himself through the trap door, but the biggest, fattest part of him - his gelatinous belly - could not get through. He sucked it in as far as it would go, which was not very far. His jowly cheeks turned as red as his hair, and for a moment it looked to Charlie as if his uncle might explode.

'Bloody door's getting smaller and smaller, I say,' he puffed, stuffing himself through the door with all his might.

Finally, after much huffing and puffing, Slupp got himself up into the Turret. Cursing the door for having the cheek to be so small, he stood on his thick, trunk-like bow legs before Charlie’s Cage, looking up at the birdcage. With a push of its mighty wings it retreated into the gloomsky, shimmering there like a distant star.

'Who – what – was...'

Charlie watched the birdcage recede, and felt his heart sink. It sunk even deeper when he saw Slupp notice that the Cage door was open.

His uncle always wore a long black cloak, tunic, and boots. And that was how he appeared now. His belly button peeked out like a third eye from under the tunic, surrounded by flab as pale as a fish’s underbelly. He jutted out his weak chin as far as it would go, and he rolled his fleshy red lips back to reveal teeth that were as yellowed, blackened and crumbling as his Castle.

'Who was that opened your Cage, Cheesegra’er? Ye’ve been up to somethin’, I knows it! Ye can’t fool me!'

Slupp lumbered over to the Turret’s parapeted walls and gazed off into the night.

'I ‘eard talkin’, I knows I did!'

Charlie’s palms were getting sweaty. His uncle, he knew, would relish thrashing the truth out of him. But he said nothing. He needed to make something up, but he had not had much practice with inventing lies.
‘I was just, just talking to my rat,’ Charlie said in the end.
Slupp’s bulgy bloodshot eyes narrowed on Charlie.
‘What rat?’ he grunted.
Charlie’s eyes searched the Turret, but the rat was nowhere to be found.
‘It was here just a minute ago,’ Charlie said, knowing his uncle would never believe him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie glimpsed a blur of dark fur behind Slupp. The blur scurried up and over the Turret wall, disappearing into the gloomlight.

And then, rising and gliding just beyond a claw-shaped crag in the Turret, Charlie saw a long black shape. It looked like a flying black worm, and it cut swiftly through the gloomlight; with one thrust of its black wings the shape had nearly overtaken the birdcage.

Charlie swallowed dryly. What was that black shape?
Slupp, however, had noticed nothing.
‘A likely story, Cheesegra’er,’ he said, pulling out his knout, his favourite weapon of cruelty. ‘I suppose it were the rat wot opened yer Cage door, too.’

Slupp brandished the knout. Its legs dangled like the gangly legs of a black spider.
The mere sight of it froze Charlie’s blood.
‘It’s true, I…’

Slupp could be swift on his feet if he wanted to. His eyes flashed, and in no time he had crossed the Turret’s floor and had his meaty fists curled around the bars of Charlie’s Cage. Clearly he meant to thrash the truth of the matter out of Charlie.

‘Just ye wait, Cheesegra’er,’ he said. ‘When I’m done with ye, ye’ll wish ye was never borned.’

Charlie had always wished that he had never been born. Usually he did not resist his uncle. But this time, thinking of the birdcage, he pushed himself as far away as he could from his uncle’s huge, grasping hands.

Slupp was so enormous that his bulk blocked any chance of escape. The boy pressed himself into a corner, drawing up his knobbly knees as far as they would go. His uncle grabbed him roughly by the neck, and bent him over his fleshy knee.

‘Ye asked for it, Cheesegra’er,’ he whispered, and the switch went up high in the air.
Charlie closed his eyes and waited.
But instead of feeling the switch, he heard a voice like a slow reptilian croak slither its way up through the trap door.

Slupp’s eyes bulged with fear, and his jellybelly began to quiver.
'Bilious!' said the croaking voice. 'Bilious, what are you doing? I sent you to get Charlie. Bring him down at once.'

Slupp looked cruelly disappointed. The corners of his fleshy lips sagged. He looked like a little boy who did not get the present he was expecting for his birthday.

'But...' he stammered.

'Bilious!'

'But, Moribunda, my dear,' said Slupp petulantly, 'e needs to be thrashed!'

'Bi-li-ous! I will not ask you again!'

The last sentence was uttered with such authority and such a slippery menace that Charlie knew he was safe, if only for the time being.

Slupp never, ever disobeyed Lady Slupp. Not because he was a faithful and devoted husband. But because the reptilian woman terrified him right down to his very soul.

Slupp stopped his hands in mid-grab and withdrew them. His yellowed teeth were clenched so tightly that Charlie thought he saw one of them start to crumble before his very eyes.

Like a puppet long-neglected by his master, Charlie gathered his limbs about him and struggled to his splayed feet.

If this had been any other day, Charlie would have felt his usual miserable self.

But now he had hope.

The birdcage would rescue him. He would escape from the Castle.

Just like the boy in his favourite story.
CHAPTER THREE
LADY SLUPP

Charlie was always blindfolded whenever he was taken out of the Cage, and this time was no different. Slupp normally used the dirtiest, filthiest, scratchiest piece of cloth he could find (once, on an especially bad occasion, he had even used sandpaper to make Charlie’s blindfold). This time he used one of his handkerchiefs, which was not so bad except that it had been used rather too recently.

Charlie fumbled in the dark, crashing into walls here, stumbling over stairs there. To make matters worse, his uncle occasionally stung him with the switch, crying out, ‘How d’ ye like tha’, Cheesegra’er?’ after each blow.

Charlie seemed to walk for an eternity. Then, suddenly, he was struck by an odd sensation, or rather, his nose was. It stopped him where he stood. His nose seemed to take on a life of its own. It began sniffing, drinking in a great savoury aroma that now scented the air, a great and glorious smell that he only dimly remembered having smelled before.

His blindfold was ripped from his eyes.

Charlie found himself in a spacious and elegantly decorated room. But the room did not interest him. For right in front of him, just an arm’s length away, was a long dining table laden with silver plated trays stacked with food. There was a roast suckling beast, goblets of drink, platters of fruit and cheese, bowls of steaming soup, and lots of other food that Charlie had never seen before.

Charlie’s belly rumbled and his mouth watered. This was what he had smelled: food. But not just any food, cooked food. It smelled so wonderful that Charlie thought he would start crying. He gawked at the food and whimpered with desire.

‘Do you like what you see, boy?’ croaked Lady Slupp.

Her long reptilian figure loomed over the table. Each time Charlie saw her – which thankfully was not too often – she seemed to elongate, as if she too suffered the Rack. Now, she was a truly towering, freakish presence in the room. The corners of her mouth seemed permanently wrenched to the back of her reptilian snout, exposing a long line of pointed white teeth. Her eyes were, as always, covered by thick cuts of bottle-like black glass, which made her look insectile. She stroked the backrest of a chair with crisped fingers that culminated in sickle-shaped black claws.
The mere sight of Lady Slupp was scary enough, but seeing her in her Experimenting Robe – a long black garment tied roughly around her bony, emaciated frame – terrified Charlie.

‘Please sit down,’ she said, her voice croaking, lisping.
She gestured for Charlie to take his seat.
‘Bilious,’ she said, ‘why don’t you take yours?’
Slupp hesitated dumbly for a moment, casting sheepish glances at his wife.
‘Yer not gonna waste this feed on Cheesegra’er, are ye?’ he said. ‘E doesn’t deserve it, noway nohow! ‘E...!’
Lady Slupp opened her mouth and a long, bluish, forked tongue darted out.
Charlie squirmed, and felt his stomach turn.
Slupp shut his mouth. He lumbered to his enormously wide chair at the head of the table. With a petulant sneer he threw himself sulkily into it. Meanwhile, Lady Slupp tottered like a long, bony insect to the table’s far end. Awkwardly, stiffly, as if afraid she were so brittle that she might snap in two, she lowered herself by degrees into a plush baize chair.
Charlie was still gawking at the food. His mouth had begun to water. At last he hobbled forward and sat down at the middle of the table, not taking his eyes from the food for even a second.

Then, a strange thing happened. His right hand began to move, as if it had a life of its own.
It crept slowly forward on the table, and seemed headed for a plate of tantalizing drumsticks.

‘Charlie,’ came Lady Slupp’s cold voice, ‘do I need to teach you your manners, boy?’
It took all of Charlie’s willpower to pull his hand back. He forced it into his lap and pinned it down with his other, more trustworthy hand.

‘That’s better,’ said Lady Slupp. ‘Besides, your dinner is here.’
With a clawed hand she pushed a big dish with a domed silver cover to Charlie.
‘What is it?’ he asked, nearly drooling at the promising size of the dish.
‘Remove the cover,’ croaked Lady Slupp.

Charlie’s hand trembled forward, and his scrabbling fingers found the dome’s ornate handle. Swallowing dryly, he slowly lifted the dome, barely able to breathe, he was so excited.

Then, his heart sank.
On the dish was a thin, measly shaving of meat. When Charlie looked more closely at it, he could see that its edges were festering with little writhing white maggots. If he could
cut around the edges and eat the good bits…it had been ages since he had had meat! How delicious it would taste!

Slupp threw back his round head and roared with laughter.

‘I knews you wouldn’t waste good food on ‘im, luv,’ he spat out.

Then he saw Charlie still examining the meat. Slupp heaved himself up out of his chair, thumped over, and blew his nose thunderously into Charlie’s dish.

A great lashing of greenish phlegm streamed onto the plate and all over the little strip of meat.

Charlie looked down at the plate before him. The morsel of meat was covered in the sticky, greenish goo. He twisted his lips in disgust. There was no way he could eat it now. He looked up at the wonderful food spread out before him, and then he looked at his aunt.

‘Ungrateful boy,’ she said, baring her pointed teeth, noting Charlie’s disgust with pleasure. ‘What do we usually give you to eat, Charlie?’

‘Biscuit,’ he said gloomily. ‘Biscuit for breakfast, biscuit for lunch, and biscuit for dinner.’

Usually the biscuit was so hard and so stale that it was nearly inedible, but Charlie thought it best not to mention that part. He did not want to appear ungrateful, and get a thrashing.

‘If it were up to me, Cheesegra’er,’ said Slupp through a cruel grin, ‘I wouldn’t never give ye nothin’ to eat. Food’s precious, it is. Slows up the Turnin’ and it’d be wasted on yer…’

‘Bilious, please,’ Lady Slupp lisped, caustically.

‘Can’t we start, luv?’ groaned Slupp, clutching his belly in both hands. Great folds of flab spilled through his porcine fingers. ‘Famished I am!’

‘Patience, my dear,’ she lisped.

Patience was one thing Slupp did not have. He thrust out his chin and looked particularly sulky.

Lady Slupp turned to Charlie. ‘Now you have meat, boy,’ she said, ‘and you do not want it.’

Charlie shook his head.

‘Would you prefer to have that plate of drumsticks all to yourself?’

Charlie nodded.

‘Well,’ said his aunt, ‘you can.’
Charlie raised his head and blinked his lamp-like eyes. He reached out to grab the plate, but stopped when his aunt lifted a clawed hand.

‘But first,’ she said, ‘you must tell me who or what visited you tonight and what they told you.’

‘A great big white birdcage it looked like, luv, an’ ...’

Again, Lady Slupp flicked out her tongue, and Slupp fell instantly silent.

‘Well, Charlie?’

Lady Slupp’s lips peeled back even farther. Charlie stared at her snout, her swollen red gums and glistening rows of reptilian teeth. With a chill he realised that she was smiling. It was the coldest smile he had ever seen her give. Her black bottle-like glasses were like a dark shield across her eyes, and her rough voice seemed to scrape the air as she spoke.

‘What do you say? I know that something visited you this evening, Charlie. I would know who it was and why they came,’ she said, cocking her head at Slupp, who shrank down into his chair, ‘if your uncle had not fallen asleep while on watch. Why not just tell me? Tell me and that plate of drumsticks and more will be yours.’

Charlie was too sad for words. But even though he was starving, and heaps of succulent cooked food was spread out before him for his taking, he made up his mind not to talk.

‘Bilious,’ said Lady Slupp, ‘please feel free to begin eating.’

Slupp ate voraciously. He slapped heap after heap of food on his plate, and downed goblet after goblet of drink. There was no rhyme or reason to what he ate; he simply ate whatever was nearest. Soon there were stacks of empty trays next to him, and a dozen or more goblets tossed around him on the floor. He made loud and lascivious chewing noises as he ate, like a slobbering Beast. Only very occasionally did he look up from his plate. When he did, it was to belch hugely, or to glare at Charlie, whose stomach rumbled all the more loudly.

Meanwhile, Lady Slupp picked at a crust of bread with the point of a black claw. Then she pushed her dish away.

‘Ye’ve got to eat, luv,’ Slupp chided. ‘It slows down the Turnin’ and...’

‘I recommend that you make up your mind quickly, Charlie,’ she said, ignoring her husband, ‘or Lord Slupp will be forced to have your share.’

Charlie bowed his head. He was so skinny that if he stood up straight, his clothes – filthy culottes and thin threadbare shirt and thinner vest - would slip off him and collect in a heap around his ankles. Watching his uncle shovel food into his mouth, and listening to all
his slapping and lip-smacking noises, was pure torture. It took all of Charlie’s strength, then, to look his aunt in the eye and say,

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Lady Slupp did not move. She was like a cold fire ready to spark into a wintry blaze. Even Slupp had stopped to gawk at her, a fistful of roast beast suspended before his great gaping maw of a mouth.

‘Are you certain?’ she croaked.

Charlie said not a word.

There was silence for a time. And then Lady Slupp sighed - a terrible gurgling, guttural sound in her throat.

‘Bilious,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he replied, an especially wicked smile creeping across his pale, fleshy face.

‘Ready the Rack, if you please. And prepare the Dungeon. If Charlie does not tell us who visited him, then feel free to stretch him. And then, I shall continue my...experiments.’

Charlie gripped his knees with his spindly fingers.

He was really in for it now.

****

Charlie might have felt better had he known that by the end of his interview with the Slupps, unbeknownst to anyone in the room, a creature with long whiskers, pink feet and wiggling grey ears padded softly into the room. Its two pinhole eyes blinked rapidly from a hole in the wainscotting in a neglected corner of the dining room. The eyes were sharp and clear, and they shone like coins, and the flickering light from the candelabras danced wildly in them.
Once again Charlie was blindfolded. He was driven out of the dining room by Slupp, who took great pleasure in kicking Charlie as often as he could. Charlie stumbled down staircases after staircase, plunging deeper and deeper into the Castle's dark depths.

'That's right, luv,' he heard Slupp snort to Lady Slupp. It was the closest he could get to whispering. 'A great white birdcage, it was. Prolly belongs to the White Sage, eh?'

'The birdcage is a shantak,' said Lady Slupp. 'Shantaks are sent by Sages to carry their Messengers.'

'But where's our Black Sage, eh? Wish 'e would get a move on,' said Slupp. 'The Turnin, sometimes I feel it, don't matter how much I eats...'

Charlie was too scared to pay much attention to what his aunt and uncle were saying. More than anything, Charlie hated and feared the Rack. He begged his aunt and uncle, but it was no use. Unless he was willing to talk, they said, he would suffer the Rack.

Slupp whipped Charlie with his knout as he scrambled into the Dungeon. Charlie lost his footing and fell in a crumpled heap to the chill cinderblock floor. The air was foul and the cinderblocks were oily with an oozing, stinking slime.

Charlie was thankful to be blindfolded. He had seen the Dungeon all too many times, in reality and in his nightmares - the bare, black walls, and the mysterious charts, globes and old tattered books; the skeletons in the upright coffins; and worst of all, Lady Slupp's Experimenting Table, a long rickety structure laden with black tapers, operating instruments, and, worst of all, a frightening apparatus of tubes and bottles and burbling potions that she would pore over after she had finished her experiments, while Charlie lay groaning on the Rack.

Charlie felt Slupp's meaty hands on him. They closed around his neck and lifted him up into the air so that his legs dangled helplessly. Charlie struggled and kicked and tried to bite Slupp's hands, but it had no effect. He felt himself being carried, and then, then the terrible moment happened: tilted horizontally and turned on his back, Charlie was tossed down onto the Rack with a thump.

'Please,' gasped Charlie, the wind knocked out of him, 'please don't.'

Slupp guffawed. 'I like the sound o' yer beggin', Cheesegra'er,' he said. 'Music to my ears, it be.'
Charlie’s arms were raised above his head and pinned down to the Rack. Then his feet were yanked until he thought they would come off. His stomach was as tight as a drum. Straps were pulled across his body, which was torture enough - their coarse leather bit into his ribs as if studded with razor-sharp teeth.

‘Please,’ begged Charlie, unable to help himself, ‘please take off my blindfold.’

He could hear Slupp’s wheezing breath, and the odd slithering shuffle of Lady Slupp. ‘Who – what - came to see you, Charlie, and what did it want?’ came her croaking voice.

Charlie kept his mouth shut and tried to think of the birdcage.

‘Very well,’ said Lady Slupp at last. ‘Lord Slupp, do with him as you please. Call me if he talks.’

Charlie heard the Dungeon door clang shut. His aunt never stayed for the Rack, but would come back when it was time for her Experiments.

‘Now, Cheesegra’er,’ said Slupp, ‘yer all mine.’

Charlie could only imagine what Slupp looked like as he prepared to torture him: fleshy mouth twisted with cruel glee, showing glimpses of crumbling, blackened teeth; his neat little shock of red hair glistening with a feverish sweat; frog-like eyes bulging; pale, sickly skin even paler and sicklier.

‘Why?, Charlie said, ‘Why do you hate me so much?’

As if in answer to his question, Charlie felt the Rack crank into use. Suddenly, he felt as if his brittle limbs were full of shattered glass.

The pain was unbearable.

‘C’mon, Cheesegra’er,’ Slupp goaded, ‘don’t pass out yet. The fun’s only just startin’.’

Another crank, and Charlie thought his arms had been ripped from their sockets.

‘Yer visitors, Cheesegra’er,’ barked Slupp, ‘who was they? What’d they say?’

Crank.

Crank.

Crank.

‘Yer visitors, Cheesegra’er. Who was they? What’d they say?’

It went on and on, - question followed by crank, followed by a howl of pain from Charlie.

Charlie heard the mounting anger in Slupp’s voice, the desperation. At last, he made his final threat.
‘I’ll rip yer arms and legs out, Cheesegra’er, if I has to! One more crank’ll do it!’
Charlie said nothing.
‘Yer visitors, Cheesegra’er. Who was they? What’d they say?’
Charlie opened his mouth to speak, and a few dry and dusty words croaked out of his worn-out throat.
‘What’re ye sayin’, Cheesegra’er?’ barked Slupp. ‘Take off yer blindfold and ye’ll tell? Ye give in?’
Charlie heard the glee in Slupp’s voice. He nodded his head slowly in answer to his questions.
Slupp wasted no time. With his sausage fingers he ripped Charlie’s blindfold from his face.
Charlie stared up at his uncle. Slupp was sweating profusely. His red hair was matted and shiny, his lips bloated and twisted, and his bulging eyes were like cracked saucers.
Charlie looked straight into those eyes and said, with as much force as he could muster,
‘Never.’
For a moment, the Welkin of Gloom fell absolutely quiet.
Charlie took enormous pleasure in watching Slupp’s eyes silently turn from triumphant excitement to white-hot fury. He became so livid that he even held his breath. His cheeks swelled. His thick ears reddened. His prickly red, quill-like hair stood on end, and sweat seemed to boil on his cheeks.
An incredible thing happened next.
Charlie Cheesegrater, the boy who had spent his life in a Cage in crumbling Castle Slupp, laughed.
It felt strange; it felt odd; it felt queer. But most all, it felt wonderful.
So long bottled up inside, the laughter welled up and forced the corners of his mouth to rise. For the first time ever, the Castle, the gloom, everything was filled with the sound of laughter - glorious, rich, and wonderful laughter, and it came rushing out of Charlie with the force of a waterfall.
Meanwhile, Slupp’s fleshy face had turned purple.
‘Laughin’!’ he whispered through clenched teeth. ‘Laughin’! Laughin’ at me!! Why, I’ll kill ye, Cheesegra’er, I’ll...’
Slupp thrust his bloodless hands around Charlie’s neck and began to throttle him.
There was no holding him back. He meant to throttle Charlie to death.
At least, Charlie thought, at least I did not tell him about the birdcage.

He closed his eyes, believing they would never open again.

But the Dungeon’s door suddenly banged open, and an ear-splitting roar filled the room.

Charlie opened his eyes and saw confusion register on Slupp’s mad face, which was barely an inch away. In another second, Slupp had released him, and Charlie began to cough and splutter as his windpipe cleared and gasped for more air.

‘Oi,’ he heard Slupp cry. There was a queer note in the cry, and it took a moment for Charlie to recognize it as fear. Slupp was afraid.

Charlie raised his head and saw why. Hovering in the Dungeon’s doorway was the biggest, most ferocious-looking gloombeast that he had ever seen.

The beast threw back its long head, shaking its lank, dirty mane. It loosed a strangled moan that broke out into a tremendous, blasting roar. It was so tremendous that Charlie felt the Rack quiver underneath him.

After that everything happened rapidly: the sound of powerful wings slicing through the air, a sharp swooshing sound, deep growling, a terrible shriek...

A moment later Slupp had flopped on his back on the Dungeon floor, thrashing his trunk-like arms and legs, as if he were a turtle flipped on its shell. His exposed belly wobbled and jiggled like a balloon filled with water.

The gloombeast stamped its black hooves and loomed over the fallen Slupp, who had begun to whimper. It threatened him with its twisted horn, pointing it down at his neck. Slupp’s face turned a deathly pale, contorting into a hideous grimace.

And it was then that Charlie noticed the blood dripping from the end of Slupp’s leg. The thick, viscous liquid soaked his black pants where his foot should have been. With its horn, the beast had sliced off the bottom half of Slupp’s leg. It lay on the cinderblock next to him in a pool of blood.

Charlie could hardly believe his eyes. His jaw dropped in pure astonishment. His stomach churned, and if he had eaten anything at all of Lady Slupp’s dinner he would most certainly have been sick.

He stared at the gloombeast. In its dagger-shaped eye the gloomlight seemed to boil and froth. With a shake of its head and greasy mane, and a deep sonorous growl, it took to its wings and flew toward Charlie.
He found himself face-to-face with the gloombeast. He stared, terrified, at its horn, nearly oblivious to the drippings that fell out of its flaring nostrils onto his face and shirt. It hovered over him, licking its lips with a pink, drool-laden tongue.

Charlie had never felt such fear. Not even his fear of Slupp or Lady Slupp could equal the fear of this beast that hovered over him. Shutting his eyes tightly, he waited for its fangs to start tearing into his flesh.

The gnashing and thrashing began, but, strangely, Charlie could not feel anything.
He dredged up the courage to open an eye.
What he saw was extraordinary. The creature had begun to saw through Charlie’s straps, the razor edge of its horn cutting through the tough old leather as if it were mere string. In less than a minute, Charlie was free.

He shook his head in utter disbelief.
The gloombeast seemed to stare at Charlie thoughtfully with its strange bauble of an eye. Then, with a savage grunt, it turned and clapped its hooves down on the Dungeon’s floor. It presented its spiny back and greasy mane to Charlie, clearly meaning for him to climb aboard.

‘But...’ Charlie began to babble, shaking his head. There was no way that he could climb onto a gloombeast. He would have to be raving mad!

It was Slupp’s booming voice, laden with an outraged malice, that settled it for Charlie.

‘Cheesegra’er!’ he thundered. ‘Ye did this, I’ll gets ye fer it, I wills!’

He thrashed on the floor, clutching in his meaty fingers what remained of his right leg.

Beside Charlie the gloombeast stamped impatiently and tossed back its head, shaking its greasy mane. Charlie guessed that if it had meant to kill him it would have done so already. He tried moving as fast as he could, but managed only to shift his legs off the Rack and dangle them over the edge. With more effort, he pushed himself up to a sitting position, and then threw himself forward onto the gloombeast’s cold, hairless back.

Meanwhile, Slupp’s whimpers had escalated to outraged wails. ‘Cheesegra’er!’ he bawled. ‘Cheesegra’er! I’ll get ye for this, Cheesegra’er. I’ll get ye and I’ll kills ye! I’ll kills ye! D’ye hear?’

Slupp’s bulging eyes met Charlie’s for only a second, but it was long enough – the red and cracked orbs glared murderously at Charlie, who would remember the look for ever. It had been burnt into his brain and become part of him.
The gloombeast roared and stretched its wings, which rose up on either side of Charlie. The creature gave them a great push and it rushed forward so suddenly and with such force that Charlie nearly toppled off. But he had instinctively grasped its mane, bunching up as much of the slippery, oily hair as he could. He had grasped just enough of it to hold himself on.

The incessant cries of a livid but helpless Slupp rang in his ears as they flew out of the Dungeon:

‘I'll get ye, Cheesegra'er! D'ye hear? I'll get ye!’
Charlie had never seen the interior of the Castle before— he had always been blindfolded. But now, riding on the gloombeast’s back, he could see that in Castle Slupp, everything—the walls, the floors, the ceilings—was a sooty, charcoal black, and caked with layers of grime. Silvery cobwebs hung in dark corners, the webbing nearly as thick as rope in places. Darkness and shadow lurked everywhere—behind every door, under each step. Shards of silvery gloomlight seeped through gaping holes in walls, bathing the decrepit hallways and crumbling corridors in its spectral glow. It seemed to Charlie as if the entire Castle was decaying, like a bad tooth.

And it was for one of these gaping holes in the walls that the gloombeast now headed. The hole was at the end of a corridor swathed in gloomlight, and they were hurtling toward it at top speed. Charlie wrapped his arms tightly around the gloombeast and buried his face in its powerful neck. It was not pleasant—the beast smelled like it might have been rolling in its own filth (which Charlie had seen them do on occasion)—but it did not matter. The important thing was to avoid getting his head knocked off going through the hole.

Charlie lifted his head just high enough to see over the gloombeast. The hole was getting bigger and bigger and bigger as they flew toward it.

*Going,* thought Charlie. *Going, at last!*

With a mighty roar, the gloombeast plunged through the hole and soared out into the sky.

....

Charlie was still groggy from the Rack. Even the smallest movement—wiggling his little finger, for instance—was answered by a terrible aching or sharp-as-glass pain shooting through his entire body. Every inch of him felt spent.

His heart yearned to cheer or cry. But neither would come. It was enough for Charlie to be out, to be free at last.

They soared out into the gloomlight, which now roiled and bubbled like a grey stew, the gloombeast rising and dipping gracefully in the cool air. In the distance, Charlie could just see the spiky outline of jagged black hills. But that was all he saw. All else seemed to be shrouded in darkness or gloomlight.
The beast began to climb, rising up and up. Its powerful wings sliced through the air like blades. Charlie held on desperately, his hands clasped around its neck, his legs clutching its torso. He saw what it was heading for.

The Turret.

The beast trebled its speed. With a slice of its wings it sprang in a graceful arc overtop the Turret. Charlie looked down. For a moment or two the Turret was directly below him. He was able to catch a glimpse of what was happening there, and felt his heart sink.

The golden birdcage lay in a crushed heap on the Turret floor, its bars warped, and its magnificent wings – its radiant white wings - besmirched and blackened. It looked like a dying bird, a battered and bedraggled golden dove breathing its last. Charlie watched the birdcage’s once-graceful wings now jerk and flutter pathetically. It looked as if it were trying to raise itself up, but could not.

Inside it lay the Messenger.

It was no longer glowing and angelic. Its glittering robe had been shredded; scraps of it lay here and there on the birdcage’s golden floor. Charlie could hardly believe his eyes as he saw its long, tentacle-like arms, its clawed feet, and its long, winding tail.

He did not have time to think about what had happened to it. It seemed to have changed into something like Lady Slupp. Or had it always been like that, and had used the sparkling robe to cover itself? Charlie did not know and it did not matter. A sense of urgency gripped him. It had come to save him; now he had to try to save it.

‘Down,’ he croaked to the gloombeast, ‘take us down.’

Charlie kicked at the creature’s taut underbelly with his heels. It was like kicking a side of frozen beef.

The beast growled in response – a deep rumbling, guttural noise that curdled Charlie’s blood.

‘Down,’ Charlie croaked again, desperation rising in his voice. ‘Down!’

The beast did not alter its course. It merely continued to hover high above the Turret. Charlie’s flesh crawled. Only now did he stop to think. He should be with the golden birdcage. Why would a gloombeast rescue him from the Castle? It did not make sense, but there was nothing he could do about it.

For just then, the Turret’s trap door opened, and the long, tottering shape of Lady Slupp poked up through the hole.
Charlie felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. He looked down at the birdcage, which still flapped on the cinderblocks, and at the deformed Messenger. Charlie wanted with all his heart to help, and was ready to give himself up to save the Messenger that had tried to rescue him.

‘You cannot hide, Charlie,’ croaked Lady Slupp, her voice as cold and slimy as the Castle cinderblocks. She tottered across the Turret to his Cage, wrapping her sickle-shaped claws around the bars. ‘There is nowhere in the Welkin of Gloom that you can go. The gloomlight shall always find you.’

Charlie’s gloombeast took to the wing. It veered upward, its powerful wings knifing through the air.

‘Down!’ he cried.

The gloombeast ignored him, and climbed higher and higher into the gloom.

Charlie clasped his hands around its neck, wrapped his legs as tightly as he could around its sturdy torso. He turned to look behind him. With its jumble of jagged, crumbling peaks his Turret resembled a giant, misshapen claw silhouetted against the gloomsky.

A pack of gloombeasts had now got between him and the Turret. And even through the gloomlight, he could make out the shining yellow viciousness of their eyes, and the crumpled silhouettes of their deadly black horns.

There was no way he could help the Messenger now.

He clutched his gloombeast’s neck with all the strength he had left in his arms. They raced upward, rushing forward faster and faster, each great cleave of the wings lifting them higher and higher into the gloomlit sky.
CHAPTER SIX
THE BLASTED HEATH

Charlie’s beast rushed through the gloomlight at an extraordinary speed, leaving the Castle far behind. The pack of gloombeasts trailed them for a while – the gloomlight was so thick and fog-like that Charlie could not see them, but he could hear their angry growling. The growling grew more and more distant, and when the gloomlight had at last thinned to an ocean of misty vapour, Charlie saw that his pursuers had begun to drop one by one from the pack, perhaps in search of easier, slower prey.

Charlie took a deep breath. Was it his imagination or did the air seem fresher? In the Castle the air had always been acrid and crypt-like. Now it pricked the skin on his face as if it had tiny claws, and it pumped up his lungs and got his blood flowing.

He was free.

Free!

For a moment, a brief flash of a moment, Charlie felt elated. A thrill of supreme joy coursed through his entire body, making him feel more alive than ever. His elation bubbled and boiled; he wanted to dance, to shout, to sing – he was so excited that he felt as if he were thrumming with a special power all his own. No more Slupps! No more Knout! No more Rack! No more Experiments!

I’m just like the boy in the story, he thought. I’m free!

And then, an icy realisation dawned on him, cooling the fire of his elation to a simmer.

The Grim War – it was back at the Castle!

Charlie was torn. If he did not have to grip the gloombeast’s neck, he would have wrapped his arms around himself. He felt as if a part of him had been left behind. Never again would he feel the old, creased cover, or trace the stitched pattern with a finger and feel its strange power; never again would he unfasten the gemlike clasps or fall happily into the strange worlds of the stories and lose himself there. Sometimes he had felt as though he were more a part of the Book than the gloomy world around him. For so long, the Book had been all the joy, and learning, permitted him.

And now it was gone.

The gloomlight swirled and danced about Charlie, as if mocking his escape. And when it did part, it revealed a bleak and barren land that looked cold and uninviting, at best. As they flew Charlie looked down at the passing hills. The dark shapes rose and swelled, but
not wholesomely. Instead, they seemed like deformities, like the lumps on a hunchback, and
the little vegetation he saw was stunted, shrivelled and parched. It seemed as though a
catastrophe – perhaps a great fire - had raged across the land, scorching all in its path, leaving
behind nothing but cinders and ashes. He knew what towns were from The Grim War, but he
saw none.

In his mind he heard Lady Slupp’s mocking voice: ‘There is nowhere in the Welkin
of Gloom that you can go. The gloomlight will always find you.’

A chill crept over him, prickling his skin.

But he did not have long to ponder his situation.

His beast had begun to make a low noise that sounded to Charlie like groaning.

His heart began to pound in his chest. What was happening?

Suddenly, the beast roared mournfully, a heart-wrenching bellow that seemed to
emerge from the very depths of its being, sapping the creature of its strength. Charlie could
almost feel a mysterious power rushing out of the creature. Its body quaked and shuddered
beneath him, and the once-powerful wings that had been knifing through the air now faltered.
They dipped and wobbled as the gloombeast struggled to keep itself airborne.

He raised his head and gazed into the distance. For a moment, he saw nothing but the
gloomlight: oceans of misty, greyish darkness that coated everything in its silvery
luminescence, sometimes thickly, other times lightly. But always, it was there.

He glanced over his shoulder. The way seemed clear of gloombeasts, but he felt
uneasy. He swallowed, his tongue as dry and brittle as the pages of his old Book.

Suddenly, his beast bucked, nearly tossing Charlie from his perch. It reared its head
back and bellowed again, its body and horse-like face clearly racked with some inner pain. It
seemed to shrink – Charlie’s legs could wrap around its torso and clasp his feet together. Did
gloombeasts do this? He did not know. He kicked at its belly with his feet, but it was no
good. Its wings now flapped sluggishly, irregularly; each flap seeming to tax the creature to
its limit.

In the next moment they were spiralling downward. Charlie’s stomach leapt into his
throat, and he gritted his teeth so tightly that he thought it a wonder they did not meld
permanently together.

Down they went, the gloomlight-shrouded land below swiftly approaching. He
peered overtop the beast’s head. They were heading for a heath or promontory. Charlie
opened his mouth to scream as he thought they were simply going to crash into the land.
But the gloombeast extended its legs, and Charlie felt it brace itself. It pulled itself up and touched down on the ground with its hooves at a clumsy run. Charlie just managed to keep his hold.

And then, he was hit from behind.

He lost his grip.

With a soundless cry, he flew head over heels and fell in a tumbling heap.

Charlie lay on the ground, eyes closed, enveloped in an eerie silence. He wondered if he were still alive. He lay in the stillness for a time, wondering if he had broken any bones. The rock beneath him felt cold and sharp.

Then from nearby he heard a feral growling and grunting. He opened his eyes and pulled himself to a sitting position as quickly as his tortured body would allow.

A short distance away, on the edge of the blasted heath, two gloombeasts were locked in vicious battle. They charged at one another, the sparse ground seeming to tremble beneath their sturdy legs as they clambered forward. Jousting with their horns, they opened blood-letting gashes in their mid-sections. Both beasts lunged forward, trying to gore the other.

One of the creatures must be his, Charlie realized. The trouble was, he could not tell which was which. Still dazed from his fall, he gaped slack-jawed at the struggling beasts, trying in vain to tell which was his.

One beast finally weakened. Its wounds seemed the bloodiest, and fatal. Great pools of its ruby-coloured lifeblood rushed from its neck and torso, turning the dark soil of the heath even darker. Its movements became sluggish, the jousts of its horn no longer swift and precise, but slow and ineffective.

Charlie knew that his beast had been tiring, and he had felt some strange force or power being sapped from it.

Could it be the one that was now so close to dying? Charlie felt a strange loyalty to the beast. He could not let it die, not if he could help it.

Charlie watched the other creature howl and beat its wings triumphantly. It trotted slowly, cautiously, toward on the weakening one, backing it to the precipitous edge of the heath. It lowered its horn and took aim at the other, meaning to deal it a final blow.

On the ground beside Charlie was a large jagged black rock. He picked it up and raised his arm, gripping the stone as tightly as he could.

What if his hunch was wrong?

Charlie threw the stone.
It sailed through the air, hitting the distracted beast in the back of its head.

The creature loosed a grunt of surprise. And in the seconds that it took for the other to be distracted, the weakening beast lunged forward. It plunged its horn deep into the other's neck. The surprised beast swayed and collapsed in a pool of glistening blood.

The survivor's dagger-shaped eye turned on Charlie, who had begun to think he had made a terrible mistake. He shook with fear. There was nowhere he could run, no one to save him. Why, he thought, why had he thrown that stone!

The gloombeast pointed its bloodied horn in the air and howled, a great beastly bellowing noise.

Then an amazing thing happened.

A mysterious bright light enveloped the creature, tracing its outline first, and then engulfing its body in a glowing blaze.

Charlie shielded his eyes with his forearm.

When the light had been extinguished, Charlie lowered his arm to see that the gloombeast had vanished.

And now, where the gloombeast had been, something hovered, something formless, shapeless — an entity.

Charlie blinked his eyes again and again, and each time he blinked, it seemed as if the rippling entity suspended in the air in front of him changed. And between changes, it was a shifting, jelly-like mass that roiled like the disturbed waters of a storm-tossed lake.

Charlie watched, gape-mouthed. The pool seemed at last to settle. It contracted to half its former size, and lowered itself to the ground. Its corners began to harden and take shape, features formed.

Pinhole eyes. White whiskers. Pink feet.

The pool transformed itself into a rat, a ravaged and bloodied one. Gashes stretched across its belly and back, crimson blood dripping down its grey peaks of fur.

Charlie shambled over to the rat. Its breathing was laboured, stertorous. But it still made the familiar sound:

'Beg beee, beg beee.'

'Begbie,' Charlie whispered. 'It's you.'

He bent down on his knees and picked up the rat, caressing its fur, which felt oddly rough and hard in his hands.

Begbie was not just a rat. He could change shape. What had the Messenger called him?
Draggoth...

‘Don’t worry,’ Charlie whispered to him. ‘Whatever you are, I’ll keep you safe for as long as I can.’

Charlie gently placed Begbie in the inside pocket of his mouldy threadbare vest. He had to get off the heath. But how?

Behind, he was cut off by an outcropping of huge, jagged rocks. He did not know if he could pick his way through them, or if they led anywhere. Worse, if he went that way, he could still be seen by any gloombeasts that might be lurking about.

It seemed that there was only one way to go.

Charlie limped to the heath’s edge, trying to ignore the gory carcass that lay beside him.

Clutching Begbie to his chest, Charlie dropped to his knees and disappeared over the edge of the heath.
Charlie’s feet found no purchase and he began to slide, tumbling over and rolling like a log down the heathside. He was clawed and scraped as he rolled through talon-like branch tips, or bumped up against stalks lined with pricking needles. But they slowed him down, for which he was thankful when a tree trunk at last caught him, nearly splitting him in two, which winded him terribly.

Charlie writhed and gasped until he had caught his breath. Then he remembered that Begbie was still in his vest pocket. He looked down to see the rat’s grey skull crushed up against the trunk. He sat up, lifted the rat from his vest, and was relieved to see his dirty grey underbelly rising and falling. But he was in a terrible condition. In the gloomlight’s dull pall Charlie could see that his sides were nearly split with gashes, and other wounds, so much that they had drenched Charlie’s pocket in blood. His fur was patchy and tufted in parts, limp and lifeless in others. Charlie wondered if crushing him against the tree had knocked him out, but he was comforted because the rat seemed to breathe easily.

Setting Begbie down beside him, Charlie covered the rat with a few black and shrivelled leaves. Then, shivering at the cold, he raised his head and gazed forlornly out at the bleak and barren Welkin of Gloom.

The gloomlight dusted the chancre-like swells of distant hills, and it gyred and danced like a fog along the gloomrock, sometimes obscuring, sometimes revealing. When the gloomlight did clear, Charlie looked hopefully for some semblance of civilisation or life, but there seemed to be nothing but endless stretches of dark, blasted gloomrock, without even a Beast to enliven it. Once again Charlie had the impression that some terrible fire must have blackened the Welkin, scorching the rock, leaving nothing to grow.

He seemed to have rolled perhaps a quarter of the way down a steep, but not sheer, hillside. It was studded with grey boulders that jutted out from the dark soil like serrated teeth. The boulders were wrapped in the curling vines of gnarled shrubbery that writhed up like serpents’ tentacles from the sparse undergrowth. The trees were pale and squat, with trunks warped and bent almost horizontal to the ground, as if the thin, spindly branches they supported were too burdensome. Looking at them, Charlie felt that the trees had a strange, stunted quality, as if they had been forced out of the ground, unwilling. Their gnarled, tangled branches added to this strange effect. They were thrust up like arms raised above heads, as if to shield and protect against some terrible calamity. The trees seemed to Charlie
like petrified, ghostly things, trapped forever in twisted agony, the silent victims of a nameless affliction.

Charlie sat shivering by the trunk of one of these misshapen things. He had no one to guide him, no map, no one to speak to. He did not know how to get food or water, if any could be had in such a barren, unyielding Welkin.

He sat shivering, as the cold reality and desperation of his situation dawned upon him, unwelcome and unbidden. He wished that he had his Book, *The Grim War*, so that he could lose himself in its tales, as he had done so often in his Cage. He tried not to listen as his heart told him that, in all likelihood, he would never feel the turn of its rough parchment in his hands again.

The gloomlight began to swirl, falling about him in grey droplets, spraying his skin, like a light rain. He leaned back against the tree trunk, which jabbed into his back like a bar in his Cage. Head down, knees up, hands slumped by his sides, he drifted into a nightmare-ridden slumber.

A murderous, one-legged Slupp chased him down an endless corridor of the Castle, thundering at the top of his lungs: ‘I’ll kills ye, Cheesegra’er, d’ye hear me? I’ll kills ye!’

Charlie cried out many times, but his cries died unheard and unacknowledged, throttled by the pitiless gloomlight.

Such was Charlie’s first experience of freedom.

When the nightmares released him, Charlie awoke, wincing. Each and all movement, even opening his eyelids, it seemed, was agony. But he ignored the pain, and shifted himself around the tree trunk.

All seemed still and quiet in the Welkin of Gloom. Begbie still slumbered beside him, the shrivelled leaves making a poor blanket. Charlie picked up the rat and placed him in his vest pocket, the blood there having dried. He was breathing softly, his little white whiskers trembling with each breath. The gashes in his scabby fur had dried and begun to heal. Though he had no idea how, Charlie knew that sooner or later he would have to find some food and drink. Not for himself – he was used to going without – but for Begbie. His only plan was to find a town, where he hoped they could beg or scavenge for sustenance.

Charlie crept down the hillside. It was a difficult passage - slipping, sliding, and nearly tumbling his way along, scuffing his knees and palms on the rocky surface. Charlie soon realised that his legs could not carry him very far. They began to feel heavy as though stuffed with bricks, and each step on the hill required a supreme effort that he could not
sustain for long.

He rested, pressed on, and soon the black swells in the distance grew closer. As he went, Charlie became aware of a road that wound and undulated through the foothills. Charlie followed the road that was more like a scar or raised welt than a proper road, hoping that it would lead to a town. He kept to the hillside, just close enough to the road to see, but not, he hoped, be seen. He had to be careful about gloombeasts.

Once, he was startled by a noise coming from behind him, the noise of rocks crumbling beneath wheels. Ducking behind a boulder, he watched as a crude wagon appeared on the road. Charlie peered at the wagon from his vantage point, and at the pitiful beast of burden that pulled it, a horse-like creature so starved that Charlie could count its ribs.

Then his eyes fell on the creatures that drove the wagon. He squinted at them, huddled in the seat, grasping the reins with claw-like hands. They wore cloaks with peaked hoods, and their heads or faces could not be seen. As the wagon trundled by, Charlie caught only snatches of their crude, grunting speech, not enough to understand. They did not seem or sound like Men. The speech was too...Beastish – sounding, and those claws...but what else could they be if not Men? Hunger boiled in Charlie’s stomach. Though desperate, he decided to keep to the hills, and thought better of begging them for food.

But seeing the wagon raised his hopes. It was a harbinger of a town, and Charlie found himself spurred on to continue his stumbling way through the hills.

He lost himself in his thoughts, ignoring his parched throat and starving belly, and walked. The gloomlight hung so thickly about at times that he thought he wore it like a sheet, transforming him into a kind of wandering ghost. He passed through bramble and bush, through sparse, ghostly forests of the squat trees, through treacherous, rocky gulches, until the soles of his feet were cracked and blistered and aching. All the while Begbie slumbered in his pocket, and he kept his hands cupped over him when he could.

After an eternity of walking, he lifted his head to see that he had finally battled his way across the chancre-like hills, and come out on a wide expanse.

Through the shifting gloomlight rose the sight of a town.

His hopes soared, like a man in a desert spotting a distant oasis.

‘Food,’ he croaked to Begbie, his voice little more than a cracked, desperate squeaking. ‘Food, Begbie!’

The gloomlight began to disperse, revealing more glimpses of the town.

It was ringed by grey and black heaps of gloomrock and rubble. Charlie guessed that the heaps of rock had once been a mighty wall that had protected the town, but that had now
crumbled to nothing. Beyond the heaps rose the buildings, if buildings they were. They seemed more like the swelled roofs of domed caves or hovels, thousands of them, piled one on top of the other, profuse, but confused, jumbled. A feeling of unease crept over Charlie as he gazed at the town, if town it was. Dirt roads snaked through the labyrinthine mazes of the cave-like dwellings, and crude wagons plodded along them, carrying their cargo of cowled, huddled Creature-Men. Curlicues of gloomlight eddied about, spiralling through the conical piles of heaped rubbish and dumps of black gloomrock, giving the town a dark, smouldering quality, as if it had just been ravaged by fire.

It was not like any town Charlie had ever read or heard of. Only the Creature-Men could live in those hovels, he feared. The claw-like hands, the Beastish grunting – Charlie thought of these things, and wished he could go elsewhere. But he had no choice.

Charlie stood looking at the unsettling town. His body was rung through with exhaustion; his legs had been buckling for the last part of the journey, at times forcing him to the ground. His stomach gurgled steadily and constantly, beyond hunger, and his head had grown light and begun to swim.

He had to get food and drink soon.

He set off, wondering if he should hail one of the wagons, if one passed him by. He stumbled, fell, and lay on the ground on his stomach, his face pressed against the rippled and grooved surface of the gloomrock. He struggled to raise himself up on his hands, but it was no use. He had to rest.

He lifted his head and gazed blearily at the town.

Suddenly, the gloomlight was gone.

And sunlight shone so brightly that Charlie had to shield his eyes from its brilliance. . . .

The sun’s golden rays revealed a changed town and country. The piles of rocks had been reformed into towering spires, glittering streets and high walls. And instead of the bleak, barren countryside there were now grassy fields that stretched far into the distance, lined with groves of sun-dappled trees.

Charlie began to crawl, drawn by his vision.

In the blink of an eye, the spires, the glittering streets and verdant fields were gone.

And back were the gloomlight, the gloomrock, the chancre-like hills, and the hovel-infested town.

‘No!’ Charlie whispered, shaking his head.

He felt as if he had somehow been cheated. He tried to will the vision to return, but it
would not come.

‘What does it mean, Begbie?’ he whispered to the rat, who was still asleep in his pocket. ‘What does it mean?’

Charlie swallowed dryly, and found himself besieged by all kinds of wild thoughts. They rushed through his mind, half-formed. He felt them more than understood them.

And out of the thoughts sprang a long-buried memory.

Once, and only once, Charlie had spied a patch of blue in the sky above his Turret. At the time, he had not known what to make of it. The gloomlight had suddenly cleared, and the Turret, and Charlie himself, were bathed in a gentle golden light.

Sunlight.

For the first time ever, his skin had tingled with the wonderful caresses of warm, gentle sunlight.

He had risen to his feet and gaped open-mouthed at the wondrous burst of colour in the sky. The patch was large and almost perfectly circular – about the size and shape of one of Slupp’s spacious dinner plates – and it was brilliant. Looking at it, Charlie felt a strange sensation grip him, a sensation that stirred his breast and buoyed his spirits, a sensation that was very like hope.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the patch had gone. The gloomlight rushed in, and the feeling of hope dissipated.

Charlie never saw the patch again. It had been the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. But as time passed, the memory of the patch faded, until Charlie was not sure if it were reality or dream. Then, after countless spells on the Rack, and Lady Slupp’s Experiments, the memory had disappeared.

Until now.

Charlie rubbed his cracked lips with the back of his bony hands.

The patch of blue sky and the vision, – and the feelings they awakened in him – what did it all mean?

A tear dropped from Charlie’s eye and slowly trickled down his gaunt cheeks.

What had happened to the Welkin of Gloom?

He did not know. Strange things, for certain, had happened, and strange things were happening – had happened - to him. But the vision, and the patch of blue, showed Charlie that there was hope, that there was a purpose.

Exhaustion took Charlie over. He fought with every last part of his awareness to keep his eyes open. But he had been walking, crawling, for too long, without water, without food.
He had no more strength to summon.

He collapsed in a heap to the rock.
CHAPTER EIGHT
THE SPIDER

Charlie awoke, the rock cold and hard beneath him.

Sleep had refreshed him only a little, and immediately upon waking, pangs of hunger greeted him, stabbing at his growling, shrunken belly. He rubbed it gently, which seemed to ease it a little.

He sat up, and cast around with his hands, feeling for the bars of his Cage. But his hands found only the cold, unforgiving rock. Where was he?

Then, he remembered.

He was free.

Charlie gazed out at the sombre, chancre-like hills in the distance. Instead of feeling joy at his escape, a strange, powerful longing for the security of his Cage gripped him.

Charlie grew exasperated with himself for allowing it to get hold of him. But he could not help thinking that in the Castle, he had been guaranteed three crusts a day. And he could read his Book. Now he had no food at all, no Book...

Charlie sighed. Then quite suddenly the vision that he had had before he collapsed came rolling brightly back to his memory. The green hills, the verdant fields...Charlie remembered these things, and he remembered the patch of brilliant blue sky that he had seen long ago in his Turret, which the vision had reawakened in him. He did not care whether the vision or the patch were mere dreams or whether they were real. He needed them, they strengthened him, and that was all that mattered. They were all the hope he had.

He resolved to get to the town. He could not see it from where he was - he seemed to be in a sort of cave-like recess. A shelf of black gloomrock curved down over him, sheltering the top half of his body, but his legs and splayed feet lay without. He could not remember how he had gotten there. Had Begbie dragged him to the recess for shelter, after he had collapsed? He raised his hand to feel the comforting lump in vest pocket.

But Charlie’s hand found no reassuring lump.

Panic seized him.

‘Begbie!’ he whispered. ‘Begbie!’

From somewhere nearby came a low growl.

Charlie turned and saw the rat.

He was outside the recess, tensed on the edge of the shelf, growling, his fur sticking up in tough little spikes. He had dug his claws into the rock, his ravaged pink tail poised on a
knife’s edge.

Charlie could not see what he was growling at, but he could hear the half-human chanting, the half-Beastish grunting:

_Ummmmad... ummmmad... ummmmad... ummmmad_

Ignoring his pain and hunger, he shifted his legs under himself and began to crawl forward. When he was within arm’s length of the rat, he glimpsed them below.

Cowled things, like he had seen on the road.

A group of about ten were trying to climb the hill up to his cave. They wore the threadbare cloaks that Charlie had seen before, but these were worn almost to nothing, their peaked hoods slipping down, allowing Charlie to glimpse what was underneath.

Snout-like noses.

Claw-like hands and feet.

Limbs, too many in number.

And he saw eyes, human eyes, mostly, raised up to his.

In a few of the creatures, the sharp feral ferocity of a Beast had nearly taken hold. In the rest, glimmers of reason still danced, and Charlie thought that he could read in them a forlorn, desperate hope; as if they thought he kept some secret cure for their malady.

The insensible chanting rose up from the Creature-Men and hung suspended over them like a lost orison.

_Ummmmad... ummmmad... ummmmad... ummmmad_

Charlie remembered Slupp’s swinish nose and Lady Slupp’s claws and lizard-like tongue. They were corrupted, just like these creatures, but perhaps less so. Charlie remembered something that Slupp had said:

‘Ye’ve got to eat, luv, it slows down the gloomlight, slows down the Turnin’...’

Was this what he had meant by the Turning? Turning into Beasts? Did the gloomlight cause the Turning?

Charlie could not be certain. But it was possible.

His attention was drawn away from the Creature-Men. Far to Charlie’s left, where the road met the ridge’s downward sloping far end, plumes of black dirt and smoke eddied and curled from the ground. Something was coming along the dirt road.

Charlie expected another cart, perhaps a large one, judging from the cloud of black dust that wafted up and dispersed into the swirling grey gloomlight. Drops of cold sweat trickled down Charlie’s greasy forehead, and he felt sick to his stomach as the thing emerged from around the hillside.
He saw the legs first.
Black, sleek, and spindly.
They roamed over the gloomrock like a set of probing stick-fingers, or long black worms wriggling up from the soil. Then the whole monstrosity – big, black and bulbous - emerged from behind the ridge, and came scrabbling down the road. Something was written across the bulging back hindquarter:

*The Great Nefandous Presents The Master Puppeteers*

The spider-like thing turned to head toward the town, and Charlie could see its face. There were two large orbs, blazing like angry suns, and beneath them, pincers – long and sharp pincers. Clasping and unclasping, they made a grating noise that reminded Charlie of Slupp sharpening blades before supper.

The thing turned off the road, and began to scrabble in his direction. It came looming up, its red eyes glowering, pincers snapping. His stomach turned as beneath the pincers a dark maw began to yawn open. It seemed large and capacious enough to swallow the Creature-Men and Charlie whole.

Charlie scooped up the rat in his hands, and turned to climb around the recess.
He did not feel the hand slip around his throat until it was too late.

Powerful fingers lifted Charlie upward, digging into his neck, hauling him upward. His back scraped against the roof of the shelf, and the pain was like being dragged across burning coals. Charlie tried to cry out, but nothing came except for a strangled gulping noise. He squirmed and thrashed his legs and torso like a fish caught on a hook.

The hand pulled him up, up, up, and then, quite suddenly, it let him go.
Someone had begun to scream in pain.
‘My hand! My favourite hand!’
Charlie collapsed in a heap to the ground. When he had pushed himself up and turned around, he saw an incredible sight:

A boy – a big, thickset, powerful-looking boy - was sitting on top of the shelf, crying. The boy had a number of arms – Charlie could not tell how many – but there were at least two stumps where perhaps more arms had once grown. There seemed to be a shabby dark grey mitten attached to one of the arms. The boy gawked at it, his pale, oafish face twisted in horror.

Charlie blinked.

It was no mitten.
It was Begbie.

The rat’s jaws were clamped tenaciously over one of the boy’s hands. Charlie saw his white teeth, bared under pink lips, and shuddered.

The boy was screaming, and began desperately to batter the rat against the shelf.

‘Stop!’ Charlie croaked. ‘Stop!’

With one last mighty blow, the boy finally managed to knock Begbie off his hand. The rat flew through the air and landed with a heavy thump beside Charlie. Undaunted, Begbie rolled over, dug his claws into the dirt, and eyed the boy with his little pinhole eyes. His furry sides heaved in and out quickly as he tried to catch his breath. Some of his old wounds had reopened, and he had obviously earned new ones.

Charlie scrambled over to Begbie, scooping up the rat and stuffing him back in his vest pocket.

‘He doesn’t mean any harm,’ he shouted to the boy. ‘He was just protecting me!’

The boy glared at Charlie, lips twisted in a grimace of hatred. With the fine, deadly grace of a spider, he crawled down the boulder, and before Charlie could even begin to think about running away, the boy was on him, leaping from the recess and tackling Charlie to the ground. Something heavy and hard – a rock, perhaps – struck him on the head, and the next thing Charlie knew, he was being dragged roughly by the hair down the sloping ridge, hovering between consciousness and oblivion.

An eternity might have passed until he felt himself tossed to the ground on his belly. With a struggle he pushed himself up and raised his head.

The Creature-Men ringed about him, clawing at the air, chanting:

\[ \ldots \text{ummmad} \ldots \text{ummmad} \ldots \text{ummmad} \]

The boy with the six arms swatted and swiped at them with a club, keeping them at bay.

Using a final reserve of strength, Charlie began to kick and scramble, but the boy lunged and raised his club high.

Charlie heard a savage crack, and his strength drained swiftly from him. The boy’s hands gripped his ankles with a brute strength that nearly wrenched them off, and he floated past the chanting Creature-Men in a delirious, swampy darkness.

\[ \ldots \text{ummmad} \ldots \text{ummmad} \ldots \text{ummmad} \]

Up, up he went, dragged along a rising wooden ramp.

And into the yawning black maw of the Spider.
CHAPTER NINE
THE MASTER PUPPETEERS

Charlie hovered in a dark, borderless nightmare land.

A parade of images – Beast-people and hovels, racks and Gloombeasts, Slupps, Spiders and six-armed people - tortured him, until at last he drifted out of the feverish darkness into the light, a light that grew brighter and brighter, until...

He was staring at a taper.

It lay on a table nearby, flickering, a pale, bluish flame.

Then, slowly, as if just coming into focus, he saw the black bars. They stood like silent soldiers before him, above him, around him.

He was back in his Cage, in Castle Slupp, and Slupp himself was bellowing to him for a spell on the Rack...

Except that he lay on a bed, a bed inside a new cage. Its stolid black bars were clamped down over him with a terrible certainty, just like his old one at Castle Slupp.

Charlie tried to sit up, to push himself up on his elbows, but only slumped back down on the bed. Every muscle in his body felt drained of strength. His matchstick arms, battered and bruised, drooped over the sides of his bed, knuckles nearly rapping the floor. His balloon-head floated up to see his pale splayed feet poking out from under the bed’s dusty blankets. His head throbbed with a pulsing pain, and he had to fight to keep everything from spinning.

Begbie was sound asleep in his vest pocket, a little lump on his chest. Charlie cupped his hand over the little shape, breathing a sigh of relief.

Something in the shadowy room caught his attention.

Eyes.

Dozens of them, perhaps even hundreds, glittering, staring.

A chill ran the length of Charlie’s body, down to his toes. He drew up his legs, and pressed himself backwards, trying to get as far away as possible from the gleaming little eyes that stared out of the darkness.

There was something feral, something starved about the eyes.

Charlie stared at them, and through the undulating shadows of the room, he caught glimpses of bodies.

Small, twisted limbs, dangling, writhing like white snakes.

Children, Charlie thought, they must be children.
Hundreds of wild, hungry children.

His eyes battled with the room’s shadowy oppressiveness. He thought he could now see slumped, sprawling figures stacked one on top of the other. Everywhere that light could penetrate revealed twisted limbs and dark slumped shapes, and the staring, gem-like, ravenous eyes.

He was surrounded by them.

Charlie stifled a scream as a door creaked open, and a dull, reddish pall drifted like blood-water into the room.

‘That ain’t no rat, papa!’ grunted a coarse voice.

Charlie braced himself.

Footsteps thumped down the corridor toward the door, and the boy with six arms appeared on the steps. The red pall bathed him in its eerie light, making the black smock he wore – which covered his whole thickset body except for hands, feet and head – appear as if drenched in blood. He was pointing all of his sturdy, branch-like arms at Charlie. One of his hands, Charlie noticed, he had wrapped in a blood-stained bandage: the result of Begbie’s razor-sharp teeth. The boy had not forgiven nor forgotten what Begbie had done to him; he looked as sulky and hateful as any Beast that Charlie had seen suffering at Slupp’s hands.

Charlie could not help feeling a twinge of pity.

‘My favourite hand, papa!’, the boy grunted again, narrowing his egg-like eyes into a steely glare. He had thick, heavy lips that reminded Charlie of greasy sausages that Slupp sometimes gobbled.

‘That ain’t no rat, I knows it in my bones!’

The boy seemed ungainly and oafish, with thick lips and a thicker forehead. But his movements were as stealthy and nimble as a spider’s. He skittered down the steps into the room, and Charlie’s lips curled with repulsion.

A strange, lilting voice froze the boy into a statue.

‘Gibbous,’ it moaned, ‘be kiiiind, or you will feel my caaaaaane across your head.’

The voice was extraordinary. As soon as he heard it, Charlie was reminded of wind moaning and sighing around his Turret, and how he had sometimes thought it was trying to speak to him. The wind had sounded so sad, so mournful, at times. Amazingly, the voice Charlie heard now was just as sad and weary-sounding, perhaps even more so.

A long, lean, and crooked figure appeared at the round door. It was an old man, and he stood at the top of the stairs, shrouded in the murky red pall wafting in from beyond the
door. In one of his eight withered arms, he clutched a cane that was as long, lean and
crooked as him. A black smock covered his lanky, stooped frame, except for arms, feet, and
head. The man’s skin seemed deeply wrinkled and shrivelled, and was as pale and bloodless
as the gloomlight itself.

But it was the man’s face that was most unsettling. It seemed frozen in a peculiar
mask: a large mouth with the corners turned down in almost comic sadness; a thick bottom
lip nearly doubled over across his chin.

‘That rat, papa,’ croaked Gibbous.

The boy reeled away from the puppets and sprang across the room, his feet pounding
on the wooden boards. He gripped the bars of Charlie’s cage with five meaty hands and
snarled like a gloombeast.

‘Let me get the knife, papa! You oughta let me kill it dead, you oughta let me get the
knife...!’

The boy gritted his black teeth. He made awful wringing and ripping motions with all
six of his hands.

Charlie pressed Begbie against his chest to protect him. But the rat seemed
unperturbed; in fact, his mouth gaped open in a long, insolent yawn.

The boy’s podgy face swelled and reddened, and his eyes bulged. He thrust a grasping
hand covered with welts and warts into the cage, which Charlie did his best to dodge.

The old man crept stiffly down the stairs, his face still frozen in its peculiar mask.

‘Enooooough, Gibbous,’ he moaned, brandishing his old, crooked cane.

The boy gave Charlie and the rat a long loathsome stare, and turned away.

‘Pleeeeeseeallow me to introduuuuuuuce myself,’ said the man, as he crossed the room.

He stabbed at the wooden boards with his cane as he hobbled, and the hollow knocking
resounded in the cavernous room. He came to Charlie’s cage and stopped.

‘I am Nefaaaandous,’ he declared, bowing with some difficulty, ‘maaaaster
puppeteeeeer.’

With one long, gnarled hand, Nefandous fished in a pocket of his smock and brought
out a key, worn brown with age. He turned the key in the cage’s lock, swung the creaking
door open, and stepped inside.

Charlie steelied himself, and shrank away as far as possible from the man.

Nefandous towered above Charlie. Slowly, very slowly, he leant over, peering at
Charlie over the rocky bridge of a crumpled nose. Charlie shifted his eyes, to avoid staring
into the flaring black holes of the man’s nostrils. He leaned closer and closer, smacking his
lips as if he were about to eat Charlie.

*Smack*

*Smack*

*Smack*

Charlie tried to swallow, but the lump in his throat was too big. Begbie growled and stirred in his pocket.

‘What aaaaare you?’ Nefandous asked, at last. His prunish head bobbed from side to side, serpent-like, as he talked.

His breath was foul, like rotting trash. But Charlie had suffered fouler. He felt the man’s bulging eyes run greedily over him.

Like dealing with Slupp, Charlie thought it best to keep very quiet.

The man continued, his voice a long moan.

‘Everyone and everything in the Land of Gloom has been marred, defoooorrrrrmed, corrrrrrupted, by the...glooooomlight...all, that is, except for yooooouuuuu.’

The man stretched to his full, crooked height. And in a showman’s voice, he declared,

‘Yooooou are the Unmaaarrrred. A Liiiiiving Myth!’

Nefandous turned and skittered out of the cage, all of his former stiffness suddenly gone.

Charlie had been holding his breath. Now that the man had gone, he let it out in a relieved gasp and wrapped his hands around Begbie. The feel of the rat’s tough, brush-like fur comforted him.

Nefandous turned away from the puppets. He stabbed his cane at the floor, the knocks sounding like thunder.

‘But we must eat, ohhhhhh the huuuungeerrrr, we must eat, or…’

Nefandous dragged a long gnarled finger across his wrinkled neck.

‘But yoooouuu will save us,’ he said pointing his cane at Charlie. ‘The waaaay the Beastmen pawed at you, how they worshipped you – they will pay, oh yes, they will pay, to see the Living Myth, the only pure, uncorrrruppted being in the Welkin of Gloom.’

Nefandous raised a hand. He clutched a gold coin between two crooked fingers.

‘We will show you, displaaaaay you, and the Beastmen will pay!’

‘No papa,’ Gibbous pleaded, ‘let me get the knife! The knife!’

The cane whooshed through the air.

*Crack*
Gibbous lay sprawled on the floor, his five good hands clutching his head. The man towered above the boy, his cane raised high above his wrinkled, egg-shaped head.

Charlie stood up and gripped the bars of his cage, ignoring his pain. ‘Stop!’ he cried. ‘Stop!’ Nefandous swivelled his head and glared at Charlie. Charlie was breathing rapidly. His chest rose and fell in time with his pounding heartbeat.

He watched the man as he began to walk stiffly across the boards toward him. Nefandous stopped just before the cage and craned his head, peering myopically at Charlie, licking his lips.

‘Let the Showiiiiings begin!’ he said. ‘At once!’ ‘What’s a Showing?’ Charlie asked. ‘You will seeeee,’ moaned Nefandous, bottom lip curled even farther over his chin. He turned away from Charlie and stepped quickly across the room to the door, as if inspired by his own brilliance.

‘We must make preparations,’ he moaned, his face still locked in the peculiar mask. ‘Gibbous, cooome with meeeeee. We must find Eldritch!’ The boy thudded across the room and disappeared up the stairs. ‘That ain’t no rat!’ he grunted, as he left. ‘Kill it and the Unmarred dead, papa!’

Charlie heard Gibbous’ heavy feet pound away down the tunnel away from the room, which now fell eerily quiet. He stood in his cage, alone in the shadowy room, alone except for Begbie. Charlie stood for a long time, clutching the bars of his cage. They felt cold in his hands, like bars of black ice. Across the room the round door stared at him. Strangely, it had a doorknob in its centre. The flickering light from the taper by Charlie’s bed began to play tricks, making the doorknob seem like a pupil, and the door itself a black eye, forever closed, yet forever watching.

Charlie turned his back on it, and lay down on his bed. He tried not to think about his new captors, but he could not help wondering what the Showing could be. He had a bad
feeling about it, and along with his usual famished hunger and parched thirst, worry began to 
gnaw at his insides.

As a powerful weariness spread over him, Charlie tried to console himself.

At least, he thought, he would be fed. Whatever the Showing turned out to be, at least 
he would be fed.
CHAPTER TEN
SHOWING

It was not long before the puppeteers returned. The round door creaked open. A dark outline bathed in a lurid halo of swampy red light appeared on the doorstep. It was squat and thickset, one hand still wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage.

Charlie awoke, groggily. When he saw Gibbous, he instinctively searched his vest pocket for the reassuring lump.

But the lump was not there.

Panic rose in his belly. Where had the rat gone?

‘Lookin’ for your rat?’ grunted the boy. He began making ripping and strangling motions with his five good hands.

‘Killed it dead, I did,’ he said, with a sneer.

Charlie did not believe him. ‘He didn’t mean any harm,’ he said, quietly but firmly.

‘You attacked me, remember. Begbie was only protecting me.’

Gibbous’ eyes flared with anger. He emerged from the murky shadows of the doorstep and skittered down the steps across the room to Charlie’s cage. He pressed his podgy face through the bars and snarled,

‘That ain’t no rat, I tell you. I feel queer, ever since that rat bit me. Hungry, even more ‘n usual.’

The boy snapped his blackened teeth together, and Charlie drew back, repulsed.

‘Kill it dead, I will, if I get a chance. And you too, Unmarred.’

‘Why?’ Charlie asked. ‘What have I ever done to you?’

A strange look came over Gibbous’ ugly face. ‘We’re all changin’, turnin’,’ he said, ‘because of the gloomlight. Eatin’ usually helps, keeps us from turnin’ too quick. But ever since that thing bit me, I feel like I’m turnin’ even faster, no matter how much I eat. But you’re not. You’re Unmarred. And it ain’t fair!’

The boy growled and thrust a spindly arm into Charlie’s cage, hand clutching and grabbing for his neck. Charlie pushed himself to the back of the cage.

It occurred to him that Nefandous may have put him in the cage for his own protection, and not just to keep him prisoner. He hoped that Gibbous could not get the key.

‘I was going to ask for food,’ he said, dodging Gibbous’ clutching hands, ‘but I guess this isn’t a good time.’

His words seemed to enrage Gibbous. The boy was nearly hopping with anger. He
thrust his arms deeper into the cage, but they were not quite long enough to reach Charlie, who shifted himself here and there out of harm’s way.

Then, Nefandous’ crooked, stooped figure appeared on the doorstep. The man seemed to shine with a strange light, and he smacked his dry lips excitedly.

‘Alllll is reaaaaady,’ he moaned. ‘Gibbous, ooooom the hatch, boy.’

Still in his cage, Charlie was hoisted onto a wagon, and then rolled down a ramp out of the shadowy room and into the gloomlight. Though heavy, its touch seemed prickly and cool on Charlie’s skin. The wagon wheels creaked, grating on Charlie’s ears as it moved through the gloomlight. It was guided by the long, lean and crooked figure of Nefandous.

‘Ohhhhhh, the glooooooomlight,’ he moaned, bitterly, using his cane like a scythe and swatting at the thick, shifting fog, as if he could slice his way through it.

Gibbous pushed from behind, his meaty fists clutched around the bars of Charlie’s cage. He pressed his podgy face between them, and uttered oaths that Charlie did his best to ignore.

Charlie saw a hovel-town in the distance, shrouded in the gloomlight, which gave it a ghastly, tomb-like look. Charlie had no way of knowing whether it was the same town as he had seen before, or a different one. As they approached, the chant rose up, again like a lost prayer:

‘ummmad...ummmad...ummmad...’

And Charlie saw them, dark, cadaverous shapes, streaming out of the ruins of the town.

Most wore ragged, threadbare pants and jackets, ripped by the unnatural changes wrought to their bodies. Most could walk. But some, troubled by their Beast-like limbs or extremities, adopted a curious half-shambling gait as they joined their brethren.

‘ummmad...ummmad...ummmad...’, came the chant.

Other Beastmen – but of a much lesser degree, like the puppeteers - drove them on, like cattle. Their whips cracked and snapped, and howls and cries rose up from the Beastmen, who huddled closer and closer together, until they seemed like a single, hobbling, creeping mass.

Nefandous halted, and the lesser Beastmen marshalled their stock in a mob before Charlie’s cage.

Charlie’s first instinct was to shrink back and huddle into himself. The hideous deformities, the chanting – it was all too nightmarish.
But instead, he stood and gripped the bars of his cage. He looked out at the mob of Beastmen. He wondered what had they been like before the gloomlight.

Charlie noticed then that a fence had been erected, and the Beastmen yowled and stamped behind it. To pass through the fence's gate, a Beastman first had to put a coin into a sack, which Nefandous held.

One Beastman shambled forward out of the mob, and tossed its coin into the sack. The Beastman was missing a foot – it seemed to have been torn off, leaving a bloodied stump, which it dragged across the ground as it shuffled toward Charlie's cage. It wore breeches and a vest, and its two arms snaked through the holes. The arms seemed to end in claws, like a shellfish's snappers, which the Beastman raised as it crept toward Charlie.

When it was close enough, Charlie saw that they were not claws at all. They were hands, hands that had been gnarled, hardened and misshapen until the fingers seemed melded together into a pointed, curved lump. And a hammer was lodged in one of the snappers.

Charlie stared at the Beastman, but was not afraid. If anything, he felt enormous pity for it. Its face was still human, and framed by long, stringy almost colourless, grimy hair that stuck to its cadaverous skin. Its nose was swinish, and its mouth gaped open, exposing a row of blackened, crumbling teeth. Its jaw looked as if it had been slammed to one side and left to set unnaturally.

And the eyes were not like the inscrutable eyes of a Beast. They were the eyes of a person. But something was happening to them. Charlie tried to look deeply into them. They were still a watery blue, and most of the eye – the whites and the pupil – sparkled with the luminous quality of a polished gem.

The eyes were not bright, happy eyes; they were the eyes of a beggar. Charlie had read about beggars. Some were like thieves, and they hated and feared the fortunate. But there were others, he knew, the saddest of them, who wanted not spare coins to buy food, but for you to perform magic and transform them into a different being - into the being they were before the Change, a being more like yourself.

That was how this Beastman, and perhaps many of the Beastmen, looked at Charlie. Some, like Gibbous, hated and feared him. But most begged him, worshipped him, and beseeched him to transform them. In him they saw someone whom the gloomlight had not touched, not corrupted. Above all, they saw him as someone who had kept his original form. They begged him to save them from their fate, from the Turn.

And Charlie could see the Turn working on them.

A strange, dull, dead quality invading the gem of their eyes.
A part of the gem that had lost its lustre.
If they were not saved, the lustreless quality would overwhelm the luminous.
Charlie shuddered.
What would they be like then? When the Turn was complete?
Charlie imagined it to be like looking into the eyes of the dead, except that they would be living.
They came, one after the other, shuffling, hopping past Charlie, each tormented by their own hideous deformities.
As they passed, Nefandous and Gibbous lunged at them with their clubs. And, Charlie noticed, the lips of the puppeteers were peeled back in wide, satisfied grins.
The Showing, it seemed, was a great success.

When it was at long last over, the puppeteers wheeled Charlie back to the Spider, up the ramp, and into the shadowy room.

Charlie had curled himself into a ball on his bed, the horror of the Showing, and the Beastmen, still vivid in his mind. His head spun. When he closed his eyes, he saw them come, wave after wave of shambling Beastmen, each with a different horror, their faces locked in pitiable torment.
And he was powerless to help them.
The Slupps, the grotesque puppeteers, the Beastmen, the gloomlight – Charlie wondered how long he could survive in such a Welkin.

The puppeteers hauled heavy brown sacks up into the room. When all the sacks had been brought up, Nefandous reached a long, gnarled hand inside one of them and pulled out a handful of golden coins. They spilled from his hand and rattled on the wooden floorboards. Gibbous immediately tossed himself to the floor and began gathering them up, slurping noisily, greedily, all the while. It was as if he were famished and the little coins were morsels of food. When he tried to stuff the coins in his pockets, Nefandous struck the boy a savage blow across the head with his cane.

‘In the saaaaaack, pleeeasse, Gibbous,’ moaned the man. ‘These puppets,’ he declared, spreading all of his arms wide to indicate the misshapen things on the shelves. They stared back, gem-like eyes glittering. ‘These puppets no longer pay. Uuuuseless, they are...’

With surprising quickness, the old man lashed out with his cane, not once, but several times. Charlie gasped. Two puppets were struck, and they dropped from the gallery to the wooden floor with soft little thuds. They writhed and squirmed there in quiet agony.
Charlie stared in horror. It had happened so quickly.
Gibbous jumped up and down, clapping his five goods hands.
‘More, papa, more,’ he said, twisting his thick lips into something like a smile.
The boy lunged forward perhaps to kick the puppets.
‘Enough, Gibbous, do not be cruuuuel!’ said the man, brandishing his cane.
Gibbous slunk away, muttering to himself.
Taking several sacks each, the two puppeteers turned to climb up the little staircase out of the room.
Gibbous returned in a moment, skipping down the stairs. The boy picked up the remaining sacks in his meaty fists. He paused a moment and began to sniff.
‘You’ve given it food, Eldritch!’ he snarled.
The boy dropped the sacks and turned his back to Charlie. He studied the gallery of misshapen puppets, as if looking for something, or someone. He had a bull neck, and bulky shoulders, which he shrugged in frustration, not being able to find what he was looking for. He raised a fist and shook it at the puppets.
‘No one wants to see your masterpiece anymore, Eldritch!’ he grunted.
He picked up the sacks and hauled them up the stairs and through the door, slamming it behind him.

The puppets shifted uneasily in the gallery. The two fallen puppets had stopped writhing, and now lay still on the dark, grainy floorboards. Were they dead, Charlie wondered. Perhaps a better question was, he thought, were they alive? But how could puppets be alive? Charlie’s gaze ran over the puppets on the floor and wall. Their shining orbs stared back. They were as misshapen and corrupted as the Beastmen, as all things in the Welkin of Gloom.

Charlie sat on his bed, and held his head in his hands.

And then he smelled it...something sweet and strange...the aroma tickled the hairs inside his nostrils. When it reached his stomach, his belly-rumblings turned into explosions. It was as if a set of firecrackers were going off in his empty belly. His mouth began to water; his stomach doubled then trebled its explosions.

He saw it.

A tray.

A tray, heaped with food, sitting next to him, on the bedside table by the taper.
Charlie thought he must be dreaming.
He turned away, and looked back.
Cakes, breads, pies, fruits, goblets of drink – it was all still there!
The food was old and stale, the slices of meat sliver-thin, and some of the breads and cakes looked crusty and dry and hard rather than moist. But to Charlie’s famished eyes, the little tray of heaped food seemed like the greatest feast ever prepared.
He pushed himself all the way up to a sitting position.
Begbie suddenly appeared out of a dark corner, sniffing. His pink nose wiggled furiously, as if trying to drink in as much of the enticing aroma as his little lungs would permit. The rat scurried across the room and leapt up onto Charlie’s bed. Charlie stroked and caressed him.
‘Where have you been?’ he chided, though he did not care. He was just glad to see the rat again.
His patchy fur was almost entirely black now, and it felt bristly and stiff in his hands. He examined the rat and discovered the cause: dried blood.
‘Begbie,’ whispered Charlie. His voice was dry and papery. ‘Are we dreaming?’
The rat hobbled down to the tray, moving as if with a crippling pain that made each step agony. Charlie knew how he felt. A sense of deep respect and admiration for Begbie spread over him. Where would he be without the rat? Begbie crept down to the tray, sniffing it all over. Then he turned his head to gaze pleadingly back at Charlie with his pinhole eyes.
‘It’s OK,’ said Charlie. ‘Go on. You deserve this as much or more than I do.’
Instantly Begbie began eating. He nibbled at first, and then, warming to the food, he began taking great mouthfuls of the meats and breads. He was every bit as starving as Charlie, perhaps even more so, if that was possible. He made satisfying little crunching and smacking noises as he ate.
Watching Begbie eating gave Charlie a wonderful feeling. After all that the rat had done for him, Charlie felt that he had at last been able to do something in return.
Begbie ate as much as he could. When he had finished, he hobbled back onto the bed and lollled on the blankets between Charlie’s legs, licking his fur.
Now it was Charlie’s turn.
It had been so long, so very, very long. Charlie was almost too hungry to eat.
But there was another reason stopping him.

Once Slupp had roasted some bloated insects and disguised them in a delicious, savoury sauce that he knew Charlie could not resist. And when Charlie out of sheer starvation took a mouthful of the stuff and began to gag, Slupp had roared and roared with laughter until tears streaked down his pale, puffy cheeks.

Charlie could not easily forget such an experience. For a long time, he sat staring at the food, getting hungrier and hungrier.

And then, overcoming his fear, Charlie leaned forward and quietly, happily, he began to eat.

He savoured each bite, eating slowly. Each mouthful of meat or cheese or bread tasted better than the last. He ate as much as he could, but after being neglected all these years, Charlie’s stomach had shrunk into a ball about the size of his fist. It simply could not handle very much food.

It was no matter.

Charlie was more than happy. At long last he had had a meal, and tasted something other than dry, stale biscuit.

He lay down on the bed, placing his hands behind his head. His belly was full, his sickly feeling had gone, and a warm, pleasing sensation flowed through his body. He grew drowsy, and turned to drift off into a deep sleep.

That was when the note sounded.

A deep rich note.

He sat up, scanning the room. His bed seemed to vibrate with the note’s timbre. The puppets in the gallery glared back, but he could see nothing but their lumpen bodies.

The note sounded again, deep and rich in the cavernous shadowy room.

And then, more notes, until a slow, melancholy tune drifted and floated amongst the shadows. Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie saw something move.

A quill, moving up and down in time with the tune.

And a puppet sitting in the gallery, holding a cittern in its hands.

Charlie could not move in the least.

The deep timbre of the instrument’s voice filled the room with a melancholy, bittersweet tune.

Charlie listened, his heart swelling, and then the tune ended, and the last sad notes faded away.

The puppet put the cittern aside. It got up, set its two feet down on the wooden floor,
keeping its head bowed, so Charlie could not see its face. But he could see what it wore: an old dancer’s costume, and a pair of battered old dancer’s shoes. The costume had once been pink, but was now torn and smeared with grime; and the old shoes had worn straps that wound feebly around the creature’s thin, puppet-like ankles and calves.

Charlie could hardly believe his eyes.

It was so life-like, so real, it could not be...

Very slowly, the puppet-girl raised her bowed head, and Charlie could at last see her face.

It was blank.

A pale, papery globe of a face, framed by bobbed black hair.

Charlie stared in wonder. It was as if the puppet-child’s maker had not had time to create its face, and had left the material, or the skin, blank. The face’s material seemed so soft and fine, and with such a rich sheen, like silk, that he longed to reach out a hand and gently stroke it.

The puppet-child raised a dainty hand to her pallid mask of a face. In the hand was a long grey feather. To Charlie’s amazement, she began to draw on the blank face with the feather. It ran deftly, expertly, making soft scribbling sounds, and in a moment, a masterpiece of simplicity had been drawn: a face composed only of black lines.

Two perfectly round eyes.

Graceful eyebrows, quaint nose.

And a mouth with the corners turned up in a bright, warm smile.

It was the most welcoming face that Charlie had ever seen. But in the next moment, it was gone. The puppet-child had passed her hands over her face, brushing it clean, and once again her face became a pallid mask.

She scribbled again.

The new face was so utterly sad, so entirely bereft of happiness. Charlie stood up and coiled his fingers around the bars of his cage; he wished that he could break them and rush to comfort the forlorn puppet-child. All the misery and sadness of the Welkin of Gloom seemed to be embodied in the simple black lines of her melancholy eyes and mouth and figure.

She began to turn away. Charlie reached a desperate hand through the bars, in a feeble gesture of comfort.

She knelt down to the fallen puppets, comforting them, stroking them delicately as if they were her children.

Charlie could not see her face; it was turned from him. But a curious warmth stole
over him as he watched the girl stroke the puppets with her graceful, dainty hand. The sensation began at his heart and moved slowly through his entire body, until he felt his toes tingle. He longed to do the same for her, to give comfort.

The puppet-girl rose from the floor. With great care, she restored the fallen puppets to their places in the gallery. On a card that she pulled from the gallery she scribbled something, and held it up for Charlie to see.

_Nefandous and Gibbous were not always as they are now. Like you, they took me in and fed me when I was lost and starving. They should be pitied rather than hated._

She put the card away, and reached into the gallery once more. Clutching something in her hands, she leapt down from the gallery and with her lithe grace crossed the floor to Charlie’s cage. She held out a puppet through the bars for him to take.

He reached out and took it in trembling hands.

The puppet was long and thin, dressed in black pants and vest, with long, lank, stringy black hair spilling over a face as pale as a moon. It gazed out at the world with lamp-like dark eyes that seemed both naïve and weary, with two thin strips of faded dark cloth under the eyes, like smudges.

‘Who is it?’ Charlie asked.

The puppet-girl pointed a finger at Charlie.

‘It’s me?’

The girl nodded.

Charlie looked at the puppet once again.

‘Do I really look as sad as that?’ he mumbled to himself.

It was an odd feeling, holding a puppet of yourself, he thought. A strange, tingling feeling spread over him. He felt as though every last fibre of his body were trembling, but with something very different than fear. No one had ever given him anything; at least, not that he could remember.

Charlie felt a soft lump inside the puppet’s vest pocket. Charlie looked up at the puppet-girl. Her sad face had gone, replaced by the joyous, welcoming one he had first seen her create. She nodded at him excitedly, motioning for him to reach inside the pocket.

Charlie’s long slender fingers dug inside, pulling out another puppet.

A dark grey rat.

Begbie.

Just then, the real Begbie roused himself from his position on the bed. His shifting pinhole eyes settled on his puppet, and the creature wiggled his little pink nose and shook his
head, as if to say, 'not a very good likeness, I'm afraid.'

Charlie threw back his head. Despite all his aches and pains and bruises, he laughed.

It was a dry, hacking laugh, as if his throat and lungs wondered what was happening.

For the first time in his life, he felt truly, wonderfully, happy.

At last, he stopped laughing.

He furrowed his brow.

The girl was walking backwards, away from him, across the room.

With her quill she quickly drew a face.

Her eyes were wide-open with shock, her mouth shaped into a gaping oval.

'What's wrong?' Charlie cried. 'What's wrong?'

And then he knew.

His teeth.

She had seen his teeth.

He cried out for her, but it was no use.

She had turned and, in a blur of pink and black, fled from the room.

. . . .

Charlie stared at the round door, hardly able to believe what had happened, and the door seemed to stare mockingly back. The wonderful warm feeling he had had while laughing had slipped away, unreal as a dream.

Though he had only seen her for a short time, the puppet-girl evoked feelings in Charlie that he had never had before. He sat on his bed, his mind replaying what he had seen: the girl comforting the battered puppets, stroking them with the loving care of a mother for an infant.

Over and over again he saw this, until it seemed to have worked a spell, entrancing him. He could not think about anything, or anyone, else.

A great yearning rose within Charlie for the puppet-girl. She had fed him – the tray by his bedside had not a single morsel or crumb remaining. He chided himself for not having the presence of mind to thank her, even to speak to her.

What was she? Who was she? And what was she doing in the Spider with the puppeteers?

Charlie burned to ask her these questions, but would he ever get the chance to ask them?

'Slupp was right,' he said to Begbie, 'my teeth are hideous. I am hideous. I'm just like the boy in the story.'
Begbie, unperturbed by the scene with Eldritch, leapt down from the bed and disappeared into the shadows.

Charlie spent a long time, sitting in his cage, cursing Slupp for corrupting his teeth. He wondered if he would ever see the black eye across the room open, and the puppet-girl’s lithe frame come dancing in.

Only then could he gaze into the marvellous simplicity, the black lines and shading, of her face.
The Welkin of Gloom had no moon or sun to mark the passage of time. There was only the gloomlight, ever swirling, ever grey, ever present.

The Spider scrabbled along on its spindly legs, carrying Charlie and the puppeteers toward another hovel-town, another Showing. At times the gloomlight was a misty, opalescent grey which the Spider’s luminous red eyes burnt through, like fog lamps; and at other times, it was as impenetrable and dense as a storm cloud. Then the Spider would creep slowly along or lay quiet, like a boat listing at night in calm waters before a storm.

Charlie was never permitted to leave his cage. He sat in his bed as he had at Castle Slupp - greasy, pale forehead resting on his drawn-up knobbly knees, arms slumped at his sides. He had started his old practice of making notches in the floor of his cage to count his sleeps. So far, he had counted three slumbers since he had last seen Eldritch. Her absence tortured him.

From time to time, the round door did creak open, and Charlie would raise his head, hoping to see Eldritch. But it was Gibbous who inevitably appeared, grunting and sneering, sometimes clutching a tray of food in his meaty hands. The food was meant for Charlie (Nefandous now insisted on keeping his investment strong). But the boy, snarling and resentful, would gobble the meats and cheeses and breads himself, if the man with the cane was not looking.

‘Hungry,’ said the boy, in a petulant voice, ‘I’m getting hungrier and hungrier. Haven’t felt right since that thing of yours bit me.’

Charlie would ignore the boy and slowly lower his head. He longed for Eldritch, and in his loneliness, he blamed himself, his teeth, for driving her away.

But if he thought clearly about the situation, was he really so ugly, so repulsive?

Charlie wondered.

Now that he had seen some of life outside the Castle - the Beastmen, the puppeteers - surely he was no uglier than they?

Something did not make sense. He had a strange feeling - a hunch - that there must have been another reason why Eldritch had reacted to his teeth the way she did, and was now staying away from him. But he could not guess what the reason could be.

He longed for a chance to explain about his teeth. But that was not all. He was burning inside to tell her about what had happened to him, to unburden himself - about
Castle Slupp and his escape. And he wanted to hear her story. Like him, she had been taken in by the puppeteers. But he wanted to know more.

In Charlie’s mind, Eldritch could be a friend, the only one he might ever have. After all, she had given him food. She was kind, and no one had ever been kind to him before. One day, he knew, she would come back, he would explain, and they could be friends again.

Until that day, the puppets she had given him were all he had, keepsakes of her kindness.

Begbie was gone for longer and longer periods of time. When he was not thinking about Eldritch, Charlie wondered what the rat was doing. He began to worry that Begbie might leave him, too. It was on the fifth day after Eldritch had gone, when Charlie had fallen into a sullen gloom, that Begbie came scurrying out of a dark corner and leapt up onto the bed beside him. Charlie shook his head and said, ‘not now, Begbie.’ Inside, however, he was relieved that he had come back.

The rat would not leave him.
Charlie gazed down at him.
He clutched something in his teeth, something that glittered. He dropped the item on his lap, and would not leave until Charlie had examined it.

Charlie picked the item up. It was a gold piece, a coin. Perhaps it had fallen out of Nefandous’ sacks.

Charlie turned the coin over in his hand.
Slupp’s face - the eyes, the flaring, hog-like nostrils, the twisted, fleshy lips - glared up at him.

Charlie dropped the coin as if it had burnt him. When he had looked at the coin again, he saw words:

‘One Golden Slupp’
Slupp, it seemed, was lord of the realm.
Satisfied with Charlie’s reaction, Begbie had bounded to the boards once again, and disappeared into the shadows.

Charlie understood what Begbie was trying to tell him. Slupp would hear about the Showings; perhaps, Charlie realised, his flesh crawling, he already had.

They had to be stopped.

Charlie spent a long time pondering the question.
Could he tell the puppeteers the truth about the Slupps and his escape from the Castle? He wanted to tell Eldritch, but not the puppeteers. They would neither care nor understand. And without the Showings, and the Golden Slupps they brought in, there would be no reason for the puppeteers to keep Charlie. At best, they would dump him off at the next town; at worst, they would kill him.

Charlie heard a creaking noise. Someone was opening the black eye.

'Ohhhhhhhhhhh the glooooomlight, unmaaaaaarrrrred, unmaaaaaarrrrred!'

The door swung open, and the puppeteers stood at the top of the staircase. Gibbous glared at Charlie.

'Where’s that thing of yours?' he grunted. 'That thing that ain’t a rat!'

But he had changed. He had become thinner, his smock drooped where before taut muscles had bulged. His skin had become sallow, his cheeks sunken and no longer podgy. He looked diseased.

'Look at me,' he whispered. 'I’m Turning, faster and faster. That rat’s bite, that draggoth...'

'Siiilience, Gibbous!' moaned Nefandous. 'Shooooowing!'

Charlie was unloaded from the Spider and wheeled on his cart through the gloomlight.

'Ohhhhhhh, the glooooloomlight,' moaned Nefandous, bitterly. He swatted at the thick, shifting fog with his cane, as if trying to cut his way through.

Gibbous pushed from behind, still-meaty fists clutched around the bars of Charlie’s cage. He pressed his withering face between them.

'I’m Turnin’, Unmarred, Turnin’!' Charlie stood in his cage this time, gripping the bars.

'We have to stop the Showings!' he cried. 'Stop the Showings!'

It was no use. Nefandous was busy moaning, and Gibbous merely taunted him.

'Stop the Showings!' the boy grunted, parodying Charlie in his thick, oafish voice. 'Stop the Showings!' Then he would nearly collapse in a bout of cruel chuckling.

The chant rose up amongst the Beastmen, over the howling and grunting and stamping.

'ummmad...ummmad...ummmad...ummmmad...'

Nefandous had created a banner advertising the Living Myth. It arced high above Charlie’s cage, and fluttered in the breeze.

But this time, a roll of parchment dangled from the banner. Charlie had never seen it
before. He blinked and blinked again, and could not believe his eyes.

It was a drawing of a figure in a black vest and short black pants slumped in a cage.

‘The Living Myth,’ the poster proclaimed, ‘presented by the Master Puppeteers.’

Glancing away from the parchment to the town, Charlie noticed that each town looked the same – jumbles of hovels nearly drowned in gloomlight. But this one was somehow different.

On the crumbling walls, on the piles of rubble – the drawing of himself was everywhere. Nefandous and Gibbous must have spent ages putting them up.

Charlie shrank into himself, and actually began to shake.

Drawings, drawings of himself, all over the Welkin of Gloom!

Slupp, he thought, surely he would see them, or hear of them, and then...

But this was not what made Charlie shake.

Eldritch had made the drawings. Her touch and style were evident, in the simple lines, soft shading and deft strokes. Charlie could easily picture her hunched over a desk, her quill running over the rough parchment. That was what she had been doing during her absence.

She had betrayed him.

Charlie moaned with grief, sounding like Nefandous.

‘Stop the Showing!’ he cried, though he knew it was useless.

There was the cracking of whips, the dull thuds of clubs striking flesh. The Beastmen were herded out of the hovels by their drivers, and martialled in an unruly, stamping, hooting mob behind Nefandous’ fence. It seemed that there were more of them, much more than ever before. Indeed, the drivers and the puppeteers dealt out savage blows, one after the other, to keep the mob in an uneasy line. The parchment, thought Charlie, was working – perhaps too well.

‘Sit down, Unmarred,’ cried Gibbous, sneering at him. ‘You’re stirrin’ ‘em up!’

Charlie sat down on his bed, and forced himself to forget about Eldritch for now, if that was possible. He steeled himself to suffer the Beastmen. The ones that pleaded and begged him were the worst. He would try not to look into their eyes, and see the light there dimming, soon to be extinguished altogether by the Turn. The ones who glared hatefully and swiped at him with claws – those were easy. He was used to that.

Charlie closed his eyes. The Beast-like howls and guttural grunting of the Beastmen seemed to grow louder.

Suddenly, it came to him. There was a way to stop the Showings. If his teeth had
scared Eldritch so badly, then...

   Charlie peeled back his lips and opened his mouth.
For a moment, nothing happened.
And then, it began.

The mob of Beastmen swelled and heaved. Some shambled away from the fence, running from Charlie; while others, their eyes narrowed and bloodthirsty, began to surge forward.

Charlie kept smiling.

He felt Nefandous’ fishlike eyes bore into him. His downturned lips crinkled in fear as he saw Charlie’s exposed teeth. He began to back away from the Beastmen, swinging his clubs, which now seemed pitifully small.

‘Back to the Spiiiider! Back to the Spiiiiider!’

Nefandous sounded like a gloombeast in its death throes. With one of his hands he fumbled in his pocket and retrieved something small. He threw it to the ground and a thick plume of black smoke rose up.

The Beastmen fell back, whimpering with fear.
But not for long.

Howling, they lunged forward again.

Gibbous broke into a thumping run, his arms pulled in tightly to his stomach.

‘Goodbye, Unmarred,’ he said to Charlie as he rushed past the cage. ‘Gibbous,’ said Nefandous, ‘taaaaake the Unmarrrrrrred with you! It’s valuable!’

‘But papa,’ he protested, ‘it’s…’

‘Ohhhh, do as I say, boy, or else…’

The man looked murderous. His eyes burned through the gloomlight like fog lamps.

The boy thumped back to Charlie and wrapped his hands around the bars.

‘If it was up to me,’ he grunted, ‘I’d let the Beastmen eat you!’

The wheels of the cart began to squeak. Charlie had never thought that he would be relieved to hear the sound.

Nefandous tried to cover them by running backwards, and still lashing out his cane. It was one of the strangest sights Charlie had ever seen. The man looked half like a scuttling spider, half like a sea creature wallowing about on land. But he was no longer going at a sluggish skitter. Now, he was surging backwards at a surprisingly nimble gallop.

Charlie’s wagon rolled toward the Spider, which grew larger and larger as they got
closer. It squatted at peace on the road in the distance, three black hairy lumps with long, hairy limbs.

Gibbous began to push Charlie up the ramp. Little rivers of sweat slicked the boy’s face, and veins swelled hotly on his forehead. Charlie crouched inside his cage, gripping the bars tightly. The cage inched its way up the ramp.

Not far behind the boy, the Beastmen shambled along, stirring up plumes of dirt. And the gloomlight hung grey as mushroom soup about them.

Nefandous galloped past the cage and up the ramp, his canes pounding like hammers on the wood. He turned at the top of the ramp and with a spare hand began cranking the ramp closed, moaning miserably all the while,

‘Ohhhhh the glooooomlight...’

Charlie turned around. The Beastmen were too close.

Gibbous turned also.

‘Bye bye, Unmarred,’ he grunted.

Letting go of the cage, he scrabbled spider-like up the bars. In a flash he had clambered over Charlie’s head and swung himself down to the Spider side of the ramp.

Without Gibbous there to hold it, the cart rattled down the ramp. When it hit the ground, Charlie’s cage tumbled off, and Charlie himself was tossed head over heels inside the cage.

His plan had backfired.

The puppeteers stood at the top of the ramp, looking down at him. The man’s mask-like face looked even more tragically mournful. Gibbous raised a hand, the one that Begbie had mangled, and waved it at Charlie. The ramp began to close, and an oily, oafish grin spread dumbly across his face.

Up the ramp went, slowly, infuriatingly slowly.

Charlie watched the ramp closing like a drowning man watched his ship sail away. He gripped the bars of his cage and tried, senselessly, to break them open. When nothing happened, Charlie pressed his forehead into his arm and closed his eyes in despair.

One last time, Charlie raised his head and looked at the ramp.

It had stopped moving.

Puppet-like legs, with pink dancer’s slippers covering the feet, slid over the edge of the ramp.

They dangled there for a time.
And then, the outfit, pink and frilly; the arms; and the black bobbed hair.
Eldritch.

... ...

Before the puppeteers could stop her, Eldritch had lowered herself down, gripping the ramp’s edge in her hands, her lithe body swinging back and forth in the gloomlight.
She dropped to the gloomrock and collapsed in a heap.
She stayed down for a time, and Charlie thought she must have injured herself. But she surprised him by springing up on her nimble legs and beginning to run as fast as she could towards Charlie. Her face was blank, a pallid mask.
Charlie’s skin prickled.
‘No,’ he cried, ‘go back, go back!’
Eldritch covered the distance from the ramp to the cage in no time. She did not look at Charlie. Instead, she fumbled in her pocket for something, and finally drew out a key, which she turned in the lock. The cage’s rusted gate swung open with a grinding creak.
Charlie moved as fast as he could out of the cage. Eldritch threw an arm around his shoulder and tried to carry him, but could not. Together they hobbled toward the ramp, not daring to look behind.
The Beastmen were almost upon them.
Charlie spied a club on the ground; one that either Nefandous or Gibbous had dropped. He bent down to pick it up. On his knobbly knees, Charlie swivelled round to face the Beastmen. He knew he could not do much to them, but they did not know that. Perhaps if he looked fierce enough...
Charlie brandished the club.
He could see the drool dripping from the fangs of the Beastmen, could see the whites of their eyes. The powerful muscles in their arms pumped as they galloped.
Charlie scrunched up his face, and, from the bottom of his stomach he summoned the loudest, fiercest growl that he could possibly produce.
‘Roarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!’
Eyes closed, he swiped roundly, clumsily, at the gloomlight with his club.
He opened his eyes.
And to his utter surprise, the Beastmen had slowed their galloping to a cautious trot.
Then they stopped altogether, and began to cower and howl with fear.
A sense of triumph bloomed in Charlie.
He had done it! He had saved them from the Beastmen!
Charlie felt like dancing, and might have, were it not for a great droning noise that rose from behind him.

It seemed to be everywhere at once, a low, insectile buzzing. Even when Charlie clamped his hands over his ears, he still heard it. It seemed to be inside his head.

He turned around.

A dark monstrous shape squatted on top of the Spider. Charlie saw the wings first, silken black and powerful, which the shape unfolded and spread wide, as if it meant to sweep all the Beastmen into them and carry them away. This thing — with its scaly black skin, its long plated neck and tail, and its sleek, serpent-like head — had terrified the Beastmen, not him!

Charlie had read about dragons in his Book. Like them, plumes of black smoke curled up from the creature’s flaring nostrils. He wondered whether it might open its maw and roast them all with red, fiery blasts from its inner furnace. But if the creature had such a power, it did not show it.

Charlie stood mesmerized. The dragon-like thing both terrified and fascinated him. Its diamond-shaped head was crowned by a single eye. It was thin and dagger-shaped, like a gloombeast’s, but while the horse-like beast’s blade pointed down, this creature’s blade seemed to thrust itself up from the hilt. A grey energy like the gloomlight swirled up and down the length of the blade, welling up like a pool of gas in the hilt.

But the thing did not seem to need its eye to see. It held its head steady, and did not peer about; yet it seemed that nothing could move without being sensed by the creature.

The droning noise swelled into a din. It crept inside Charlie, flowing through his body like poison, sapping his energy. He thought he could feel it search within him for goodness and hope to rot away. The drone was having a terrible effect on the Beastmen, too. They clutched their heads in their hands, if they had them, dropping to their knees and loosing long tortured howls, while others tossed themselves to the ground and rolled madly as if on fire.

Charlie then became aware that Eldritch was not near him. He turned to find her on the ground by the cage, hands covering her head. She seemed to be shaking with fear. Charlie sank to his knees beside her. Battling the drone, and the cold fear that froze his heart and limbs, he began to pull at her arm.

‘Eldritch,’ he said, but his voice seemed small and lost against the drone.

The thing rose from its squatting position. Charlie’s eyes were drawn to its forelegs,
which were not dragon-like at all. Though ribbed and plated, they were long, fine and graceful, like a horse’s, ending in a set of black hooves. The thing gave its great wings a sudden push, lifting the dark shape into the gloomlight. In a moment it was soaring over Charlie and Eldritch.

As the thing passed, it seemed to take the air with it; Charlie felt it disappear, as if sucked or driven away, but it was gone only for a moment. The air rushed back in a propulsive gust that nearly choked him with its foulness. The stench of the thing was dreadful, like nothing Charlie had ever smelt before. Covering his mouth and nose, Charlie watched the shape pass overhead, watched its scaly darkness steal through the gloomlight with monstrous ease. His eyes locked on a set of frightful jaws, which yawned open to reveal rows of serrated white teeth. Then the plated neck passed, and the smooth dark underbelly with the strange legs and hooves.

Through Charlie’s fear came a memory, a memory of a long dark shape slipping through the gloomlight, in pursuit of a golden birdcage. And before that, a blur of black fur, racing up the Turret wall.

Begbie.

Charlie watched the thing swoop low over the Beastmen, who threw themselves to the ground and cowered there, clutching their heads. Then the creature began to spin like a corkscrew, flying close to the ground. Finally it stopped spinning, and Charlie watched with horror as it dipped its long slender neck and opened its black cavernous maw. He saw the jaws, the teeth, and then turned away. He looked at Eldritch, who was still on the ground, covering her head. He heard the sickening crunching noises, and the howling. And then it stopped.

Charlie dared to look once again. He saw the shape arc high into the air. Beastmen were fleeing in every direction, some loping, others hobbling according to their malady. He turned away again, before he saw the remains too clearly.

The drone began to fade. Charlie felt its poison ebbing, as if it were releasing him. Clarity returned to Charlie’s thoughts and feelings. The Beastmen and the thing were gone. Now it was up to him to get Eldritch inside the Spider. Charlie got to his feet, and throwing his arms around Eldritch, began to pull her to her feet. She seemed badly weakened by the drone, and covered her face with her hands. He tried to carry her up the ramp, but her legs dragged clumsily along behind her. ‘Eldritch, my looooooove,’ Charlie heard Nefandous say. He saw the man’s crooked frame come hobbling down the ramp. Grimacing, Nefandous reached out a gnarled hand and with surprising strength began pulling Eldritch’s arm.
‘Coooome, my looooooove,’ he moaned.

He was trying to pull her up, and, whether he realized it or not, he was hauling Charlie with her.

The three of them stumbled up the ramp, which thrummed as if impatient to close. Charlie raised his head to see Gibbous standing at the top of the ramp, glaring down at him. The ramp began to close, but more quickly than Nefandous could haul them up. Charlie felt the ramp tipping him forward, and he tumbled over, knocking both Eldritch and Nefandous into the Spider.

All three collapsed in a heap as the ramp clanged shut behind them.

Curling fingers of gloomlight swirled for a moment in the shadowy room, and then slowly dispersed.

They were safe.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
YOU ARE THE GLOOMLIGHT

Charlie lay panting on the floor. He was barely aware of the murky twilight that surrounded him in the shadowy room. Rough hands seized him under his armpits, and heavy grunting breaths began to heat the crown of his head as he was dragged across the floor. His matchstick legs, clothed in his threadbare black shorts, lay in front of him, and the ankles of his splayed feet dragged along the floor. Then he was flung like a doll, and a hot blast of pain coursed up his leg as it banged on the wooden floor. He lay sprawled, clutching his leg.

‘Let me get the knife, papa,’ he heard Gibbous cry.

And then:

‘Draggoth... a servant of the evil Blaaaaaack Saaaaaage... the droooone... cuffffffit to the waaaaall, boy...’

‘But papa, it nearly killed us dead!’

‘Cuff it to the wahaaalll, or feeeel my cane across your heeeead!’

Charlie’s head swam with the noise of the bickering puppeteers. In the next moment, he felt himself being lifted up, carried, and then slammed against a wall. In one great gush, air rushed out of him, and he struggled to catch it again. Before he could, Gibbous had pressed him up against the wall with one hand and with another two or three began fumbling with the cuffs. Gibbous finally got them closed, and they bit into Charlie’s wrists as if they were lined with teeth. He hanged there, trapped against the wall, his legs and arms outstretched.

He gazed through the room’s murky depths. The tall, thin crook-backed frame of the man with the cane stood on the steps by the door. Nefandous said nothing, and did not move. But Charlie could feel the power of his bulging white, fishlike eyes on him. It was as if they sent out beams of malice that struck his chest and filled his insides with fear. Gibbous was near; Charlie could hear his feral grunts as the boy’s chest rose and fell with exertion and fear.

The room seemed to thrum with tension, and the keen, gleaming eyes of the gallery-puppets kept their constant watch. The Spider was scrabbling at high speed, and though the puppeteers tottered and stumbled, they never lost their balance or concentration on their subject.

‘Eldritch...?’ Charlie croaked. ‘Eldritch? Where is she? I have to talk to her!’

The puppet-girl did not seem to be in the room.
‘Let me get the knife, papa,’ cried Gibbous. ‘Let me get the knife!’

Nefandous eased himself down the steps, moving as if each step cost him much pain. It was hard to believe that this same creature had been running so quickly just moments ago. With his black smock, down-turned lips and creased, prunish head, Nefandous would have looked comical, were it not for the bulging menace of his eyes and the cold threat of his cane. He crossed the floor, stabbing it with the point of his cane as he went. At last he drew himself up before Charlie, peered down his crumpled nose at him, and smacked his lips.

Smack
Smack
Smack

He thrust his head out, like a snake. His lips were dry and cracked and nearly black, and the bottom one quivered as if trying to speak all of Nefandous’s unspoken thoughts. It was so down-turned it almost folded itself over his weak chin.

With surprising speed, two gnarled hands flashed up and grabbed Charlie’s chin, yanking it downward. Charlie gagged and writhed, but could not escape. The man’s fishlike eyes bulged wide open, and he peered into Charlie’s mouth. Seeing what was there, he jerked his head back as if Charlie had struck him.

‘Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh the glooooomlight!’

Astonished, Charlie watched as the man slowly crumpled into a ball. He stuffed a pair of quivering hands into his mouth and began to gnaw on his bony fingers. He made wet chewing noises and began to drool like a Beastman.

Even Gibbous had curled his fleshy lips into a sneer of repulsion.

‘They...shiiine,’ Nefandous moaned, his bulging eyes glancing at Charlie’s mouth and then away in horror. ‘They have the...glooooomlight...the terrrrrible glooooomlight...in them.’

Charlie stared at Nefandous. He had never heard this before.

‘That is what made the Beeeeasstmen react so...’ said the old man, now looking at Charlie with a mix of wonder and fear. ‘They saaaaaw the glooooomlight in your mouth. It shifts, it swirrrrls, just like it does out therrreeee! But yet, you are unmaaaaarrred. How? How? Has the gloomlight corrupted your teeth?’

Charlie closed his mouth.

‘I know I’m hideous,’ he said. ‘But it wasn’t the gloomlight that made my teeth.’

‘Whaaaaaat?’ Nefandous moaned. Slowly, he rose up from the floor like a demented flower with eight petals. ‘The gloooomlight has made us alllll what we arrreeee! If the
terrible glooooomlight has not done this, then whaaat?'

'Not what,' said Charlie in a quiet voice. 'Who.'

'Whoooo?'

'Reach into my vest pocket,' Charlie said.

Nefandous did as he was asked, and pulled out a Golden Slupp, the one Begbie had found. The man's eyes flashed.

'Wheeeere did you get that?' he demanded. 'It's miinee!' Nefandous stuffed the coin into a pocket, and glared at Charlie, his pale, creased face contorted into a greedy, hateful sneer.

Charlie forced his head to stop swimming, and plucked up his courage.

'Slupp,' he said, hating even to say the name, 'is my uncle. I escaped from his Castle. He's searching for me. He put these fittings on my teeth to make them crooked. He said they were growing too straight. He was very cruel.'

'Lies, papa, lies!' cried Gibbous.

'Siiilllence!' moaned Nefandous. He raised his cane and Gibbous slunk away into the middle of the room.

'Whhhhyy?' said the man. 'Why do they search for you?'

'I don't know,' Charlie sighed, shaking his head. He was exhausted, and suddenly weary of it all.

Something was happening to Nefandous. The man's eyes rolled about in his head, each one moving independently, as if they had decided to see different sights.

It took a moment for Charlie to work out what the man was doing. A strange spell seemed to be cast over him. He stood rooted to the spot, mouth hanging open, all eight arms drooped at his sides.

'Loooooord and Laaaaaady Slupp?' he moaned to himself, eyes still rolling. 'Loooord and Laaaaaady Slupp? Verrry wealthy, they arrrrre. Fetch a goooood price!'

An icy horror crept over Charlie. He wished he had kept his mouth shut.

'No, no,' he said, 'you don't understand...'

But Nefandous was still thinking. At last, he shook his head, and smacked his lips.

He had come to a decision. He stared at Charlie, and with a strange look, he said,

'Youuuu arrre corrrect. There shall be no more Showings!'

Relief washed over Charlie. It felt cool, and gave him strength.

Nefandous began to back away from Charlie, as if he were suddenly frightened.

'Youuuuuu,' he said, raising an arm and pointing it at Charlie, 'youuuuuu arrrrre the
gloooomlight! You brought the draggoth!'

Charlie shook his head.

'I don’t know what you’re talking about,' he said. 'I don’t know what a draggoth is. I’d never even seen one, until now. I’ve never even seen my teeth! All I know is that they’re ugly, and if anyone sees them, they get scared and run away.'

Nefandous continued to creep backward across the room, his arm still raised, his crooked finger still pointed at Charlie. The rest of his hands and fingers he tried to stuff into his mouth. Gibbous backed away with him, his face a hateful mixture of fear and boiling anger.

'What are we going to do with it, papa?' he grunted.

Nefandous did not answer. He crept up the stairs and with a final look at Charlie, moaned,

'Draggoth! You woooooke it! Summmmoned it! Youuuu arrrrre the gloooomlight!'

And then he disappeared into the murky red pall beyond the round door, pulling Gibbous along roughly by the neck.

....

Charlie shook and battled against his cuffs until his wrists were chafed. His head felt hot but his body and extremities cold, and he had begun to perspire. He could not stop his feverish mind from racing.

_You arrrrrrree the gloooomlight! You wooooke the draggoth! Summmmmmoned it!_

Nefandous’ moaning voice was like the howling of the wind. His words seemed to linger in the shadowy room and in Charlie’s ears long after he had left.

‘Mad,’ Charlie muttered, shaking his head, ‘he’s mad!’

But, after a time, when the fever’s febrile grip released him, Charlie realised that he had nagging thoughts that refused to go away.

Why did Lady Slupp experiment on him? What secret was she trying to extract?

Why had the Messenger risked its life to rescue him?

Could it be because, like Nefandous had said, he was the gloomlight? Or perhaps the Slupps and the Messenger believed that, because he was unmarred, he had the power to control the gloomlight, even to control the Turn.

Was that power within his teeth?

But how had he received such power, if indeed he did possess it? Who had given it to him? Charlie thought hard, his mind racing. If his teeth had the gloomlight in them, like
Nefandous said, then Slupp could not have made them.

Charlie was astounded. He had believed all his life that Slupp had been responsible for his ugly teeth.

His heart beat wildly against his chest. He did not know whether to be relieved or worried about his teeth. He was glad that they were not Slupp’s creation, but then...who...how?

His eyes searched the room, as if he would find the answer there. They came to rest on the puppets Eldritch had given him, which lay discarded on the floor, their limbs twisted unnaturally. He stared at the Begbie puppet.

Draggoth.

The drone, the jaws and teeth – Charlie understood why they were feared. Worse, draggoths were shape-shifters, or at least, Begbie was. If his teeth had the power to control the gloomlight, then perhaps that explained why Begbie had stayed with him all this time, protecting him.

There was another question that Charlie almost dared not ask. Begbie, in draggoth shape, had attacked the golden birdcage, stopping it from carrying Charlie off to the White Sage.

But why?

Charlie shook his head. He did not know. Charlie thought, turning over in his mind what little he knew about draggoths and the Messenger. Clearly, they were enemies. He puzzled over this for a time, and then suddenly it struck him. The Messenger had declared itself to be sent by the White Sage. But the draggoth, the draggoth was different.

Straining his mind, Charlie tried to remember what Nefandous had said about it. Finally it came to him:

...servant of the evil Black Sage...

Charlie thought, and as he did, he grew more and more bewildered. He did not know what a sage was, but there seemed to be two of them - one white, and good, the other black, and evil. The Messenger had come to take him to the white one, but Begbie, servant of the evil Black Sage, had stopped it.

Charlie breathed deeply as the realisation dawned on him. Begbie was evil. He could not help a feeling of sadness, of disappointment, from welling in his heart and spreading over his body. Begbie had cared for him, defended him, rescued him, and had been his only companion. But the draggoth had tricked him, concealing his evil intentions. Charlie felt betrayed.
The sadness welled within him and grew. He lost himself in memories of being in his Cage at the Castle, and talking to Begbie, and of his journey with the rat through the wilds of the Welkin of Gloom. The sadness he felt crested and then ebbed, but not before it had sunk itself into him. It would always be with him.

Through his gloom Charlie realised that one question was still unanswered. Why didn’t Begbie just take Charlie to the Black Sage right now? The draggoth certainly seemed powerful enough. Something must be stopping it. But Charlie could not guess what.

After the sadness left his heart, a great yearning swelled in its place, a yearning to hear the sound of a quill scratching over paper, and to look into the dark pools of a puppet-girl’s eyes. Eldritch had risked her life to save him, and he had not had time to thank her.

But Eldritch had done more than just that. She had seen his teeth, seen his ugliness, and still she came to his rescue. She was not afraid of him. The yearning in Charlie’s heart seemed to double, and his skin prickled with tingling warmth. She would come, he thought. Soon, she would come.

The consoling warmth of his yearning made his eyelids grow heavy.

The little taper still flickered on the table where Charlie’s cage had been, casting its wavering light into the shifting shadows of the room. The flame danced in the shining eyes of the puppets in the gallery, and to Charlie, their eyes seemed like a hundred little embers. The taper revealed glimpses of their stunted, misshapen limbs - arms and legs either too long or too short - their oblong, lumpen heads - their small, child-like faces locked in unnatural, unchanging grimaces. They were horrible to look upon. Had they, too, been corrupted by the gloomlight? And was he himself somehow responsible for it?

‘I am not the gloomlight!’ he whispered.

His head was filled with thoughts of sages and draggoths, and through eyelids flickering with sleep, he kept watch on the round door that seemed like a black eye.

Soon, he thought. Soon she would come.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
I WANT TO BE WITH YOU FOREVER

Somewhere, in the strange boundless lands between sleep and waking, Charlie's heart pounded, drum-like, and his mind became a mirror, black and silent. The mirror was suddenly cracked by streaks of silver as a glittering star slowly formed. The light burned stronger and stronger, conquering the darkness, until both light and dark died away, and a hooded figure appeared.

Draped in robes emblazoned with a symbol of dagger thrusting downward, the figure sat upon a steed-like creature with a white coat and wings. A sole white horn protruded like a sword above the steed's dagger-shaped eye.

The darkness shrouding the figure lifted, replaced by a magnificent blue, with a yellow orb and white oblong shapes.

Sun and cloud.

The picture burned vividly, as if lit up by a powerful energy or light.

Out of the blue splashes of emerald came, peaked and crested, like waves. They became hills, great undulating emerald hills, and nestled amongst them were the sturdy battlements and towers of a castle. The white figure and its steed stood upon one of the battlements. Below them, surrounding the castle, were people, tall and proud and dressed in white.

The vision remained for a time, floating, and then, slowly, imperceptibly, it became nightmare.

On a towering, jagged mountaintop, a dark hooded figure appeared, shrouded in shadow. The figure's robes were not fine; they seemed coarse and threadbare, save for the richly emblazoned symbol: a dagger thrusting upward. Throngs of dark shapes surrounded the mountain's foot, clutching red-tipped daggers that they thrust above their heads, as if tearing at the air. The dark figure spread its arms wide, and tongues of dark red flame burst out of the mountaintop, followed by creatures - fire-spewing, winged creatures, with a sole, dagger-shaped eye that thrust upward.

The figure in black took one of the creatures for its own, and riding it, led its dark forces in an invasion of the land of sun and cloud. Soaring across the sky in a great phalanx, the creatures spewed a dark flame as they flew, burning the land, blackening it. A deep void of hungry darkness followed them, devouring the emerald hills and the white clouds. The white steeds opposed the creeping darkness, filling the sky with a pure, pale radiance. Most
radiant was the figure in white, who rode at the vanguard.

The two figures, white and black, each followed by their creatures, converged, clashing in a blaze of light that was both terrible and beautiful. The blaze bloomed, forming a strange pattern of circles within circles, until white and black and the circles disappeared. In their place came a curtain of dull grey pall that seemed like a billowing fabric, or a gyring grey fog.

Hunched shapes appeared on the land, corrupted and beast-like. They prowled, as if compelled by a voracious hunger, searching, eating, and then searching again.

Some began to shed their beast-like features, turning pale as the grey fog itself, and their bodies shrinking into little more than just skin and bone. Though they returned to human shape, their eyes blazed with blood-red light. Kicking, beating, stabbing and gnawing at one another, they seemed to have lost all reason.

This image - of the dark fog land peopled with beast-like men - swelled and pulsed with a strange power until it seemed it would explode.

And then, slowly, imperceptibly, like a stage show, it began to fade, consumed by darkness, and leaving silence in its wake.

And out of the darkness and silence came words:

The Myth of the Welkin of Gloom

By Eldritch Moon

Charlie drifted in and out sleep. Finally, he was awakened from the torture of his dreams by a dull, dry creaking noise. He opened his eyes, and still half asleep, he saw a crack of murky red light spill into the flickering shadows of the room.

Puppets, bathed in the red light, shuffled across the floor, back to their places on the shelves. Charlie watched their misshapen limbs and bodies, made even more hideous by the strange light. A bolt of fear shot through him. The puppets had been up to something. They had come down from their shelves while he slept and...

His eyes swept across the room.

On the rotting floorboards bulky shapes were strewn about, here and there. Charlie looked at the shapes, and a strange feeling washed over him. He saw a castle, black and white sheets, a yellow ball and crumpled white parchment. Finally his searching eyes fell upon two creatures that lay splayed and lifeless in a corner of the room. One was white and horse-like, with wings and a horn, and the other long and black and plated, like a dragon.

Charlie raised his eyes from the props on the floor to the puppets in the gallery. They
sat still and lifeless now, their shining eyes glaring malevolently back at him.

The dry creaking noise came again. Charlie knew the sound well. It was the sound of the black eye, finally opening. Charlie steeled himself for whomever or whatever might come into the room.

He watched the door, trembling.

It peeled back farther, and a puppet’s pencil-drawn face peered around it. Charlie forgot about the puppets.

‘Eldritch!’ he cried. ‘It’s you!’

But the puppet-girl raised a finger to her lips. She nodded, closed the door behind her, shutting out the red pall, and crept silently into the room. Charlie watched her, wondering whether he was still dreaming. She padded across the floor, wiping her face clean. She drew as she walked, the long feathery quill working deftly, making soft scribbling noises.

Charlie was again struck by the girl’s uniqueness: the lithe, puppet-like body; the torn and smeared pink dancer’s outfit; the shoes with straps that wound around her wiry legs; and of course the puppet-like head.

Her face was extraordinary. Her big eyes, beautifully rendered, were wide open and plaintive. But they were also dark and mysterious, like pools of deep, still water. And her mouth, little more than a line, seemed somehow to quiver, as if she were nervous or struggling to fight back tears.

Charlie watched her walk silently toward him. In her hand she held a long key coppery with rust. She unlocked his cuffs and raised a long, gloved finger to the quivering line of her mouth.

Charlie groaned with relief. He flexed his wrists, arms and fingers. Blood rushed back through his veins. His mind raced with all the things he wanted to say. Hoarse as he was, he struggled to whisper,

‘Eldritch, you don’t know what it means to me to see you. Thank you, thank you so much for rescuing me. I...I thought you were afraid of me, I thought my teeth had scared you...but don’t be, don’t be scared at all.’

Everything he said sounded so pale, so weak and clumsy, compared with the feelings that burned inside him. Words welled up and threatened to burst out of him.

Eldritch turned away. She padded softly across the floor to the gallery and opened a drawer. She reached in and pulled out two puppets, one of the Spider, one of Nefandous himself, and a prop of a castle. Clutching all these things she turned back to Charlie, who
wondered what she doing. She gazed at him. How she managed a look of such earnestness through the simple black lines of her face, and the shimmering darkness of her eyes, was a mystery. But Charlie felt her earnestness, and was moved by it. She was trying to tell him something, something important, with the puppets. Clutching the Spider, she drove it toward the castle. Then she drew from a pocket a Golden Slupp. It glittered in the candle’s light.

Charlie blinked.

Eldritch made the motions again. The Spider raced toward the castle.

‘Castle Slupp?’ he said.

Eldritch slowly nodded.

Charlie lowered his head. He felt Eldritch take his hand and lead him across the floor. They sat down next to the trap door. Charlie stared at his knees, but did not see them. For a moment or two, as his mind dealt with the full weight of what Eldritch told him, he was not aware of anything, not where he was, or even who he was. His lips may have twitched once or twice, but he could not speak.

At last he raised his head.

Eldritch had drawn a new face. Teardrops streamed down her silken cheeks from eyes that drooped sadly at the corners.

Charlie looked hopefully into them, hoping somehow that he misunderstood. But the girl slowly nodded her head, and Charlie could see she told him the truth.

‘But why?’ he whispered, though he knew the answer.

Eldritch unravelled a piece of paper from a pocket. It read:

‘Wanted: Charlie Cheesegrater; property of Lord and Lady Slupp. Generous reward offered for return.’

Charlie swallowed.

As scared as Nefandous was of the draggoth that had appeared, and of Charlie himself, he was not quite scared enough to pass up the opportunity to collect a handsome reward. The man’s greed clearly outweighed his fear.

‘How far are we from Castle Slupp?’ Charlie asked.

Eldritch considered for a moment. Then she put her hands together, raised them to her cheek, and tilted her head to indicate sleeping. She did this five times, then shrugged her shoulders.

‘Perhaps five sleeps?’

The girl nodded.

Charlie swallowed. He had been hoping for more time. He closed his eyes and began
to wring his hands.

When he opened his eyes, he realised that he had raised trembling hands to his mouth. 

Cold tears trickled down his cheeks. His whole body was shaking.

‘I can’t go back there,’ he said, ‘I can’t.’

Charlie felt Eldritch’s arm across his shoulders as she drew him toward her. She felt warm, and Charlie pushed himself closer to her. Never in his life had anyone been kind to him like this.

In a quiet voice he told her all about the Castle, his cage, the Slupps, and the escape. And when he had told his weird tale, he raised his head and looked at Eldritch and said,

‘I can’t go back. There’s no way.’

Eldritch nodded. She took her arm from around Charlie’s sharp, bony shoulders, and reached down to the trap door. Her gloved hands deftly working the lock on the floor, she pulled the trap door open, slowly and with great care, so it would not creak.

The door yawned open, like the black mouth of a great beast. Together they watched the silvery, prowling fingers of the gloomlight pry into the room and meld with the room’s murky dimness.

‘I can’t go back to the Castle,’ said Charlie, ‘and I can’t stay here. I have to leave. But I can’t leave you, Eldritch.’

He reached out and took her soft hands in his.

‘Until I met you, I thought the Welkin of Gloom had only cruelty and torture in it. You’re the only person who has ever been kind to me. You’ve even saved my life. I don’t know how to thank you.’

They sat by the door, hand-in-hand, watching the pale fire of the gloomlight surge into the room.

He had never really been this close to her before. Looking at her extraordinary face, he could see faint lines spiralling and curving under the cloth-like surface. There were hundreds, thousands even, more, it seemed, than there were age-lines in the grain of a tree. Every picture that she had ever drawn, Charlie realised, seemed captured there forever in faint layers under the surface.

Charlie could not help himself. He reached up a pale thin hand and gently stroked Eldritch’s cheek with a finger. Her face was as beautifully soft and smooth as silk. Charlie’s finger made a gentle indentation in the mysterious fabric of her face, and nothing more.

Charlie spoke again, his voice a murmur in the gloom.

‘Why did you save me, Eldritch?’ he asked. ‘I thought...because of my teeth...you
ran away...' Eldritch gently pulled her hand out of Charlie’s and wiped her face clean. She lowered her head to draw a new one, her shining quill this time moving in slow, deliberate strokes. When she had finished, she raised her head. Her eyes were oval-shaped, the dark line of their elegant brows raised upward, as if she were going to ask a question. Her small mouth was merely a line, but somehow it seemed determined to Charlie, as if she had set her mind to something after long consideration.

Then, very slowly, she raised both hands to her mask. She began to fold it upward from her slender neck.

Charlie held his breath.

What he saw underneath struck him like a bolt of thunder.

Pale and smooth skin suddenly turned black and shrivelled...

Eldritch continued to roll her mask up until there was no more to reveal. She sat slumped before Charlie, her mask off, her face revealed.

'Eldritch,' Charlie whispered, 'what happened? What happened to you?'

Her face was little more than a scorched, black rictus, the skin nearly flayed from the bone. It had been burnt into a permanent expression, a face twisted in intense fear, the lips seared closed. The whites of her eyeballs formed the only colour, the only parts of her face not blackened by flame.

Charlie stared at her, not with fear or repulsion, but with sadness and shared grief.

'What happened?' he asked.

Eldritch shifted her gaze and shrugged her shoulders.

Then, she raised her head once more, and looked Charlie full in the face. He felt as if she were about to reveal something else. Something important.

He watched what was left of the lips on her face peel back into a hideous grin.

And what he saw moved and surprised him to the depths of his being.

'I don’t believe it,' he said, staring at the girl with something far deeper than mere wonder. ‘I don’t believe it. You, too, Eldritch. You too!’

Her mask had concealed more than a face ravaged by flame. It had concealed a set of warped and blackened teeth in which swirled and danced the grey luminosity of the gloomlight. The teeth were almost like black baubles with bright swirling ribbons of silver streaked through them. But the ribbons twisted and glowed with a mysterious energy, like the gloomlight itself. But stronger, deeper, and more powerful. The energy seemed to form into three broken, horizontal lines, and then break apart again.
It was so powerful that Charlie had to struggle to stop himself from scrambling away from Eldritch. The urge to flee from such a sight was nearly overpowering. This was why she had run away when she had seen his teeth. Charlie might have done the same, if he had suddenly come across someone with teeth like that, with the gloomlight in them.

Eldritch rolled the mask back down. Once again Charlie was looking at the white silken face of the puppet-girl.

For a while, Charlie was so overcome that he could not speak. He simply sat, his mind both full and empty.

At last, Eldritch raised a hand to her heart and patted it quickly.

‘Mine, too,’ said Charlie, smiling.

They were silent.

‘What does it mean, Eldritch?’ he whispered, at last.

She made no move or sign.

‘I’ll tell you what it means,’ he said. ‘It means we were meant to be together. We belong with each other. It wasn’t just chance that brought me here. There’s a reason.’

He reached out and, staring at the girl in wonder, embraced her, holding her close to him.

‘Come with me, Eldritch,’ he pleaded. ‘I don’t know where we’ll go, or what we’ll do. The Slupps would be after you, too, but I can’t let them find you, either - just the thought of it...the things they’d do...it’s horrible! You have to come with me.’

The puppets had shuffled across the floor and now stood in a ring around Charlie and Eldritch, as if to protect them.

‘They showed me your show, Eldritch,’ said Charlie. ‘About the myth of the Welkin of Gloom.’

Eldritch turned her head and looked at the puppets, who stared back at her, almost defiantly. Charlie could not tell whether she was shocked or annoyed; he could not read her at all.

The words now spilled out of him. ‘At least I think they did,’ he said. ‘It seemed...like a dream...a nightmare, rather. I’m not sure which. Some of it was beautiful. The sun and cloud, the figure in white...was it the White Sage? And those beautiful white beasts – I’ve read about them. They’re unicorns, aren’t they? But now they’re gloombeasts. Was that really how the Welkin of Gloom was made? A clash between the White and Black Sages?’

Eldritch tilted her head, as if to gaze quizzically at Charlie. Then she shrugged her
shoulders and nodded.

‘Maybe we have something to do with it,’ Charlie continued. ‘Our teeth...I think they somehow keep us from being marred by the gloomlight, keep us from Turning, from becoming Beastmen and like those creatures in your show, with the starved bodies and the red eyes. They were horrible. Nefandous told me I was the gloomlight. But I think he’s wrong.’

Charlie took Eldritch’s hands in his again and looked earnestly into her eyes.

‘Come with me,’ he said. ‘We’ve been brought together to find out the truth about who we are, Eldritch. Finding out about our teeth - what they are, how we got them - will tell us who we are. And it might be important for the Welkin of Gloom itself. We might be able to...change it.’

Charlie realised how mad he sounded, but his heart was pumping as it had never pumped before.

‘That’s why the Slupps kept me,’ he said, ‘and didn’t just kill me. And that’s why the Messenger came, why Begbie saved me...’

Charlie swallowed. He did not want to think about Begbie.

‘Has anyone ever come for you, Eldritch?’ he asked. ‘Tried to take you away?’

Eldritch shook her head.

‘It’s probably because you’ve been in here, in the Spider, for nearly all your life’ said Charlie. ‘And your mask. You’ve been safe.’

Eldritch considered for a moment. She picked up the Nefandous puppet, and, amazingly to Charlie, began to stroke it gently, even lovingly. It was obvious that she was lost in memories, memories of the time when she had been a waif and Nefandous had picked her up, brought her in, as he had done for Charlie, memories of an earlier, happier time when the gloomlight’s corruption had not completely twisted him into the mad figure he now was. Eldritch’s earlier words came back to Charlie:

_Nefandous was not always as he is now. He should be pitied._

Charlie sighed. He knew that what he was asking Eldritch to do was dangerous, even foolish. Where would they go? How would they eat? Who would protect them? Begbie? But Begbie was a...

Charlie shook his head. He did not want to think about Begbie, not after what Eldritch’s myth had shown him about draggoths.

‘Nefandous was kind to you,’ he said softly. Eldritch nodded. ‘I know it’s hard to forget cruelty, it stays with you, lives with you, haunts you every moment of your life. But
kindness does too, and it’s a lot stronger. The smallest dose of it can sustain you, strengthen you, keep you going through almost anything. Your kindness gave me the strength to endure the Showings. And I’m sure the kindness that Nefandous showed you in the past gave you the strength to endure all his cruelty. But you don’t have to endure it any longer, Eldritch. Come with me!

Eldritch wrapped her arms around Charlie, and the two of them embraced and felt one another’s warmth. They stayed like this for a while, growing warmer, the puppets still standing in a ring about them, and Charlie thought if they could just stay like this forever...

They embraced, and then, at last, they drew away. But Charlie was smiling, and Eldritch had wiped her face and drawn another, this one happier, the black line of her mouth raised slightly at the corners, a weary, resigned kind of happiness. Then she scribbled on the back of Slupp’s poster, and showed Charlie what she wrote:

I want to be with you forever

Charlie nodded, and smiled. He looked down at the trap door and took Eldritch’s hand in his.

‘We have to leave before Begbie comes back,’ Charlie said.

Eldritch shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head.

‘Why?’ said Charlie. ‘Because I think...I think he’s a...’

Before Charlie could say the word, the room suddenly was filled with a deep growling noise.

Charlie and Eldritch turned around.

Behind them, in the middle of the room, swathed in curling plumes of gloomlight, was the rat.
The rat’s back was arched, and the hairs on its body rose in little grey prickly crowns until it seemed its whole body was covered with them. Its pink lips quivered, hiding and then revealing razor-like incisors.

It began to move, back still arched, hairs still raised in prickly tufts, and crept warily round Charlie and Eldritch, to the other side of the door.

Charlie felt the rat staring at him, with his piercing pinhole eyes, glancing sharply from him to Eldritch.

How much had the rat heard?, Charlie wondered. Did it know about Eldritch’s teeth?

A strange light grew in the rat’s eyes, the light he had once seen before, when the Messenger had arrived. The light had tinges of black and white and grey, and it danced and gyred gracefully and glittered like a polished gem. For a moment, Charlie thought he was no longer looking at Begbie, but at... something else.

Icy fingers touched Charlie’s spine.

The rat’s growling was as sonorous as if a bell had been struck. The ominous noise prowled across the room until it reached Charlie and raised goosebumps on his flesh.

The puppets, still standing in a ring about him and Eldritch, shifted on their feet. They hunched down low, as if prepared to spring. Charlie heard a noise coming from them, the unsettling noise he had heard sometimes in the dark, the noise of snapping teeth.

What happened next happened quickly, and it shocked Charlie to his soul.

Quicker than the eye, the rat lunged.

Begbie sank his teeth into the leg of a puppet, and tossed it aside like a doll.

In the next moment, the rat had darted through the ring of puppets.

Charlie cried out. The rat ran straight for him. Before he could move, Begbie had clamped his teeth down through his shorts, missing his leg. The rat began to drag him across the floor, to the trap door.

The puppets fell in a writhing heap on the rat, clawing at it, biting at it, but the rat was tenacious. Eldritch began kicking at Begbie.

A mass of puppet-like limbs swarmed around the rat, writhing in a confusing jumble.

And in the next moment, as if time had suddenly slowed to a crawl, Charlie saw Eldritch throw back her head in silent agony, saw her hands begin to beat the wooden floor, and finally, he saw Begbie working at her leg, his incisors cutting deeply.
‘Eldritch!’

Charlie had meant to scream her name, but managed only a strangled croak.

Begbie released Eldritch, and she scrambled crab-like away from the rat.

Charlie thrust himself forward, catching Eldritch in his arms as she scrambled backwards. He wrapped his arms around her, shielding her, but too late.

The strange smouldering gleam gyrred in the rat’s eyes once again. Charlie recognized its colour: it was as if the gloomlight had through some sorcery been preserved in them. The growling grew deeper and darker than before, enveloping Charlie and Eldritch in its gloom.

It was not a dull animal’s growling, but greater, darkly magical and spell-like.

The puppets seemed paralysed, and ceased their clawing and biting. They were spread on the wooden boards, some clutching their arms or legs in pain.

The rat was beginning to change...beginning to...

His eyes ablaze, Begbie scurried across the boards to the trap door and plunged down into the gloomlight.

And was gone.

The dark noise evaporated, and Charlie felt as though he had been released from a spell.

The room grew airless, very still and very quiet. The trap door was still open, and the gloomlight whorled upward into the room. It was like a silver fire now, burning as if from some hidden furnace below. Its flames came gyiring and twisting up into the room in ever greater spires.

Charlie felt Eldritch’s body stiffen, and he tightened his embrace, trying to shield her as much as he could. Then he felt her body loosen, turn slack, as if...as if...

Charlie shook his head.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered, holding her and shaking his head. ‘I’m sorry.’

Charlie gazed at the figure stretched across his knees, stroking her black puppet’s hair, which was stiff, yet warm and soft. He felt miserable, as if he were responsible for what had happened.

Charlie gently lowered her head to the floor. Her gloved hands covered the fleshy part of her leg where Begbie had bitten her. He took her hands carefully in his and lifted them away from the wound.

Charlie lowered his head and examined the wound more closely. He had expected to find deep and bloody gashes where Begbie’s teeth had savaged her. Instead, he found only
five or six deep indentations.
No gashes.
No blood.
It was as if Begbie had sunk his teeth into a block of wood.
How...Charlie began to wonder...how...
‘Eldritch,’ he whispered, ‘what are you?’
But she could not answer.
‘Gibbous was right,’ he found himself saying. ‘Begbie isn’t a rat.’
He swallowed, and then out it came.
‘He’s a draggoth.’
Charlie looked down into her drawn face. But he saw more than just one face –
Charlie found himself staring at the hundreds, even thousands of lines, faintly traced in the
mysterious fabric of her skin, her myriad faces. Faded smiles, sparkling eyes, dimpled
cheeks, lines of laughter and joy – they were all there, and Charlie’s heart cried out to see
them.

‘Eldritch,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know, you have to believe me. I didn’t know what
draggoths were, what they had done, until I saw your masterpiece. Sorry...I...’
He was babbling now.
The silver fire of the gloomlight blasted into the room, fuelled by the oil of Charlie’s
despair.

‘Gibbous was right all along,’ he said, finally.
There was silence, and then, the unmistakeable creaking noise of the door slowly
opening.

‘Gibbous was right all along!’
The grunting voice mimicked Charlie’s own. The stunted, shrunken frame of
Gibbous stood at the door.

‘Look at me!’ he cried. ‘And it’s your fault, Unmarred!’
He grew livid and came thudding down the staircase.
All six of his arms were outstretched, his hands crisped almost into fists, and his
formerly heavy, dull eyes were now afire with a cold gleam. Charlie tried to dodge the
oncoming boy, but he was too late. Deadly hands closed round his throat and squeezed.

‘Draggoth!’ he grunted. ‘Draggoth! Did you hear him papa!’
Charlie saw the fury in Gibbous’ eyes, and he felt his thumbs press down harder, and
harder and harder on his throat. Charlie flailed his arms, but it was useless. He felt himself
weakening, felt himself slipping away.

‘Draggoth!’

Charlie tried to shake his head, but could not budge it. Gibbous was pushing him down, down to the floor.

Gibbous may well have strangled the life out of him, if he had been anywhere in the room except at the trap door. As it was, Gibbous, in his fury, drove him down, pushing Charlie’s top half outside, into the gloomlight. Charlie thought he could feel it curling through his hair and on his skin. It obscured some of Gibbous’ snarling face, which, even as life drained out of him, Charlie counted as a blessing. Beyond the boy, the gloomlight shifted, allowing Charlie to see Eldritch. She clawed feebly at Gibbous, and her lined face frozen in a mask of pain, mouth open, silently screaming.

Charlie felt life stir within him. He fought against the darkness that threatened to descend over him. With strength he did not know he had, he began to raise his arms. Slowly, they went up, his hands reaching for Gibbous’ head.

But they were not his arms, not his hands.

His were drooping down through the trap door, dangling in the gloomlight. He could not move them.

But hands, someone’s hands, were reaching up.

Grey hands that seemed to float on the gloomlight.

No, they were the gloomlight. It was as if the stuff was doing Charlie’s bidding, and had sprouted hands.

Charlie could not believe it.

And neither could Gibbous.

Charlie watched the boy’s twisted face and slow, heavy-lidded eyes. They looked stupidly, thickly ponderous as they watched the gloom-hands rise up. His expression changed from glee at finally getting at Charlie, to a slow-witted surprise, and then to horror, as the thumbs of the gloom-hands plunged into his eyes.

Gibbous howled.

But his grip on Charlie’s neck did not slacken. Gibbous had pulled up four hands, two to cover his face, two to punch at the gloomlight. His last two hands, and his strongest, it seemed, he kept locked around Charlie’s throat.

Charlie felt himself slipping away again. Through his drooping eyelids, he saw the howling boy, clutching his face and swiping the air. Then, suddenly, he began jerking wildly, as if he were being pinched, prodded and punched, all over his body.
Charlie could not see what was happening. The gloom-hands had vanished, so it could not be them that attacked Gibbous.

Just as Charlie felt the boy’s last two hands release him, and he began to fall down through the trap door, he glimpsed lumpen heads behind Gibbous.

The puppets.

They had begun to swarm the boy, clutching him, clawing him, hitting him.

‘Get off! Get off! Get off!’

As Charlie dropped down through the trap door, he saw Gibbous howling, nearly covered with clawing puppets.

He fell out of the Spider. The last things he saw before his head struck the ground were his splayed feet.

And through them:

Eldritch, at the trap door, face locked in a silent scream.
'Come,' he said. 'Come with me. I'm the boy seeking the light.'

The girl held out her hand and he took it in his and caressed it. It felt warm and soft, a friend's hand. In his other hand he held a book, and, holding both the girl and the book he felt complete and whole.

They stood together on a high ridge gazing out at the dark hills that were bathed in a grey, shifting mist.

'Together,' he said, 'together we could seek it, and seeking it, never be apart.'

He held the girl's hand, but the ground beneath them began to crack and quake, severing her from him. He felt the warmth and softness of her hand slip out of his, and the feeling of wholeness passed away, replaced by an urgent longing.

He watched her fall, stretching out his arms to catch hers. He saw the lines of her face, the dark pools of her eyes, falling, falling... Charlie awoke.

He lay dazed for a moment, surrounded by the fiery gloomlight. He could still feel Gibbous' thumbs pressing on his throat. He could still see his furious, twisted face and thick, sausage-lips turning blood red; could still see how the boy's face had suddenly changed, the murderous fury draining away.

Worst of all, he could still see Eldritch, silently screaming.

Charlie tried to pull himself to his feet, but managed only to reach his knees.

'Eldritch!' he cried.

Nothing.

Charlie shook his head and gazed out into the Welkin of Gloom. The rock was flat for as far as he could see, with only sparse clumps of pale trees. In the sunless gloom their spindly spines and branches, curled like the claws of a beast, glowed a spectral grey. How long had he been unconscious? He had no way of knowing.

'Eldritch!'

Charlie could not believe that she was gone.

Eldritch was gone.

He wrapped his arms about his chest, cupping his elbows in his hands. A chill crept over him, though there was no wind.

Suddenly, bitter tears burst out of him, running down his cheeks in a torrential rain of grief. When the torrent had at last spent itself, Charlie slowly raised his head.
His eyes were drawn to a light, down on the rock, a few arms’ length away. He had not seen it before. It was not a brilliant light, but more like a dull, pallid glow. It was the only light that Charlie could see in the vast gloom that surrounded him, other than the spectral glow of the trees. The mere sight of it, a little pool of radiance, warmed him. It seemed to shine with a special lustre that kindled a powerful yearning within him.

He crawled along the rock toward the light, scuffing his knees and palms on the rough, rocky surface. The pallid light seemed to glow stronger as he neared it. When he was close enough he saw that the light was a shape, long and curved.

He reached out, picked up the glowing thing, and held it before him. Eldritch’s white quill shone in his trembling hand like a lantern.

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For a time, Charlie gazed silently at the beauty of the quill. Its spine and feathers seemed to glow with a cool halo of pallid white and grey. He ran a finger down the strong spine, and felt the wonderful soft strength of its feathers. Raising it to his cheek, he caught the few tears that began to fall once again. But these were different tears, not made bitter by loss, but stronger with hope. Resolve welled within him.

‘I’ll find you,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll find you and we’ll never be apart again. If I have to walk to the ends of the Welkin of Gloom, if I have to die, I’ll find you.’

All about Charlie droplets of gloomlight fell in a gentle rain.

....

After a time he put the glowing quill in his vest pocket. Marvellous warmth spread over his breast and heart. He covered it gently with a hand, as if to protect it, and slowly he rose to his feet. The quill seemed to shine with a mysterious energy, and Charlie seemed able to draw upon it, and the light sustained him.

He began to consider his situation. He did not understand why the Spider had deserted him. Gibbous had certainly wanted to kill him. The boy could have kicked off the puppets, jumped down through the trap door...

Something must have stopped him.

It may have been Eldritch, but Charlie doubted it. It may have been the puppets. But, again, he did not think so.

Suddenly he became aware of a noise. He listened, his skin prickling.

He had been hearing it for some time, but had been too overcome to realise it.

Now he was dreadfully aware.
It seemed to come from his right. But as far as Charlie could see, the land remained flat. There were no hiding places, no boulders, no caves, not even a clump of the spectral trees. He was far from comforted by the thought.

The noise grew louder and louder. He could not tell what it was – it sounded like wet slobbering or chewing. Dread rose in his belly.

He raised his hands to cover his ears, but the noises suddenly stopped. For a moment, there was only silence.

And then, from behind came a swooshing noise, a noise of something big slicing through the air.

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Charlie began to run but was too late. Something sharp dug into his back, lifting him by his vest into the air. He saw his legs and feet before him, kicking wildly at the gloomlight that now stormed about him.

He could hear the sound of wings slicing neatly through the air. It was a deadly sound, and Charlie thought of the noises he had heard earlier.

He was lifted up, and then was brought racing down toward the rock. He hurtled down, closing his eyes as he prepared to be dashed against the rock.

Down he went, crying out, steeling himself.

Just before his feet struck the rock, he was released. He tumbled forward, his arms and legs pin-wheeling through the air. Closing his eyes, he pushed his arms out, trying to stop himself from smashing his head and body on the rock.

But they struck nothing.

Instead, he fell, tumbling head over heels, until he landed, face-first, in something cold and wet. His head butted a solid wall, and, body trembling, he turned and thrust his back up against it.

He had not been dashed against the rock. Instead, he seemed to have passed through the rock.

Above him, the terrible thing hovered.

Charlie stared up into its dagger-shaped eye. It pointed upward, its shaft twisted, the hilt smouldering and gyring with the gloomlight. The eye was strangely hypnotic; looking at it was like gazing into a pool of despair which could enslave him forever.

The draggoth began to move. It seemed to shrink, compact itself, and, like a shadow, lower itself down into the pit.
Charlie pressed his back into the wall.

But the draggoth was not after him.

It turned away, and as if it were on an axis, it rotated until it hovered directly above something - a dark lump - that lay across the pit from Charlie. Breathless, he watched the draggoth’s jaws seemed to extend as it snapped up the mangled lump.

Bile burned Charlie’s throat.

Silently, clutching the lump in its jaws, the draggoth began to rise slowly out of the pit.

Charlie rolled over. His heart was thumping, his body quaking. All, however, was quiet.

Until the noises started again, the dreadful wet sounds he had heard before.

Down at the bottom of the pit, the prisoner of a draggoth, Charlie wished that he were anywhere else, even back in the Castle with the Slupps.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
THE DRAGGOOTH PIT

The noises seemed to last for an eternity.

Charlie clamped his hands over his ears, but still, he heard them. He slumped down; his knees sinking into the cold muck or mire at the bottom of the Pit. The chill and the slime forced him back to his feet. A made desire to run, to flee, to climb up the walls of the Pit, overtook him. But moving was not easy. The mud-like stuff sucked at his feet, and he could lift them only with a powerful effort. Finally his feet struck a solid, rock-like patch, and he sat down there, wrapping his arms about himself, trying to keep himself warm. The quill burned in his vest, and he covered it with a hand. He did not want the draggoth to see it.

After a time he realised that the noises had stopped. He raised his eyes to the lip of the Pit. A glistening sheen of oily darkness was perched there, staring down at him with its dagger-shaped eye.

‘Kill me,’ Charlie said, his voice a low, venomous whisper. ‘Come on. Kill me.’

The whisper turned to a roar.

‘Come on!’

Gloomlight swirled in the draggoth’s eye. Charlie realised that it was not perched on the lip of the Pit; it was hovering over it like a giant bat with its wings extended. The gloomlight curled and slid over its sleek black skin, stroking the draggoth as though it were its pet. Charlie tried not to see the steely teeth of its dark maw. Cold and sharp-looking, they dripped with the dark blood of the body it had butchered.

‘Come on!’ he raged. ‘Kill me like you did Gibbous…’

Charlie was screaming now. The dark lump – somehow Charlie had known. He had not liked Gibbous, had been afraid of him and his threats. But his feelings of pity for the boy had always been stronger than his fear or hate.

The draggoth began to drone.

The noise reverberated in the Pit. At its core was a deep melancholy that transformed the Pit into a well of bleak despair. Charlie clamped his hands over his ears, but it did no good; the droning seeped into his skin like a poison. A deep, sombre pall fell over Charlie’s heart. Everything, he thought, everything was hopeless.

‘Stop it,’ he said, feebly, ‘stop that droning.’

But on and on it went.
A story in *The Grim War* told of a whole town driven mad by the ringing of bells. Charlie had always doubted that a mere sound could drive someone mad. He had no doubts now. In fact, he was afraid that the droning, which seemed to pour out of the walls, would drive him mad. He had crumpled to his knees, his hands still clamped over his ears.

‘Stop it,’ he babbled, ‘stop it!’

The droning appeared to weaken, and the pall over Charlie’s heart lifted a bit. Another noise grew out of the droning.

Words.

Garbled at first.

His skin prickled with fear.

‘*I am your protector.*’

The words had an unnatural flatness, as though compressed and drained of all emotion. They had another quality, a strange familiarity, as if Charlie had heard the draggoth’s voice before. But, Charlie thought, that was impossible.

With the pall over his heart weakening, he felt his anger boil once again. Pictures of Begbie’s incisors digging into Eldritch’s leg were like sparks fuelling his rage. He knew that Begbie might never have intended to bite Eldritch; he may have meant only to bite the puppets. But once he bit, he did not let go...did not stop. And now she would start to Turn, like Gibbous had.

‘You bit her!’ he said. ‘You bit Eldritch. You poisoned her, just like you poisoned Gibbous. I’ve got to save her!’

But Charlie’s words fell bloodless to the bottom of the Pit, as if sucked dry of their force.

The draggoth spoke again:

‘*I am your protector.*’

Again, a strange familiarity, as if the draggoth were not speaking itself, but merely...

Suddenly, Charlie knew.

The force of it nearly knocked him down.

The draggoth spoke using his own voice.

Not entirely, not completely – there were other voices, too – but unmistakeably, the draggoth was using Charlie’s own voice to speak.

‘*I am your protector...I am your protector...*’

Charlie shook his head, and stared at the dark shape with renewed horror.

‘You’re evil,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t use my voice. Don’t say anything.’
‘I am your protector.’
‘Don’t use my voice!’

The draggoth was silent. For a time in the Pit, nothing moved, except for the silent, shifting curtain of gloomlight. There was no sound, except for the droning, which had fallen to an insect-like buzz.

And then:
‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’

The sound of Slupp’s bellowing voice made Charlie jump with fear. He cringed, and, trembling, shook his head.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Not Slupp’s voice, not Slupp’s!’

Silence reigned again. Then the draggoth said, using Charlie’s voice this time,
‘I am your protector.’

Charlie sighed with relief. The draggoth had made its point. Terrible and unnatural as it was, it would use Charlie’s voice to speak.

‘I have to save Eldritch,’ said Charlie.

The draggoth’s eye betrayed no emotion, nor even thought. Looking at it was like looking at a bauble of darkness with a dull grey dagger-shaped eye.

Finally, it spoke.
‘No part...no part in your quest...’

The words seared Charlie’s heart.
‘Eldritch was my friend!’

‘...the grey sage...destroy the gloomlight...must destroy...’

Charlie saw the hands made of gloomlight...saw them reaching up for Gibbous’ throat...

But that was not his doing; it was impossible.

‘You don’t understand,’ he said, holding his head in his hands. ‘You don’t understand what a friend means to me. I’d never had one before her. No one had ever been kind to me.’

Charlie may as well have been talking to the Pit’s black walls.
‘...I am your protector...’

‘I don’t want your protection,’ Charlie said. His voice sunk once more into a low whisper. ‘I wish you and all of your kind had never been created. The draggoths caused all this.’
He remembered what the Myth of the Welkin of Gloom, how the draggoths, servants of the Black Sage, had brought the darkness with them. Charlie waved a long, bony finger to indicate the Welkin of Gloom.

And then,

‘...some draggoths...the black sage...but others...the grey sage...no good, no evil...bring you to him...growing stronger now...takes shape...destroy gloomlight...’

Charlie could not follow the words. They were too disjointed. He could make out only that the draggoth wanted to take him to the Grey Sage. Eldritch’s myth had only spoken of the White and Black Sages. A Grey Sage had never been mentioned.

Charlie was suspicious.

‘I’ve never heard of a Grey Sage,’ he said.

‘...grey sage...destroy gloomlight...black and white sages...control gloomlight...use it...for war...take you to grey sage...magic...his magic...inside you...kept you pure...uncorrupted...power to destroy gloomlight...destroy good...destroy evil...’

Charlie shook his head. He was cold, clammy, his hair plastered to his forehead.

The unnaturally flat tone, the way the words seemed to be ejected from the draggoth, rather than spoken, and the strange things it said made it very hard for Charlie talk to talk to it.

‘I am your protector...I am your protector...’

‘If you’re my protector,’ Charlie said, bitterly, ‘then why did you leave me alone during all those Showings!’

As Charlie spoke, his voice had begun to rise until at the end it began to quiver and strain.

‘...did not leave....’

‘But...’


The creature spoke again.

‘...can not stay in spider...shape...must change...or grow weak...’

Charlie ran a hand through his dank hair. Was that why Begbie had left him so often? And why he had suddenly left after he bit Eldritch? Because he needed to change shape?

The draggoth paused and then said,

‘you...magic inside...go to grey sage...’

‘Why don’t you just take me to him?’
...draggoths...awake now...some...black sage...others grey sage...must hide now...then go to Kadath...others come...gathering...

Charlie shook his head, trying to make sense of the draggoth’s clumsy speech. He could gather only that for some reason – something to do with the Black Sage and other draggoths - Begbie was hiding him in the Pit.

Charlie shook his head.

‘All I want to do is find Eldritch.’

The draggoth’s words came quickly.

‘...you have power...magic...control the gloomlight...use it...destroy it...’

Charlie saw the gloom-hands again, saw their long gleaming silver fingers, reaching for Gibbous’ throat.

‘Nonsense,’ he whispered. Charlie felt his flesh crawl. ‘I don’t have any power. Where would I get it from? And if I did, why would I want to destroy it?’

‘...grey sage...he must tell...take you to him...’

‘Why doesn’t he come to me?’ said Charlie.

‘...no shape...lose power in Clash...power growing now...grey draggoths...awake now...’

Charlie wished with all his heart that the draggoths had stayed ‘asleep’.

‘What woke you?’ he asked, not expecting an answer.

The draggoth was silent for a moment, and then it said,

‘...you...’

Charlie was dumbfounded.

‘That’s impossible,’ he said, ‘how could I...wake you?’

‘...your teeth...teeth...grey sage’s magic...in teeth...it called us...’

Charlie listened, stunned.

‘...power...teeth...in castle...’

He listened, trying to understand. Begbie had known by his teeth that he had the Grey Sage’s magic within him. Was that how the Messenger had found him, too? His teeth would have attracted the gloomlight, and they might have drawn the draggoth, and the Messenger, too.

‘...magic within you...destroy gloomlight...destroy welkin of gloom...grey sage...growing stronger...’

The words tumbled out of Begbie, but Charlie only half heard them.

‘Eldritch,’ he whispered.
‘...I am your protector...I am your protector...’

She had the teeth, and the magic, too. Charlie’s heart began to pound. He was about to tell the draggoth about Eldritch, but he was afraid that it might capture her, too, and put her in a Pit. He could not do that to Eldritch.

Another thought occurred to Charlie: what if the Slupps found her? The puppeteers were heading for Castle Slupp.

Charlie did not know what to do. He needed time to think, but did not have it. He knew that he did not really believe in the quest, or in the existence of a Grey Sage. However, he did want to discover the truth about the power in his teeth. But what the draggoth told him was too outlandish, too preposterous. It was evil; it had to be lying. He could not trust it.

But what choice did he have? He had to find Eldritch, to save her from the draggoth’s bite, from Turning, and from the Slupps. He had to do something, had to find her. He had to try.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the ceaseless droning and the Pit itself suffocated him. It was like trying to speak in a nightmare.

‘...go to grey sage...’

Charlie stood up, clenching his hands into fists. He felt the quill’s warm glow against his breast.

‘I have to find Eldritch. She has the teeth, the power, too.’

Charlie stared up at the draggoth’s dagger-shaped eye. He could read no emotion there. He hoped that he was doing the right thing, telling it about Eldritch. He had no choice!

‘If you won’t help me find her,’ he said, ‘then I’ll find her myself. You bit her, poisoned her. I have to save her.’

The draggoth hovered. It was so inky black that Charlie could not tell where it stopped and the Pit began.

‘...cannot save...’

All feeling drained from Charlie.

‘...cannot save...only draggoth that bit can save...only draggoth that bit can save...the eye...’

Charlie felt as if he had been struck dumb.

‘...I am your protector...gathering...coming...gathering...’

The draggoth rose and its long dark body slipped silently through the glomlight, which settled like a cloud over the Pit’s mouth.
‘Come back! Come back!’

The draggoth was gone. Its fateful words echoed in the gloom of his mind:

‘...cannot save...only draggoth that bit can save...the eye...’
He held a girl’s hands and gazed into the black shimmering pools of darkness that were the girl’s eyes. Light glittered in the pools of darkness, like tiny, gleaming stars in a magical, midnight sky Charlie had read about.

Looking into her eyes, holding her hands, he danced in great sweeping circles with the girl. Faces blurred around them as they danced, and from somewhere came the sound of clapping hands and people singing.

Light as air, Charlie believed he could dance with the girl forever.

But the dream and the girl began to slip away.

Like in a show, a puppet show, darkness began to creep from the edges of the set as lights slowly dimmed.

The girl’s hands slipped from his...

Charlie awoke.

The spell of the dream was broken. His head ached, his body ached. But the worst was the aching of his heart for the girl in his dream.

For Eldritch.

.

Time passed, or did not, in the Pit. Charlie languished there, slumped in his usual position - head down, knees drawn up, arms at his sides. If he looked up, he saw the Pit’s black maw yawning open, enticingly, but the gloomlight squatted densely over it, like a cloud. Near the mouth, the Pit’s walls were streaked with silver, and long tendrils of gloomlight unfurled from the cloud like silver streamers and crept ponderously down into the Pit. The curling, snaking tendrils shed a pale grey light, but could not penetrate the heavy darkness at the bottom, where Charlie was.

The words of the draggoth lingered in his mind, tormenting him:

‘...only the draggoth that bit can save...’

Charlie began to see in the draggoth the cause of all his own, and the entire Welkin’s, misery.

And out of this grew a deep hatred for his captor.

.

As before, in the Castle, and in the Spider, Charlie began to mark time on the walls. His legs and arms had begun to feel lifeless. At times the dagger-shaped eye of the draggoth
stared down at him. Or the creature would be shrouded in gloomlight, looking up at the sky, as if waiting for a sign. The draggoth seemed to spend a long time like that, looking up at the sky. It rarely flew, but would hover, aimlessly, above the Pit.

Charlie had wakened to find a gourd full of dark liquid beside him. Fearing draggoth-magic, Charlie sipped from it sparingly. The liquid was thick and somehow muddy, and it had a bitter, coppery taste. It was not as refreshing as real water, but Charlie was glad of it.

He had tried to climb the Pit’s walls, and was astonished to find that he could. His feet and hands could find purchase on the walls, which seemed to be pockmarked but solid rock, and he had scrambled up and up, heart racing, only to find that the mouth of the Pit seemed farther away than before. The higher he went up, the smaller and more distant it became.

The pit was an illusion, a piece of magic.

Draggoth-magic.

Charlie knew then that there could be no escape.

He had the dream again and again.

And each time he did, he reached up a pale hand and marked another tick on the wall.

He looked at all the ticks and realised that he had had the tantalizing dream six times since his first encounter with the draggoth.

The dream was both solace and torment. In it he could once again feel the raw silkiness of Eldritch’s face as he stroked her cheek; feel the softness of her hand in his; hear the scribbling of her quill.

But it always left him feeling twisted with hopelessness. With each dream, a hollow, desolate feeling grew within him. He was beginning to feel as dry and lifeless and bleak as the Welkin of Gloom itself.

After the sixth dream, Charlie awoke and rubbed his cracked lips with the back of his bony hand. Barely strong enough to raise the gourd to his lips, he broke his rule and drank deeply of the dark murky liquid. It was as if he were drinking an illusion. The bitter stuff refreshed without truly refreshing.

He leaned back against the wall and raised his eyes. It was like looking up from the bottom of a grave. Spindly whorls and curling licks of gloomlight lingered at the lip of the Pit. The draggoth did not seem to be there.

Charlie reached inside his pocket. As he did each time he had the dream, he drew out Eldritch’s quill, slowly, carefully, and held it in his hands. To him, it was more precious than
any jewel, and he kept it secret from the draggoth. Holding it, running his fingers through the soft but strong feathers, it seemed to glow and respond to his touch, shining torch-like with a deep, silver luminescence.

Charlie leaned over. He scratched the quill’s sharp point against the wall of the Pit, meaning to mark another sleep on the wall. The point struck the wall, and this time, cut deeply into it, like a knife.

Charlie gasped. Could he cut his way out of the Pit?

Burning brightly, the quill began to thrum between his fingers, as if it had connected with a source of powerful energy. Astonished, Charlie felt it begin to pull and jump in his hand. He let it go. The quill remained stuck in the wall, but its plume curved downward, almost drooping. Reaching up, he took the quill in his hand once again.

And it began to move.

It cut deeper into the wall. In a single swift movement, it had pulled Charlie’s hand over his head, down to his knees, and then returned to where it had begun. The diamond-like point had cut a large silver circle in the wall. It blazed like a ring of cold silver fire.

Still holding the quill, Charlie felt it move again. It sliced another circle inside the first one, then another, and another, each circle being smaller than the previous. Charlie stared at the pattern of the circle within circles.

He watched, baffled, as the quill pulled at his hand again. It drew a line straight down through the middle of the circles. It stopped at the small circle at the centre, jumping over it and leaving it whole, only to continue below it. There were now three concentric circles, and two halves, a left and a right half.

Then, the quill rested. Charlie took it off the wall and held it in its hand. It was a moment before he realised what he was looking at. The circles – he had seen them before, on the cover of his Book, *The Grim War*, and from Eldritch’s myth show. But he had no idea what they meant.

Before he could think any more, patterns of black and white began to form inside the circles. It took a moment for Charlie to see what the pattern was. The smallest circle had two halves, the left being white, and the right black. In the next circle, the pattern changed. This time, the left half of the circle was black, and the right was white. In the biggest circle, the pattern returned to that of the smallest: left white, right black.

Charlie stared at the baffling, mesmerizing symbol before him. His Book had never done this. The colours of black and white were pure, and they blazed with intensity. They seemed so intense that they threatened to spill over their boundaries.
And that was just what happened.

Slowly, the black and white bars began to leak into one another. The circles seemed to swirl, until a formless grey mist appeared.

Like the gloomlight.

Charlie reached out a hand into the middle of the circle, and watched it disappear into the gyring pool of grey.

He jerked it back out. For a moment, he had feared that the gloomlight had swallowed his hand. But it was still there.

Slowly, he reached out, and again, his hand disappeared.

And this time, his body followed.

He found himself crawling on his hands and knees through a long tunnel. It seemed to have the same unblemished surface as the Pit, and its icy coolness chilled his hands and knees. Though he could see no light, the tunnel was somehow illuminated, glittering as if with nitre. Grunting, he crawled and crawled until he thought the tunnel was endless. What was he crawling for? Was the quill trying to show him something, or was it just more draggoth-magic?

Something was beginning to take shape in the shadows ahead. Something made of black lines. A cube or box? Charlie could not tell. He kept crawling, a sense of urgency welling inside him. There was something there, something at the end of the tunnel...

Faster and faster he went, until the phantom shape became clear to him.

The black lines he had seen were the bars of a cage.

His Cage, from Castle Slupp.

Charlie stopped, shaking his head. He stared at the Cage. Though it was still some distance away, it seemed to loom in the tunnel. Wisps of gloomlight snaked around its sinewy bars. Dread crept over him with icy fingers.

‘No,’ he said.

An urge to flee mastered him, pushing him backwards a pace.

But there was nowhere to go.

If he tried to move backward, he struck a solid wall of darkness.

There was no going back.

Charlie raised his head and looked at the looming Cage. The heavy door swung silently open, as if inviting Charlie to come.
Charlie bowed his head and shook it. There was no way, no way that he could possibly enter it, not that Cage, never.

He raised his head. The Cage seemed to stare back, both beckoning him and mocking him.

Something had changed.
Inside the Cage there was a lump.
A pinkish lump.
Charlie cried out and crawled forward, wishing that he could run.
He crawled and crawled, until finally he lay on his knees inside the Cage beside the pink lump.

Sweeping it up in his arms, he held Eldritch’s body against him, her head and limbs drooping lifelessly. Her mask was off. Charlie could see the charred skin, and the bars on her teeth, and the gloomlight that swirled inside the three broken strokes.

There was nothing he could do for her.
He cried out her name as the door of the Cage slid silently shut, locking them both forever inside it.

Charlie found himself back in the Pit, staring at the swirling grey circle that the quill had made.

He became aware of a presence above him, and he raised his head.
A dagger-shaped eye glared down at him.
Then it disappeared into the gloomlight.
CHAPTER TWENTY
RIDING THE DRAGGOTH

For a long time afterward, Charlie sat in the Pit, tormented by what he had experienced. No matter how hard he tried, he could not forget the terrible feeling of holding Eldritch’s lifeless, weightless body in his arms. Worse, he could not forget how powerless he had felt. He could do nothing for her, could not rescue her like a hero could in a tale from his Book.

Why had he been shown this? Who had shown it to him? Was it Eldritch? He did not think so. More than likely, it was just draggoth magic.

‘...cannot save...only draggoth that bit can save ...only draggoth that bit can save...the eye...’

His eyes were drawn upward. He sat up, blinking.

The cloud of gloomlight that usually squatted over the Pit was gone.

A bolt of fear shot through Charlie.

An eye – glowing greyly, like a vial filled with gloomlight - appeared suddenly out of the darkness.

He felt like a bug in a glass.

He struggled to his knees. He picked up the gourd of draggoth-brew and flung it as hard as he could. But it only floated upwards, like a balloon. Then it came plummeting down, landing with a fat thud at his feet. He raised a fist and shook it at the loathsome creature.

‘What are you looking at? Either come down and kill me or…’

Charlie’s heart jumped.

The draggoth left its perch. It hovered for a time, shrunk itself, and then began to descend. It had wrapped its wings around its torso, and Charlie could not see its horse-like legs. Down it came, stopping to hover just above Charlie, who shrank away from it as though it were death itself.

‘Go away! Go away!’

Charlie’s voice sound pitifully weak, like the squeaking of a mouse. He could now see that only the draggoth’s underbelly was plated, for the rest of the creature seemed sleek and oily. Its skin glistened in the gloom. Charlie’s eyes followed the long black shaft of its neck to its jaws. They parted slightly, revealing the cold gleam of its white teeth. Charlie’s eyes shifted from them to the gloomlight of its eye, and back again.

‘I am your protector.’
The voice was his.
‘Come.’
Charlie shook his head in fear.
‘Come...come...’

The draggoth swivelled as if on an invisible pole. Now, he could only see the spine of the creature’s back, and the oiliness of the creature’s skin. Ooze dripped from every part of its body like black liquid.

And the drone began.
Charlie clamped his hands over his ears.
The draggoth was going to kill him as he had killed Gibbous.
But the creature only lowered itself further down, until its wings, which it still kept wrapped about itself, scraped the bottom of the pit.

It moved closer to Charlie.
So close that Charlie could step right onto its back.
He began to shake. The droning, the noxious odour....

‘I am your protector’
The voice – it was his, but not quite his – emanated from the oozing mass of the draggoth’s back, now less than an arm’s length away from him.

‘Come’
Charlie shook his head. There was no way, no way at all that he could ever touch the evil thing...

‘No,’ he said, in a terrified whisper.
‘Come...go to Kadath...grey draggoths...awake...’
The creature floated even closer to him. Charlie clamped his knees together and turned on his side, pushing himself harder and harder against the wall in a hopeless attempt to get away from the draggoth. But it was now so close that its dripping back nearly brushed Charlie’s legs.

There was nowhere left to go. Charlie had pressed himself as far as he could against the wall. The draggoth floated closer, closer, the stench of it was unbearable; Charlie thought he might be sick if it touched him.

He was not sick. Instead, he screamed, a deep cry strangled by the Pit.

The draggoth had stuck itself to one of his legs. Charlie was reminded of greenish shapeless creatures that often crawled over him in his Turret. They were cold, slimy, even
sticky, and had left a trail of ooze on his skin. The draggoth felt like those shapeless things, but worse. Far worse.

The draggoth’s skin sucked at Charlie’s leg. It was as if a toothless mouth had clamped round his thigh and was trying to suck his flesh off.

Begbie began to rise slowly up through the Pit, with Charlie dangling awkwardly by his leg. No matter what Charlie did, he could not tear his leg from the draggoth. It was as if he had become a part of the thing.

‘What are you going to do with me? Where are you taking me?’

Charlie leaned over and began to pound the creature with his fists. Instantly, he wished he had not done so. He heard two more sucking noises, and both of his fists disappeared into the draggoth’s oily back. Charlie cried out. He struggled furiously to pull out his hands, but could not.

The creature began to lift him up through the Pit. It did not fly; its wings did not flap. It simply raised itself up, swivelling as it went. When it had cleared the lip of the Pit, it unfurled its great black wings and spread them. The creature raised them, until the wingtips touched above Charlie’s head, and then plunged them down with an awful power that sent the draggoth soaring stealthily through the eddying gloomlight.

‘to kadath...in the cold waste...grey draggoths...awake...’

Charlie had crouched down low. Now he raised his head, but he could not speak. His mouth and throat felt as dry as parchment.

‘We have to find Eldritch,’ he said, his voice like the croaking of a rusty hinge at Castle Slupp. ‘Save her from your bite.’

The draggoth droned under Charlie, and the grey light of its eye shone out into the gloom. But it made no response.

The drone seeped through Charlie’s skin, turning his thoughts and his heart as black as Begbie himself.

Though he rode the only draggoth that held her cure, he knew he was powerless to save Eldritch.

Through the spectral sheen of the gloomlight Charlie glimpsed tussocks of shrivelled black grass, warped hillocks, or scant forests of trees with dull white trunks. From the air, the stunted shapes and their gnarled branches seemed to glow with their own eerie pallor.

Charlie remembered hiding in another sparse forest after he had escaped from the Castle.
Freedom had terrified him, but Begbie's presence comforted him. That was before he had known the rat's true identity.

Now, the draggoth gave him only fear and loathing.

They stole through the gloomlight, the draggoth's black wings rising and falling on either side of Charlie. He did not really ride the draggoth; rather, he was stuck to it. Despite its solid appearance, its body was malleable, and it had shrunk its body enough for Charlie's legs to wrap around its torso. At times it released his hands, and he could pry them off its skin, wiping the draggoth-ichor on his pants or vest. He could lean back, scratch, rub his face, or stretch his arms out.

His mood and thoughts were as black as the draggoth beneath him. Though he had shouted himself hoarse about Eldritch, the draggoth gave no sign of listening. And so Charlie had fallen into a deep bout of despair. He did not care where the draggoth took him.

And he could not stop his mind from showing him the vision from the Pit, from feeling Eldritch's limp body in his arms. It made him sick with despair.

And, had he not been able to see the tip of the puppet girl's quill poking up from his vest pocket, he might have given up all hope of seeing her again.

The quill kindled warmth that soothed his chest and heart.

But most of all, it kindled the fires of hope within him.

....

For a long time, they had been climbing higher and higher into the sky, until the gloomlight had turned into a vaporous ocean of grey.

Charlie, waking from a torpor, began to notice a change in the gloomlight.

It grew colder, raising goosebumps on his flesh. And it was darker, dirtier, coating his body and face with a thin layer of grainy black dust. Now, as Charlie shivered, they soared upward into a miasma of swirling dark dust. But through it he could glimpse a solid mass, grooved and black, like the side of a mountain.

Finally the draggoth tilted, forcing Charlie to lean sideways, and they began to drift.

The grooved rock Charlie had seen before vanished behind the dark, dust-ridden gloomlight, which had formed banks around them as thick and dark as storm clouds. Charlie huddled into himself for warmth. They drifted, and then something peaked and black, far blacker than the swirling dust, cut through the polluted gloomlight like a knife.

Charlie forgot how cold he was.
It was a peak, a mountain peak, and it was hollow. Billowing columns of smoke-like vapour spewed up from its dark depths, the source of the black dust that had caked Charlie’s skin. The mountain was a volcano, but instead of heat, this volcano was cold, bitterly cold.

Charlie stared at the volcano and the columns of smoke that streamed up from it. He realised that he had been talking, babbling, aloud. On and on he went...but no, it was the draggoth that spoke, using his voice.

‘...kadath...’ it said. ‘...kadath in the cold waste...draggoths made here...by black sage...’

Charlie swallowed.

‘...dark smoke...black magic...to block the sun and moon...create draggoths...out of darkness came they came...into darkness they will go...’

Charlie remembered Eldritch’s show, the dark figure standing on a mountaintop.
The Black Sage.
Creating the draggoths.
He remembered how the creatures had come spewing forth from the peak, bringing the darkness with them.

And now, the heatless black smoke came belching out of the peak in ever greater blasts – the birthplace of the draggoths.

Charlie shivered. The cold had teeth, sharp and hard, and it gnawed at his skin, feasting on him. And with the cold came dread; the mountain filled him with it. He wanted to flee this terrible place and never come back.

But instead of fleeing, the draggoth began to descend.

‘What are you doing?’ Charlie whispered. ‘Where are you going?’

Charlie shut his eyes and mouth as tight as he could.

They began to spiral in a dizzying descent. Charlie felt ill as they spun round and round, rushing headlong through the smoke, down into the cold black heart of Kadath itself.
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
THE FIRE OF KADATH

It was like being swallowed by a giant maw.
Charlie saw nothing. He could feel only the draggoth’s oiliness beneath him. Cold
teeth seemed to gnaw at his arms, legs and feet.
Down into the darkness they went, down into the mountain’s sunless gullet.
Then they emerged from the darkness to hover over a red sea of fire.
Charlie was aware of the draggoth spreading its wings. It began to lower itself. And
though the brilliance of the fire stung his eyes, he could see a ring of smooth dark rock that
formed a kind of platform around the bubbling red sea.
The draggoth sank to the rock.
Charlie felt the creature release him. He slid off its back, his feet at last touching the
solid rock beneath him. His knees buckled, and he sank down, reaching out to balance
himself on the rock, which was so cold it seemed to freeze his hands.
Below the platform of rock the liquid fire burnt in a deep red glow, sometimes
changing to a brilliant fiery orange that lit up the black sides of the mountaintop before
changing back again. The red liquid tossed like a stormy sea; and waves of deep red rose and
dashed themselves against the mountain’s sides. Chunks of black rock fell off into the greedy
fire and were hungrily consumed, swelling the fire into a furious anger. Thick streams of
smoke rose up, forming a dense black cloud that choked the volcano’s gullet.
The draggoth hovered above the red sea. It stretched its long, plated neck and
lowered its head, as if searching for something in the red liquid below. Black ichor dripped
from its underbelly and wings. It hovered like this for a time, and Charlie, on his knees,
watched the dark shape. Its movements were slow and languorous, its head and neck
swaying gently back and forth.
Then, quite suddenly, it batted its great black wings and raised its long neck. Its jaws
fell open, and a mournful howling rose up, low at first, and then swelling into a great
crescendo. The mountain’s black rock quivered underneath Charlie as he watched, rapt.
He was fascinated and repelled by the draggoth.
The cry it made, its howl, was not like any sound he had heard. It was not a terrifying
sound, but rather it was mournful, as if borne of a great misery. Charlie knew the howl of
gloombeasts, but the noise that rocked the volcano was greater, like the howling of a noble,
dying beast. He did not take his eyes from the draggoth; he felt compelled to watch every move and hear every sound.

The draggoth wrapped its wings over its body. Charlie could see only the long neck and head, which now pointed away from the sea of fire, toward the black cloud of smoke above.

A spark of fear ignited within him.

The creature seemed ready to fly up the mountain’s gullet.

Charlie did not want to be left inside Kadath, alone. He reached out an arm to protest, but, wrapped in the protective shell of its wings, and revolving slowly in a graceful spin, the draggoth began to move.

Not upward, but downward.

Into the cold fire.

Charlie cried out.

The sea bubbled and shifted as it consumed the black shape.

First the body and wings, then its neck and head.

The last thing Charlie saw before the sea took all of its prey was the grey glow of the draggoth’s eye. The creature seemed to fix it upon Charlie before it disappeared into the fire.

The draggoth was gone.

Charlie shook his head. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

The mountain fell silent.

There was only the red blaze of the fire below him. It seemed to fill the mountain with a strange radiance, the red beams reaching higher and higher up the mountain’s black shaft. The dark cloud of smoke lodged there was now ribbed with deep orange.

Charlie had moved to the fire’s edge. His hands gripped the rock, and though his eyes strained against the glow, he was able to stare down into the red sea. There was no bubbling, no roiling. It was calm now - sated, for the moment – its surface smooth and stagnant.

‘...only the draggoth that bit can save...the eye...’

The draggoth’s words haunted Charlie. How could he save Eldritch now? The draggoth was gone.

Charlie wanted to turn away. He wanted to ponder his fate and how he might escape the mountain without the draggoth, to save Eldritch.

But the fire would not allow it. It was greedy and perhaps wanted more.

Small waves now lapped gently against the platform of rock.
He peered into the fire.

A black feeling rose within him. His hand crept to his vest and took out the glowing silver quill.

Charlie gazed at it. Before, it had seemed magical to him, wondrous. Now, the bright sheen of its feathers had dimmed, its halo all but vanished. It was an ordinary quill. Nothing more.

The draggoth was gone, and Eldritch was gone.

There was no hope, no hope at all.

A desire formed within Charlie. Why not rid himself of the burden of his teeth? Of the quill? And of his quest?

The Fire of Kadath, created by the Black Sage, called him.

He peered down at it, and believed he could see his face on its undulating surface. He saw the oily black hair that fell in streaks across his white forehead. His skin seemed pale and sickly, his eyes black and weary. The only colour on his face was the dark bags like smudges of black pencil under his eyes. He opened his mouth and saw the three straight lines like bars across his teeth. They had caused him so much grief.

Only the cold Fire of Kadath could soothe him.

Charlie held the quill before him, grasping it in his white hand that seemed like a claw. He leaned over and held it above the Fire.

And then from Fire itself emerged a shape.

Its black skin glistened, as if covered in oil, and it rose out of the liquid sea before Charlie like a monster.

The spell of the Fire was broken.

The black feeling left him, replaced by a horror that spread through him like a cold fire.

He saw Eldritch’s quill before him. What was he doing?

He pulled the glowing thing back to his chest, and placed it in his pocket. Then he wrapped his threadbare vest about him as if it were a warm, thick coat. He realised that he was shivering, with fear or cold he could not tell.

He recoiled from the Fire’s edge. He did not want to fall under its seductive spell again.

The draggoth had emerged entirely from the Fire and hung suspended over it. It had spread its wings to their fullest breadth, and fixed its eye upon Charlie.

The power of its gaze pushed him onto his back.
More shapes began to rise into the air. They hung suspended over the Fire like balls of black smoke. And then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, out of the balls of smoke long plated necks formed, and wings, and the strange horse-like legs.

But no dagger-shaped eyes.

They were blind things.

Charlie looked up at the creatures that now surrounded him. He could not count them. They seemed like a mass of darkness.

Except for the one with the grey eye.

And in a dream, or a nightmare, he watched as a grey energy fell in a single stream from his mouth, pouring from him. Inside, he felt light and airy. What came from his mouth was not a thin light or streak, but more vaporous, like steam.

Or breath.

With each breath Charlie took, more vapour seemed to spill from his mouth. Streaks and whorls of grey broke off and disappeared into the air, but enough of the vapour remained intact, and began to spread across the Fire. It moved with each breath Charlie took, like a cloud scudding across the sky.

The breath moved across the Fire, which had begun to toss and boil in fury. Plumes of flame flared up, but the grey cloud of breath seemed inured to their Fire.

The stream of breath hung over the middle of the Fire. Then it fractured, and a myriad of grey streams were born and began to spread in different directions over the Fire. They looked for a moment like thick grey cobwebs. But they began to move, each new stream making thick lines toward the draggoths that hovered above the Fire. The streams shimmered and crept to their snake-like heads, and began to collect there in a pool of grey. Slowly, the pool formed into a dagger, pointing upward, like Begbie’s. And within them roiled the power of the mysterious grey breath.

Having found their destinations, the streams of breath then faded.

Charlie lay on his back, astounded.

He saw the draggoths that had been created. They hovered over the Fire. Some batted their wings, as if testing them, while others snapped their fearsome jaws. There were scores of them – big and small - some permanently changing, shrinking their wings, or extending their necks. They were impossible to count, for where one dark mass ended another seemed to begin. As a whole, they were like a winged black sea ready to rise out of the mountain.
Had he created them? No, he quickly told himself; he had only given them their eyes. But he knew that he had given them more.

Within him there was a power; he could no longer pretend that it was not there. He did not know how he had gotten it, or how to control it. Perhaps, like Begbie had said, it was the Grey Sage’s power.

But it was within him.

There was no doubt of that.

‘...we are your protectors...we are your protectors...’

The chant swelled in the mountain, and then came the draggoth-drone. Charlie clamped his hands over his ears.

‘We are your protectors...we are your protectors...we are your protectors...’

‘This can’t be happening,’ he whispered to himself. ‘It’s a nightmare.’

The Fire seemed to contract. Its surface quivered with the power that boiled inside it, threatening to explode.

A draggoth glided close to Charlie. He heard the peculiar sucking noise as his hands and legs were clamped onto the creature’s oily body, and he felt himself floating upward through the mountain’s shaft.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FLIGHT

Charlie was borne out of Kadath on the wings of a draggoth. They plunged through the black cloud, and flecks of burnt rock spiked Charlie’s face and skin as they climbed higher and higher. The bitter cold seemed to bite with less viciousness. And from far away, on the edges of his mind, as if recalling something that had happened long ago, he heard the strange chanting of the grey draggoths.

As they soared out of the mountain, he turned his head and gazed down. A steady streak of thick black smoke spouted from Kadath’s gaping mouth. Out of the smoke spun flecks of darkness; Charlie thought they were chips of rock, until they landed on the mountainside, coating it in an oily slickness.

Draggoths.

They squatted on the black rock, and began to quiver and grow, as if they could no longer bear a strain and threatened to burst.

All at once, as if obeying an unseen and unheard signal, they took to the air, and spread themselves around Charlie and Begbie until they had surrounded them.

With Charlie at its centre, the draggoth-pack began to glide through the gloomlight.

... . . .

They rolled through the gloomlight like a giant black storm-cloud.

He did not know for how long they travelled; they seemed to pass through an endless series of mountains, whose towering peaks scraped through the gloomlight like blades.

A strange peace descended over Charlie as they flew. His mind seemed blank, and he might have slept for a time as the draggoth carried him through the air. The steady rhythm of Begbie’s wings rising and falling soothed him, as did the chanting. Distant and dreamlike, the draggoth voices worked like a spell: we are your protectors, we are your protectors.

But sleep was not peaceful. The horror of his dream from the Pit revisited Charlie time and again. More than once he awoke from them with the puppet-girl’s name on his lips. One dream stood out from all others.

Once again he crawled through the strange tunnel. He clutched something in his hand that burned with an insistent silver fire, its beams striking out against the tunnel’s walls, as if trying to bore holes through them. Was it Eldritch’s quill? A torch? Charlie did not know; his dream would not reveal it.
Whatever it was, he knew it was important. He was nearly sick with worry that he might lose it. His heart pounded and his forehead burned with the strange heat of a fever. He crawled along the tunnel, gripping the valuable thing tightly in his hand, so tightly he thought he might crush it. He kept his eyes pinned on the unmoving, pinkish lump at the tunnel’s end, which he saw through the bars of a forbidding cage.

Slow.

Too slow.

No matter how fast he crawled, the lump remained as far away as ever.

After too long, far too long, he came to the tunnel’s end.

The cage gaped open before him.

He crawled inside, his fingers still wrapped around the glowing thing in his hand.

His heart in his throat, he dared not breathe. He cupped his hand behind Eldritch’s head, raised it gently up.

‘I’m here. I’m here.’

His words echoed in the tunnel.

He looked down.

The dark, hollow eye-sockets of a skull gazed back up at him.

After that dream, Charlie strove to remain awake. He could not stand another one.

The deathly paleness of the skull, and its deep, hollow sockets of darkness — they seemed so real. For a long time after the dream, he thought he could feel the curve of the cold skull in his hand. But worse were the eyes — the dark, empty wells haunted him; for a long time after the dream he had the dreadful sensation that they were watching his every move and thought, judging him, accusing him.

Yet, awful as the dream had been, it seemed to have a purpose: to remind him of Eldritch. As if he could forget her! His vow flooded back to him, stronger than ever: find her or perish in the attempt. The vow gave him the strength to shake off his torpor, and he tried to keep his mind blade-sharp. Though it was not likely — surrounded as he was by draggoths - an opportunity for escape could arise at any time. For Eldritch’s sake, he had to be alert enough to seize it.

All around the mountains rose, majestic in their size. At times the gloomlight squatted over the peaks, thick as a cloud, and at others it spread itself thinly like a grey veil over their dark, barren rock. Charlie remembered Eldritch’s show, how the draggoths had
blasted the mountains and land with their fire. Those same creatures – or ones like them – now had him captive.

And he had helped to create them.

The thought chilled him. Over and over he saw the blobs of unformed draggoths rise from Kadath’s roiling fire, saw the blind things hover in the air, and, worst of all, saw the thin stream of vapour pour from his mouth, forming their grey eyes. Charlie tried to tell himself it had not happened. Begbie had created the grey draggoths, not him – the draggoth had plunged itself into the fire, and from it the others had grown.

He was soothed by this, but only for a time. At the back of his mind, he knew that once again, an unknown power had worked through him, had created the vapour that had given the draggoths their eyes. What was the vapour? Was it gloomlight? Could he somehow control it, even create it?

No. It was too much. It could not be...

Eldritch. He would think only about her.

Charlie drew himself up and straightened his back. He felt the strong, warm glow of the quill in his breast-pocket. He gazed out into the gloomlight, past the draggoth’s long, undulating neck and gently bobbing head. Far in the distance, a shard of dark mountaintop tore suddenly through the gloomlight’s thin grey haze. The draggoth-wave veered toward it. It seemed like they were going to land.

Charlie seemed to remember circling other mountain peaks. He had strange, dream-like visions of draggoths huddled together and droning, as if in silent debate. If these meetings had indeed happened, Begbie did not speak to him about them. Perhaps they were going to have another meeting. If so, Charlie was determined to be awake for it.

The draggoths began to descend. Dark flecks broke off from the wave and attached themselves to the black rock. Soon the solid mass of draggoths that surrounded him had given away completely, and for a short time he and Begbie soared through the sky alone. Then they too dipped and began to fall toward the mountain. Charlie’s stomach turned as they descended.

When they had landed, Charlie unstrapped the draggoth-gourd and drank from it, wincing at the bitterness of the murky liquid. While still in the Pit, he had strapped it to his waist with a strip of clothing torn from his filthy vest. He was glad of its strange power now.

He wondered whether Begbie might unclamp him, but his legs remained stuck to the draggoth. Charlie raised his head. The grey eyes of the draggoths stared at him. They were
ranged below him, a black mass dotted with grey lights. Begbie droned beneath him. The
unearthly chant rose up: *we are your protectors.*

Something was happening. Were the draggoths speaking to one another? All he
could hear was the buzz of their droning, which seemed to grow stronger and stronger. They
were bound by a common energy; Charlie could not see it, but he felt it. The mountaintop
thrummed with their energy, as if alive. The draggoths seemed to pulse, even to swell into
bubbles, as if engorged. And then, as if drawing power from the mountain itself, they began
to grow, doubling in size and malevolence.

What was happening?

He tore his eyes from the draggoths and gazed out into the gloom.

It took a moment for his eyes to see the white peak, and the winged shapes flying in
circles around it. At first he only glimpsed it, the gloomlight thinning to a transparent
curtain, and then suddenly thickening.

He waited for it to change. When it did, he saw the ghostly outlines of the peak. It
was not pure white, but white sullied with grey and black, so that it shone with a strange
glow, like a shard of dark ice. Shapes of the same sullied colour dropped from the sky onto
the peak. It was far away, across a wide gulf of swirling grey cloud.

The grey cloud thickened, shrouding the peak in its gloom.

He knew what the shapes on the white peak were.

Gloombeasts.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
CLASH

A chill feeling, like dread or loathing, grew in the pit of Charlie’s stomach.

The droning changed, swelling to a maddening buzz. Charlie clamped his hands over his ears. Across the gulf, the gloombeasts swarmed about the white peak. They were clearly disturbed by the presence of the draggoths. Had they been surprised? Charlie imagined that they were. After all, the grey draggoths had just been created.

Charlie stared at the peak. He thought he could just see tiny white shapes spilling over the lip of the peak, just as the newly created draggoths had done at Kadath. Was the white mountain the birthplace of the gloombeasts? He searched his memory of Eldritch’s show, but could not remember anything about a white mountain.

For a long time, the draggoths pulsed and swelled on the mountaintop, their drone rising and rising. In The Grim War there was a story about a town driven mad by the ringing of bells. Charlie had always doubted that a sound could drive anyone mad. He did not doubt that now. The insidious drone seeped into him, tormenting him. But somehow he knew that it was not directed at him, and this made it bearable.

But it had a terrible effect upon the gloombeasts. White shapes began to drop from the mountain and spiral down through the gloom. Others continued to buzz madly around the peak in a confused frenzy.

Charlie’s gaze was drawn from the white peak to his own mountain. There was movement; the draggoths had begun to take to the sky.

Charlie’s hands were still clamped over his ears, and he had slumped forward. He struggled against the drone, and tried to keep himself propped up on his elbows.

More and more draggoths had risen into the sky. They wrapped their wings about their bodies as they spun upward into the gloomlight. When they had completed their magnificent arc, they hovered in the sky and spread their massive wings. A dark canopy of draggoths was formed; it was as if the sky had been tarred by a brush dipped in glistening black paint. A seamless mass, the draggoths’ let their jaws gape, exposing rows of jagged white teeth that made Charlie shudder. He seemed to be staring up at one cavernous maw with a thousand rows of teeth.

Across the gulf the white peak loomed, laden with swarming gloombeasts. Worry struck at Charlie’s belly. He feared the draggoths, but what if he were taken by the gloombeasts? What would they do with him? In Eldritch’s show, their master had been the
figure in white – the White Sage. Would it be better to go to him, rather than to the Grey Sage? Charlie did not know.

He shook his head. Why worry about what might happen? He did not care for Sages, whatever their colour. Eldritch, his friend - that was all that mattered. He would look for an escape, no matter who imprisoned him, and find her.

Black shapes continued to spin off the mountain to add to the massive canopy in the sky. They hovered in the gulf between the mountains, a droning cloud of menace. And then, opposite the draggoths across the gulf, a mass of seamless white formed as the surprised gloombeasts scrambled to align themselves. And between the two sides, curtains of gloomlight shifted across the gulf like a mist.

Charlie felt Begbie stir beneath him. Nearly all of the draggoths had gone to the sky; the mountainside was almost bare. Soon, it would be their turn to join the ranks. But the creature seemed to hesitate. It remained squat on the mountainside. Its long plated neck was curved, and its dragon-like head lay on the ground. It seemed reluctant to join the others.

‘What’s wrong, Begbie?’ Charlie croaked. His voice startled him; it seemed feral, more like a bark or growl than real speech.

The draggoth slowly raised its head, its black wings rising accordingly. Then Charlie saw, with mounting horror, that its head seemed to split in two, the top half rising while the bottom half dropped.

Then a monstrous roar shook the mountainside.

Charlie realised that it had not split its head in two.

It had bared its jaws.

Charlie cried out as Begbie at last rose spinning from the mountain side.

Waves of sickness washed over Charlie as he waited for the spinning to stop. When at last it did, he realised that he had been yelling; his throat stung with the pain of it. He opened his eyes slowly, his head still spinning. When it stopped, he saw only darkness.

Panic seized him.

‘Begbie,’ he cried, ‘I can’t see. What have you done? What’s happening?’

He craned his head and neck, struggling to see.

At last he saw a vast sea of darkness spread around him. If Charlie could move, he might have been able to walk across it. The sea was not smooth, but seemed to be rippled with the curls of white waves. But the waves gleamed with a cold menace that struck fear into Charlie’s heart.
He knew now why he thought could not see. The draggoth had wrapped its wings around its body, and they had wrapped around him, too. But if he sat straight up and craned his neck, he could just see out over the sharp tip of a wing glistening with oil.

Once again, he was at the centre of the draggoth-pack. The sea of darkness was nothing more than thousands of their glistening backs melded together as a single entity. And out of this vast draggoth-entity curved white blades like sharp fangs had sprouted, which Charlie had mistaken for curling waves.

For a long time, Charlie seemed to float in the strange dark sea. In the distance the white cloud of gloombeasts hovered. Then, all of a sudden, the dark sea began to ripple, and the white cloud to shudder.

It had begun.

Ripples gave way to fissures of light. They streaked through the draggoth-pack, penetrating it.

Charlie watched the snaking grey streaks; it was as if the dark glassy sea of draggoths had begun to crack. The black creatures began to drop away from the pack, tumbling down through the air. Then, whole battalions of them broke away, some falling, and some disappearing into the gloomlight, locked in tumbling battle with their white adversaries. And at the outer rim of the pack, black and white shapes spun in all directions through the gloomlight, which tossed and heaved like the Fires of Kadath.

Charlie tore his eyes away from the grey cracks. He looked down at the draggoth. A pale, weak light emanated from its dagger-shaped eye.

A section of draggoths on Charlie’s left suddenly broke off from the pack. For a moment, they were exposed, bathed in plumes of gloomlight. Through it Charlie could glimpse dark strips of land like purple bruises below.

He dug his nails into Begbie, and his stomach tightened with fear. He did not like being the prisoner of draggoths, and he did not want to go to the Grey Sage. But the gloombeasts, with their crumpled horns and talons, terrified him.

They would have to hide. Unless the draggoth had some other plan, Charlie saw no way out for them but to drop and hide, perhaps in a town. It was desperate, he knew, but Begbie could change shape…

And perhaps, thought Charlie, perhaps he could somehow escape.

‘What are we going to do?’ he asked.
As if in answer, the draggoth suddenly fell away from the pack. It wrapped its wings about itself, covering Charlie, and it began to plummet down, down, down.

Charlie buried his face in the creature's wing, ignoring the slime and smell. His stomach flipped and churned as the draggoth spun and swerved. Its wings still covered Charlie, but if he raised his head and turned, he could just see over them.

He saw: white wings, crumpled horns, talon-feet.

Gloombeasts.

The draggoth dipped and weaved, trying to outmanoeuvre its pursuers. Charlie turned his head again. He tried to count the number of gloombeast eyes he saw and the beams of whitish light that streamed from them, but it was impossible.

Now they were no longer plummeting; the creature had levelled itself and was racing parallel to the ground.

Charlie raised his head and saw the pale sheen of the gloombeasts' coats, saw the jets of white light streaming from their eyes.

Begbie dipped and then suddenly pulled up.

But the pull was too sharp.

Charlie felt his grip slacken. The draggoth's skin became slippery, and Charlie scrambled to hold on; his fingers and legs slid over the draggoth's back. He knew that he could not fall from the draggoth; it must be that it had released him.

It pulled hard to the right.

Charlie was flung from its back.

He seemed to hurtle through the air, and he felt himself spinning, tumbling, falling.

Then his back struck something hard and cold.

He rolled like a wheel, and then, finally, stopped.

And all went black.

Charlie's eyes flickered open. Whorls of gloomlight the colour of brackish water danced sluggishly just above him. When that layer of gloomlight cleared, he saw, far above, a dirty grey fog that stretched heavy and ponderous across the sky. Black and white shapes, as tiny as insects, tumbled in and out of the fog. For a moment, he wondered what they could be, and then he heard the drone and the terrible din of battle, the braying of gloombeasts, and the roar of draggoth. Dazed, he lay on the cold rock until he had caught his breath, and his mind had come back to him.
Slowly, he rolled himself over and pushed himself up on his knees. Apart from a dull ache in his back and new bruises rising like purplish black clouds on his arms and legs, he did not seem to be hurt badly by the fall.

Before him, a draggoth’s dark body and wings were frosted by gloomlight, which gleamed now with an almost pure and brilliant light. Hovering just above the ground, and pulsing like a black heart, the draggoth spread its black wings high above its body, and out of its eye blazed a solid beam of grey.

The beam soared into the sky, and then exploded with the shimmering light of a star. Charlie shielded his eyes from the brilliance.

When it had passed, he looked again. The draggoth’s beam had clashed with others. A half-circle of pale gloombeasts hovered above the draggoth. The winged horse-like creatures seemed to bear the collective force of their white power down upon the lone draggoth. Charlie saw their crumpled horns and three-pronged talons; they dripped draggoth-ooze, which hissed like steam as it fell to the ground.

Everywhere he looked, he saw carnage.

Draggoths crunched their jaws into the ribcages and backs of gloombeasts, ripping off chunks of flesh. Gloombeasts gored draggoths with their horns, which they plunged deep down into the flesh of their adversaries. Still on his knees, Charlie was overcome. He wished that he knew which side was good, and which evil. But it was not at all clear. He wanted it all to stop.

He wrenched his gaze from the sky and looked at Begbie. The beam of light streamed from its eye, but to Charlie, it seemed paler, weaker than before. The draggoth pulsed and pumped, but it had begun to quiver like a heart strained to its limit.

The battle; it would not stop until he was captured or...

Escape.

The notion burned into his consciousness, and it sparked him out of his despair.

Charlie turned away from the carnage in the sky, turned away from the draggoth struggling with all its mysterious might to defend him.

And when he did, he saw it.

A crumpled, broken shape, dashed against a high ridge of solid rock.

The Spider.
His eyes sharpened as he peered through the gloomlight. He had not noticed the dark, sloping ridge before. It loomed in front of him like the hump-spine of some giant beast - Charlie half-expected it to rise up and lumber off. Its length seemed vast; stretching in two directions for as far as the gloomlight permitted him to see. At its feet, the Spider's bloated rear poked high in the air, its mandibles and hairy head mashed against the rock. Its legs, those Charlie could see, were snapped like twigs. The whole contraption, once so monstrous, even terrifying, now looked sad and broken, an insect squashed against a wall.

A surge of emotion coursed through his body, so powerful it nearly carried him off his feet. Charlie began to run, thinking only of Eldritch. Was it possible? Could she be inside it?

Charlie ran.

He ran, faster than he had ever done. Lightness had returned; Charlie had the strange feeling that he was floating speedily across the ground, that he was moving faster than his legs could carry him. The gloomlight seemed to push him along, and the Spider rushed toward him. Before he knew it, he stood below the trap door, which gaped open, revealing a black hole inside.

Charlie gripped the splintery sides and hauled himself up into the Spider.

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The puppets!
No eyes gleamed in the shadows, no mangled limbs or malicious puppet-faces leered at him. They had gone. But where?
‘Ohhhh...let Nefandous be...ohhhh...’

The voice came suddenly, startling Charlie and making him jump. It was a high-pitched cry, and shrill, more like the screech of a tormented bird. All the warmth of his body seemed to leave Charlie, and suddenly, he felt very, very cold. He wrapped his arms around his body, cupping his elbows in his hands. The shrieking came from outside the room, beyond the round door, which Charlie had always thought of as a closed eye.

Except that the door was no longer there – it had been ripped from its hinges and lay desiccated on the floor. Someone or something had smashed it to pieces. But what? Whatever it was, it must have been large and strong. Was it terrorizing Nefandous right now, making him shriek like that? And Eldritch?

Charlie swallowed dryly. His throat was scratchy and dry, as if it were a piece of battered old wood. He gazed across the room at the space where the door should have been. In all his time in the Spider, he had never passed beyond that door. Charlie hobbled across the room, his feet thudding on the floorboards. He climbed up the small staircase, and lingered on the top step.

A long, dark corridor stretched before him. Cracks in the darkness came from the light of nearly burnt-out torches on the walls. The torches were kept in glass cases of deep red, which cast a swampy red pall in the corridor. Charlie reached up and plucked the best torch from its sconce. Holding it before him, the light revealed walls, ceiling and floor ribbed as if with bones. Charlie felt as though he had been swallowed by a monstrous beast, and was caught in its ribcage.
‘Ohhhh...ohhhhhhh...awaaaayyyyy...the gloooooomlight...’

Cold and clammy, his dank hair plastered to his forehead, Charlie felt as if he were trapped inside an endless tunnel, doomed to walk it forever. He tried not to think of his journey through the tunnel in the draggoth pit, tried not to think of the lifeless pink body he had found at the end. Around him the darkness seemed alive, even hungry, devouring the light of his torch.
‘Ohhhh...ohhhh...get away...stop...stop...’

Charlie’s gait had now slowed to a stealthy creep. As he crept, he could just make out the top of a staircase, a staircase that plunged downward into a room of flickering shadows.
‘Let Nefandous be...ohhhhh, where’s Gibbous? I’ll pound him for leaving...’
Charlie reached the staircase. He thought the thudding of his heart would give him away; it pounded in his ears like a drum. Steeling himself, he peered farther down into the room.

Bathed in a shaft of lurid red light, Nefandous seemed to be suspended in the air, hovering off the floorboards like a giant spider without a web. In several clawed hands he gripped canes, and he was swatting them madly at the unruly mob of little dark shapes that jostled and grasped at him with sharp, hungry claws.

‘Ohhhh... get away... get awaaayyy... leave Nefandous be...’

He swatted this way and that, all his arms striking at different points, even swatting at himself. It was as if, like a madman, he was convinced little bugs ran over his body.

Charlie’s eyes adjusted to the darkness.

The puppets seethed in the room, clambering over one another in a silent frenzy to get to the man, whose howling was like the baying of some awful creature.

‘Ohhhhhhhhhhh, the pain... ohhhhhhh!’

Nefandous swiped and swatted, trying to keep the puppets at bay. But Charlie could see that it was only a matter of time before the puppets could swarm him. They were above him, too, in the rafters, and they came shimmying down a rope after him, tearing at his bald pate with their claws. There would be no escape for him. His mouth gaped open in a grimace, corners turned-down, his bottom lip curling out and onto his chin.

Charlie could not bear to watch. He shielded his eyes with the boniness of his arm.

‘Stop!’ he cried. ‘Stop!’

The room fell silent.

Nefandous turned his wrinkled rictus to face Charlie, and the scarred faces of the puppets did the same. They looked at Charlie as though he were a ghost.

‘Ohhh... help Nefandous... help me... argggghhhhh...’

‘Eldritch’ said Charlie, desperately, almost begging Nefandous. ‘Where is she? Is she here? Is she alive?’

Nefandous tilted his head. He was in a pitiable state. Gaping wounds had opened on his head, and dark liquid streaked down his face, seeping into wild eyes that bulged with horror. His clothes dangled in strips from his body, like pieces of flesh. But, despite his wounds, and his predicament, he still managed to look both pitiable and sly.

‘Tell me!’ Charlie shouted, his voice dry and hoarse.

Nefandous smacked his lips.

‘Ohhhh... if Nefandous tells, will you make them stop?... leave Nefandous be?’
Charlie did not know if the frenzied puppets would listen to him, or how he might stop them. But he nodded.

Nefandous blurted out what he knew instantly.

‘Gone, gone, away, she took her away...ohhh...let Nefandous be...ohhhhh!’

*She took her away.*

‘She came and took her...took her there...from where there is no escape...’

‘Where?’ Charlie demanded. ‘Where?’

‘Ohhhh...she took her to the Castle...Castle Slupp...’

......

Charlie felt as though he did not have a body, as though he were numb. He was aware only of Eldritch, whom he had vowed to find, no matter where she might be.

But he had never expected this.

‘Ohhhh...the draggoth bite...to cure it, she said, to cure it...’

‘It’s a lie,’ said Charlie. ‘A lie! Only the draggoth that bit Eldritch can cure her.’

Nefandous’ bottom lip unfurled like a red carpet over his chin, and the pouches under his eyes seemed to multiply.

‘You gave her up, didn’t you?’ said Charlie, bitterness straining his voice. ‘I know you, Nefandous. You gave her up to save yourself.’

Nefandous shook his head, but the puppets nodded furiously.

‘She came for me,’ Charlie continued, ‘but you gave – perhaps even sold – Eldritch to her. And she took her, knowing that I would come, would go anywhere, even there, even to the Castle, to try to save her.’

The puppets began to writhe and threw their claws in the air.

Charlie struggled to control himself, but he was overcome. He shook his head, it was not true, surely it was not true. As the full weight of what Nefandous had revealed hit him, the air inside the Spider seemed to disappear, and Charlie began to choke and splutter. He had to get out; he could not breathe. He began to stumble backward out of the nightmarish room.

‘Noooooooo...noooooooo,’

Nefandous’ betrayed howls pursued him as he shambled down the tunnel.

Charlie’s foot struck a cusp of wood in the floor. Stumbling, he dropped the torch. He fumbled a graceless path down the corridor, unaware of the smouldering fire brewing behind him.
Down, down to the end, feet thudding on the floor, down into the room, through the trap door and out, into the gloomlight.

Charlie dropped out of the Spider.

In the distance, hills like spiky shards of black glass kept a silent and sinister watch, their withered trees tensed like claws on the hillcrests. And in the air the battle still raged, the hurtling bodies of draggoth and gloombeast, of black and white, still locked in eternal battle.

But Charlie was not thinking about gloombeasts and draggoths. Instead, his imagination soared on dark wings. The Dungeon, the Rack, gloombeasts, Slupp, Lady Slupp – Charlie was so overcome by the very thought of Eldritch languishing there, at their mercy, that his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground, his face buried in his cold, pale hands. He had brought nothing but danger to Eldritch. Danger, and now...worse, much worse.

Now, Eldritch was there, there, where Charlie feared most of all to go.

Dimly he became aware of a desperate howling.

Charlie raised his head.
‘Nefandous,’ he whispered.

Charlie whirled round and began to hobble back to the Spider, but he was too late.


How could he have left Nefandous to them, to the puppets, and to the fire?
Shock, he told himself. Shock of Eldritch’s fate - the grief of it had unhinged him, if only for a short time.

A strange feeling rose within him.

Nefandous had been cruel to the puppets. Did he not deserve his fate, to be destroyed by his former victims? Nefandous would not have saved him; why should he have saved Nefandous?

A part of Charlie - a small part, but a part nonetheless – felt bitterly satisfied. Nefandous had suffered a grisly fate, a fate that, it might be said, he richly deserved.

*Nefandous and Gibbous were not always as they are now. Like you, they took me in and fed me when I was lost and starving. They should be pitied rather than hated.*

Each word of Eldritch’s seemed to strike at Charlie’s heart. Pangs of cold struck at him with blade-like precision. He stared helplessly at the Spider, now fully aflame.
He turned, and as he did, he saw Begbie in the distance, no longer hovering above the ground, but squatting on it. The creature emanated a low expiring hum.

Charlie shambled towards the fallen creature. It was surrounded by dying gloombeasts, their white vapour streaming up into the gloomlight, which greedily consumed it.

The draggoth began to change before Charlie’s eyes. His body, no longer the monolithic black it had once been, now seemed thinly spectral. A funnel of grey vapour began to stream out of his back and into the gloomlight. Begbie’s dagger-shaped eye gleamed weakly, as if its light were about to go out forever.

Charlie approached the draggoth, wishing that he could somehow help it.

‘Begbie,’ he whispered.

But the funnel of grey vapour streamed into the gloomlight, and the draggoth began to fade.

‘Begbie.’

The draggoth grew smaller and smaller, until at last it became only a billow of grey.

And just as the last curl of Begbie’s smoke rose up, Charlie heard a voice, softer than a whisper. It seemed to surround him, or perhaps he heard it only in his head. It was his own voice, and it gently breathed, like a woeful sigh,

‘Charlie’.

And Begbie was gone.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
THE QUILL IN THE TUNNEL

Charlie gazed down at the rock where the draggoth had been. Begbie as a rat had kept him company at the Castle; as a gloombeast he had broken him out and protected him from Gibbous; and as a draggoth he had saved him from the Beastmen. And now, it seemed, he had given his life protecting him from gloombeasts.

Bitter shame spread over Charlie. He had thought only of escape, only of himself and Eldritch....

His eye was drawn to a dull glowing object on the ground. It was like a piece of glass, or a vial. But inside it a grey gas swirled with a mysterious energy.

Charlie fell to his knees. He bent forward, and, treating the object like a precious jewel, he cupped it gently in his hands and raised it carefully from the ground.

He was aware of nothing else, not the battle raging in the sky, or the burning Spider. He stared at the glowing object. The grey energy gyred inside it, spiralling up and down the shaft, coursing along the blade, coiling around the hilt.

The words of the draggoth came back to him:

...only the draggoth that bit can save...the eye...

Had Begbie brought him here to see the Spider? Had the creature listened to him after all? Had Begbie wanted to save Eldritch, too?

Charlie did not know. Draggoths were evil. But perhaps the grey draggoths were different. Perhaps, somewhere inside them, there was good. They were still terrible – Charlie could not forget what Begbie had done to Gibbous - but perhaps not evil. Charlie shook his head, and a tear dropped down his cheek, cutting a solitary path through the grime caking his face. Looking at the draggoth, Charlie realised that he did not know what good and evil really were.

He reached down and closed his hand around the hilt of Begbie’s eye. It felt like cool glass in his hands, and at his touch it began to glow, the gas inside churning and twisting with life.

Behind him, engulfed in riotous flame, was the Spider. Clouds of black smoke rose up from the inferno and mingled with the gloomlight until it was streaked with black. As the hungry fire ravaged it, the Spider had begun to make a pyre, its crude beams, planks and floorboards breaking, crumbling and crackling. A noxious odour reached Charlie’s nose,
cloying at him, and he began to gag. Soon the Spider would be nothing more than a heap of smouldering ash.

High above, the tumbling black and white shapes still hurtled and fought, locked in their strange dance of death. Some flew without heads or legs, and they drifted senselessly through the gloomlight. Others spiralled out of the sky and dashed themselves on the ground, stirring up thick clouds of black dust. There were so many clouds that to Charlie’s eyes it seemed that the landscape was filled with a dense black fog.

Charlie wished the fog were denser, wished it could have obscured the white sack-like lumps strewn about the landscape, and covered the graveyard of unburied dead gloombeasts. But both near him and in the distance, across the flat expanse of charred rock, Charlie could see the soiled white mists wafting up from their expiring bodies. And he could see, streaming up from the ground into the greedy gloomlight, countless columns of billowing grey vapour – the lifeblood of his protectors. The Welkin of Gloom seemed like nothing more than a steaming witch’s brew of dying creatures.

The carnage sickened Charlie. The dead creatures, the destruction - was it all for him? He shook his head. He had not asked for the power to control and destroy the gloomlight, if indeed he had such power. He had not asked for a quest at all, had not meant to start a war. And he could not be blamed. Nevertheless, deep within him, he felt responsible for everything – for the Welkin of Gloom, for Nefandous, for Gibbous, for Begbie.

And, most of all, for Eldritch.

Charlie reached inside his vest and took out the quill. He stroked its silver feathers, marvelling anew at their strength and softness. In his other hand he clutched the cool, smooth pommel of the draggoth eye.

A steely knot of resolution formed within him, borne of misery, but also of hope and love. If there was a way that he could be with Eldritch and together they could destroy the gloomlight, and forge a new and better world, then he would follow that way.

But there would be no battles, no war. The gloomlight would be destroyed peacefully, or not at all.

Buoyed by his resolve, Charlie gazed about himself. His quest had begun. Behind him was the ridge – he knew that he could never climb it. But he did not want to pick his way through a landscape riddled with expiring gloombeasts and draggoths; it would be too ghastly and dangerous a journey.
Then, near the pyre of burning wood that once was the Spider, he saw a black hole in the ridge. He had not seen it before. Looking at it now, Charlie realised that the Spider may have been heading for the hole – perhaps a tunnel - hoping to come out on the other side of the ridge. But if it had been pursued, or caught, it might have missed the entry and smashed into the rock instead.

Charlie turned his back on the battlefield. Armed with the quill and the draggoth eye, and with the burden of his quest, he began to head toward the cave in the ridge.

His feet felt like sacks of heavy sand, his body broken and bruised. He shambled along, his feet kicking up plumes of black dust. He felt ungainly, his limbs weary; they moved with a jelly-like sluggishness.

Before him yawned the cave’s black maw. He shuffled into it. The din of battle faded, and his ears seized greedily on a silence most welcome. Holding the quill aloft, like a torch, the silver glow of its trapped energy cut a swathe through the gloom. He saw no cave walls, only more darkness. High above he caught shadowy flickers of a curving formation, like a ceiling. He began to think he was in a tunnel, rather than a cave. Whatever it was, the passage seemed bare, except for piles of black rock, and wide enough, he decided, for the Spider to have rumbled its way down.

He crept deeper into the ridge. The shuffling of his feet echoed in the gloom. The passage seemed to grow darker, and he guessed that perhaps he was approaching the heart of the ridge. The eye’s light revealed a path cluttered with boulders: their bulky girth seemed both formidable and forbidding. They blocked his way, forcing him to crawl over or around them.

As he went deeper into the cave, and as the tunnel’s darkness folded around him, a feeling of self-loathing grew in his heart. He could feel it gnaw at him, and its teeth were sharp. In the cold gloom he struggled to keep his mind from dwelling on Eldritch, on Begbie, on Nefandous, on what he had seen in the battle. Underneath the self-loathing was a foundation of guilt that seemed to grow deeper with each step he took. He was the cause of it all. The light from the quill had begun to quiver, and he realised that his hand was shaking.

‘I’m trying,’ he told himself, but it did no good. There was too much guilt seeping through him like a poison.

Alongside his guilt grew another feeling. He knew it well and welcomed it as a relief from guilt’s painful sting.

Fear.
It burgeoned and rankled in the pit of his stomach.

He stopped shuffling. Doubt assailed him. He was alone, all alone. He looked
behind him, and saw only the quill’s light, and beyond that, darkness. In front, he saw the
same. Where was he going?

Alone.

All alone.

He began to shuffle faster. Stopping, stopping was bad.

He hurried past the obstacles in his path, his chest pumping. Even his breathing
seemed to echo in the vast tunnel; it sounded as if someone were pursuing him.

Faster, faster he went, deeper and deeper into the ridge.

Until he ground to a halt.

The quill’s light revealed the gaping maws of more tunnels.

His breathing was heavy, and his chest heaved with panic. Visions of wandering
inside the ridge forever, and of perishing in a dark corner, leaving Eldritch to her fate at
Castle Slupp, tormented him.

‘Which way,’ he whispered. His voice wavered dangerously, and Charlie wondered
whether he were close to madness.

Five paths, each seeming darker than the other, lay before him. The urgency of fear
stalled him instead of spurring him on. He gazed at the quill, hoping that it would give him a
sign. Its grey light continued to shine, which helped to calm him.

He held it aloft, and it cast its grey light into the tunnels.

He searched them as best he could, wincing in the darkness, trying to find a sign that
would tell him the way to go.

When he did not find one, desperation plunged him into action.

He shuffled blindly into one tunnel, then turned and shuffled back when the fear and
doubt and guilt became too much.

He did this again and again, until he felt that his heart would give out.

He leaned against the tunnel wall, staring at the passages that gaped before him.

He began to beat the walls with his fists, and cry out into the gloom.

His anguish spent, he sank down to a crouch, his back against a wall.

In his old familiar position, knees drawn up to his forehead, arms slung down by his
sides, darkness settled over him like a blanket.

And as sleep came, he was unaware of the gleams of light that appeared around him
in the tunnel.
In the sky above a majestic ocean of clear blue reigned, so pure, so endless, so perfect, that it seemed like the boy and girl were locked in a glass bauble, or a child's toy. The scented breeze over the ample field of green wafted lazily, so lazily that it seemed to caress each of the myriad of beautiful beaming flower-heads one by one as it passed by.

'It doesn't seem real,' the boy said.

But the soil beneath their feet and the thick green, dew-drenched blades of grass that poked between their toes were real, and refreshing.

Facing one another, their skin warmed by the gentle heat of the sun, they held hands. They did not speak of the power that seemed to course through them so that their arms seemed more like conductors than flesh. They did not speak of the sensation that rippled through their consciousness, a wonderful but nebulous feeling, of peace, contentedness, and rightness. And he did not share his thought that the power might lift them up and carry them off into the azure sky.

They remained rooted to the soft ground beneath their feet, leaning so closely together that their foreheads touched.

He awoke.

Instinctively, he raised a hand to his vest. His fingers stroked the bristles of the quill, and slipped over the cool smoothness of the draggoth-eye.

The dream lingered. It was like a ragged fading fabric of a memory, gossamer thin, that he tried vainly to keep in his mind. And the more he tried, the more the elusive memory seemed to fade, until it had gone forever.

All except the feeling: the power, the energy that had coursed through their arms, into one another. The feeling remained. The quill and the eye seemed to burn with a greater purpose, feeding off the strange power. They cast a pale but clear light into the dim shadows of the tunnel.

Despite the dampness seeping into his bones, Charlie felt as though he had swallowed a ball of fire. His stomach burned, as though the flames inside threatened to burst out of its cage. The memory of the dream gone, his mind was assaulted by images, each more disturbing than the last.

Nefandous crowned by puppets.

Columns of billowing draggoth-vapour.

Headless gloombeasts soaring through a grey fog.
A spectral Begie expiring before him.

Eldritch in the Castle.

It had all happened so swiftly, so remorselessly.

He sat in his usual position, holding the eye and quill. He watched their steady silver-grey light pool on the tunnel’s rocky walls. He swallowed dryly as a fury burned within him. Eldritch was imprisoned in Castle Slupp, and he had slept! He pounded his head with his fists. How could he have been so selfish?

‘It’s my fault,’ he said to the darkness. ‘All my fault. Everything.’

He saw the flames engulfing the Spider, which he had caused. He lived again through Nefandous’ tortured screams. He saw a puppet’s broken body lying lifeless in a Cage.

And he was lost forever inside a ridge.

Charlie scrambled to his feet. The sleep had not even refreshed him. His limbs were still sluggish, his body still bruised. He drank from the draggoth-gourd, but the bitter liquid failed to refresh him.

All he could think of was getting out of the darkness.

He stared at the dark mouths of the tunnels. They seemed as impenetrable as before.

But he continued to stare, holding the quill aloft, as if waiting for a sign. He moved the quill from left to right, in sweeping arcs, and back again, over and over, looking for....

Suddenly, a gleam.

In one of the tunnels, a gleam.

Then, more.

The gleams multiplied, until they seemed to sparkle like jewels encrusted in the darkness.

Charlie had seen them before, in the Spider.

A flash in his mind - Nefandous swiping at the puppets with his canes – and a horde of shambling puppets began to spill out of the tunnel toward him.

Charlie turned to flee, but as he did, his foot struck a rock. With a cry he toppled over, his body slamming down on the ground. The wind was knocked from him, and he writhed in the dust like a snake.

He saw the quill before him, lying covered in black dust. It had been knocked from his hand.

Behind him came the sounds of shuffling, and snapping jaws.

Their claws were like knives stabbing his legs; their feet trampled him like a plague of rats.
A gnarled claw appeared above his head, snapping up the quill. Then, two little bow legs stood before him.

Charlie raised his head and saw a puppet standing over him. Its clothes were blackened rags, and they hung loose from its small, burnt body. Bumps deformed its head, and its hair seemed like a coil of thin charred rope. A hideous, toothless grin spread across its malformed mouth. In a crumpled claw it held the quill, which it stroked with the stunted fingers of its other hand. Its small, glassy eyes gleamed like gems.

‘Eldritch,’ Charlie croaked.

He wanted to talk, to explain, but to his astonishment, the puppet bent down. With a clumsy grace, it held the quill out before him.

Now a ring of puppets surrounded him, little crowding half-shapes in the darkness, their eyes gleaming as the light from the quill found them. They did not tear at him with their claws, did not snap at him with their teeth.

Instead, they took him by the arms, and raised him to his feet. He took the quill from the puppet, and held it before him.

Its light now exploded inside the tunnel.

He did not question the power of its light, or why it had suddenly chosen to guide him when before it had given no sign. He would not perish in the ridge, in the darkness, and that was all that mattered.

He crept forward, the puppets shuffling along behind him. He entered the mouth of one of the tunnels.

And the light dimmed.

He tried another, and another, and still the light dimmed.

He tried the last tunnel, and the quill’s silver fire blazed.

Clutching it, his heart thundered as he led the puppets out of the ridge.

Now, now it would lead him to Eldritch.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
THE RETURN

He did not know for how long he crept through the tunnel; its winding path seemed to last forever. The puppets pawed at his legs as he crept along. Though they were only a small number, every stamp and shuffle of their feet, and every snap of their jaws, was amplified by the tunnel. It seemed to Charlie as if there were throngs of them. But amidst the shuffling and snapping, soft grunting noises could be heard. Charlie wondered if perhaps they were trying to speak to him. He understood nothing, and was desperate to escape the ridge. Moving seemed to blunt the edge of his guilt, so he pressed on, charging faster and faster past the crouching, oblong boulders and rocks strewn about his path, hoping that he would soon see a light at the end of the tunnel.

It came. At last it came.

It was so small at first, and so distant— a small round grey light— that Charlie nearly mistook it for a jewel, or perhaps another puppet-eye. But as he grew closer it became unmistakeable:

Gloomlight.

Followed by the puppets, Charlie crept on to the light, brandishing Eldritch’s quill in the air above his head. His heart raced. Closer and closer; the light loomed before him now. Tendrils of grey light snaked into the tunnel toward him, curling over the tunnel’s dark lip, as if it were searching for him. He wanted to plunge headlong out of the darkness and into the gloomlight, out into the Welkin of Gloom.

He shambled down the last of the tunnel, the gloomlight now like a pale silk screen stretching across the tunnel’s mouth. Through it he could see hills so dark they seemed to shine, like the shells of beetles.

He had nearly reached the screen when a noise— a cracking noise, and a dull roar— froze his blood. His heart thrummed like a struck gong in his chest.

He stopped.

Outside, the noise continued, the roar of a stampede, growing louder and louder.

Still holding the quill, Charlie used his free hand to support himself against the tunnel’s wall. He stood, heart pounding, just by the mouth. The gloomlight swirled about him, as if to congratulate him for reaching the tunnel’s end. Feeling the puppets pawing at his legs, he peered around the tunnel’s lip.

He saw:
A black cloud of dust. It hung suspended in the air, before slowly dispersing. Dread spread over Charlie, encasing him in an icy shell that he could not break. The dispersing cloud revealed...people. At least, they had legs, arms, and the torsos of people. But the proportions were wrong, hideously so. It was as if their limbs and bodies had been stretched or contorted into unnatural shapes and lengths. Some still had claws, others tails, and others yet scales or fur. But most did not; they had two arms and legs, like men. They wore spiked chokers, fashioned from black chain, about their necks. Charlie did not know why until he saw what came rattling after them. It was a wagon, its large wooden wheels spiked with tooth-like blades. The people were pulling it; Charlie now saw that reins stretched from their chokers back into the darkness of the wagon, where unseen hands controlled them. Charlie swallowed thickly. His throat was like a heavy stone lodged in his neck. A coarse scaly material, stretched tight as a drum, covered the wagon. The material looked to Charlie like cured skin. He had seen his fair share of the gruesome stuff, courtesy of Slupp; his uncle had cured beast hide on occasion, draping the skins on Charlie’s cage before a roaring fire. Just as the wagon was about to pull past the tunnel, its reins tightened like bowstrings. The creatures threw their hands up to their necks and fumbled at their chokers. Their pale, gaunt faces grew paler and gaunter, their nostrils flared, and their lipless mouths gaped open. They slowed their gallop, and the wagon came to a creaking halt. It stopped just below Charlie. All that stood between him and the wagon was a crude path that seemed to lead down from the tunnel’s mouth. Charlie watched the creatures snap hungrily at one another, like starving beasts. To settle them, several white whips – wielded by unseen hands - lunged and struck at their bare backs and shoulders. Charlie looked more closely and saw that they were not whips. They were serpents. Their skins seemed like scaly ivory, and they arched their necks, rearing their deadly, diamond-shaped heads. They struck with startling speed, sinking their fangs into the flesh of their victims. Then, just as swiftly, they let go. Stung, the creatures shrank away from the serpents and cowered under their wrathful eyes.
But they did not cry out. In fact, they made no sound at all. They seemed to exist in a terrible dumbshow. There had been only the sound of creaking wheels, and the wild slapping of the creatures’ unshod feet over the rock.

But their eyes – Charlie saw them now.

Blood red, sightless orbs.

Eldritch’s show came rushing back to Charlie.

*The Lost.*

He stared at the non-beings who had once been men, but who had Turned; first into Beastmen, and then into these, creatures with no will, no minds. They wore nothing but filthy rags that barely covered them, and they had rough, almost ghostly-pale skin, made paler by contrast with the patches of black dust caked here and there over them.

Charlie shrank away from them. He thought of Eldritch - the dragoth-bite would be making her Turn; if he could not find her, she would...it was not possible, he could not allow it, he could not even think of such a terrible fate. He would do anything, anything at all, to stop Eldritch from Turning into one of *them.*

Charlie stood facing the Lost. He gripped the quill and stood his ground, summoning all the courage he could muster.

Something was going to happen. Something terrible – he knew it.

But what?

And like a monster from its cave, emerging from the darkness inside the wagon’s cover of skin, Charlie saw: a squat head, hair like bloody spikes, a moving mountain of fat.

Slupp.

The icy shell of dread over Charlie broke, replaced by a hot, seething hatred.

He had always known it would happen.

And now, it had.

Slupp was enormous. The black smock he wore could barely contain him. His bulbous stomach thrust itself out from under his smock, belly-button peeking out like the eye of some dull-witted beast. He more than climbed down from the driver’s carriage; rather he poured himself over it, a black waterfall of fat.

When he had reached the ground, he shoved his porcine fingers down the tops of his pants and tried yanking them up. His girth would not allow it. They drooped down again, looser and baggier than before.
Charlie watched Slupp’s every move, every quivering roll of fat, with a strange mixture of terror and awe. But though still huge, the man seemed somehow thinner, hungrier, starved. His sneering lips squirmed on his face like fat worms, and his blood-cracked eyeballs strained in their sockets, as if about to explode out of them.

Slupp raised them to Charlie, and pinned him with a murderous glare that shook him to his core.

‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’ Slupp boomed. ‘I knews ye’d come! I knews it! The gloomlight surrounds ye – ye can’t escape it, just like ye can’t escape me!’

As he heaved himself forward, the Lost shrank and cowered silently from him, like whipped curs.

Charlie’s heart banged against his ribcage like a hammer. He drew in his breath and held it.

Scuff...clump...scuff...clump...scuff...clump

‘Ohhh me leg,’ Slupp whined as he hobbled onto the path leading to the tunnel where Charlie stood, ‘ohhh me leg, it hurt, it do…’

Charlie raised his eyebrows. He had almost forgotten that Begbie, in gloombeast shape, had bitten Slupp’s knee, shin and foot off in the Castle Dungeon.

Scuff...clump...scuff...clump...scuff...clump...

‘Ohhh my leg, it hurt, it do.’

Where Begbie had bitten him there was now fastened something like a peg leg. But the peg had not been made from wood. Charlie could not quite see, but it looked as though it were made of some kind of chain.

As he walked, Slupp alternated the scuff of his good foot with sharp stabs from his peg leg. He hobbled, gritting his teeth as if every step caused him the utmost agony, and muttered,

‘My leg...Cheesegra’er...DRAGGOTHs, ye wokes ‘em up, ye did...CHEESEGRA’ER!’

Slupp’s voice boomed against the surrounding ridge; Charlie’s name echoed until it finally died away. Then, Slupp stopped, bent over, and began to fumble with his peg leg.

Charlie stood still, and watched, trying to control his fear.

From his peg leg Slupp unwound a chain, and then reared up to his full mountainous height. At one end of the chain there seemed to be a short handle, which Slupp gripped in one of his meaty hands. It did not seem to be made from wood; it was too pale, too crude. It looked more like bone.
Charlie’s stomach turned when he saw what was at the other end of the chain. At first Charlie took it for a ball. But then he saw the eye sockets, the line of crumbling teeth, the jawbone.

A skull.

It dangled from the chain, studded with what looked like fangs, sharpened to a fearsome point.

Clutching the bone handle in his fist, Slupp began to swing the spiked skull in sweeping contours above his head. Fixing his cracked eyes on Charlie, he began once again to advance.

_Scuff...clump...SWOOSH...scuff...clump...WHOOSH...scuff...clump_

‘Smash ye, I will, Cheesegra’er!,’ he muttered, almost with glee. ‘Smash ye, I will...’

Charlie battled his fear, tried to master it. He knew that if he was scared, he could not think. And only thinking could save him now.

Slupp swung his mace in vicious swipes.

Before he knew what was happening, Charlie saw little hobbling shapes begin to spill down the path. The puppets formed a line between him and Slupp. Some had even crawled or hobbled out to meet him. Their child-like qualities seemed to disappear; now they were fearless things, and tough.

‘Get away wi’ye,’ Slupp bellowed as he swept his mace low, knocking a row of puppets into the air. They struck the ground and seemed lifeless, only to climb back to their feet and come at Slupp again.

‘Get away wi’ ye!’

The puppets swarmed around Slupp faster than he could knock them away. They began to claw at his good leg.

‘Oh, get away! Get away!’ he cried, sounding to Charlie like Nefandous. He managed to knock the puppets away, but not before they had ripped his smock with their claws and drawn blood, which trickled in rivulets down the quivering fat of his leg.

Slupp raised his head and glared at Charlie. His eyes bulged and his flaming hair stood even straighter, even pricklier, on his round, pale head. He was livid, but Slupp was nearly always livid about something. Now, there were other emotions, emotions that Charlie had rarely seen on Slupp’s face – surprise? panic? fear?

Charlie began to walk out of the tunnel.

Realising his danger, Slupp began hobbling backwards, away from the surging line of puppets. His cracked eyes, looking more murderous than ever, were still locked on Charlie.
There was a hissing sound above Slupp’s indignant roars.
And from Slupp’s wagon came the serpents.
One after the other the white shapes slithered across the ground toward the puppets, diamond-shaped heads raised, necks curved to strike, jaws open.
Slupp knocked another puppet from his good leg, then reared up to his full height.
Rolls of fat bounced as his chest heaved with exhaustion.
Charlie stood on the path above Slupp.
The two glared at one another; Slupp with his army of serpents writhing about him; and Charlie with his troop of puppets, who stood in a seething but wary line before him.
Charlie and Slupp glared silently at one another, until at last Slupp broke the silence.
‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’ he boomed, but there was something missing from the usual powerful timbre of his voice. He seemed outraged that Charlie was not whimpering in a heap on the ground before him, as he had done so often and for so long before.
Charlie began to speak, and found words that he did not know he had inside him.
‘I am not afraid,’ he said.
Slupp’s eyes bulged, his face grew crimson, and his fleshy lips twisted with rage. He brandished his mace,
‘I’ll swat ye, Cheesegr...’
Charlie cut him off. ‘You lied to me.’ Though he did not feel it, his voice was calm, quiet even. ‘You didn’t make my teeth. The Grey Sage did.’
Something seemed to come over Slupp. He gazed at Charlie, sucking in his lips. Then, slowly, his round head fell back, and his mouth yawned open. For a moment he stayed like this, as if frozen. And then the eruption came, shaking Slupp’s entire body. He made a noise that sounded like a beast’s roar, and Charlie would have thought he was sick or in pain if he were not clutching his stomach in laughter.
‘Ye believed it, too, eh Cheesegra’er?’ Slupp roared. ‘Ye believed it, eh?’
Charlie endured Slupp’s laughter, and when it had died down to a low snorting, he said,
‘You and Lady Slupp held me captive, experimenting, trying to find out the secret of why I wasn’t Turning. You wanted to use the secret – the Grey Sage’s power - for yourselves, to stop yourselves Turning. But I escaped.’
In the blink of an eye, Slupp’s hoggish face turned from crimson with the heat of his laughter to bloodless. His jaw dropped open, exposing his craggy, blackened teeth, and sickly, greenish tongue.
'Can ye blame us?' he said. 'Can ye blame us for not wantin' to be like them!'

Slupp pointed at the Lost, who shuffled and stamped senselessly before the wagon.

'Ye don’t know what it’s like, ' shouted Slupp, ‘to feel it workin’ on ye, the Turnin’!

Charlie swallowed. He had not been expecting this.

'If ye did, ye’d do anythin’ – anythin’ – to stop it.

Slupp glared at Charlie, his face scrunched into a grimace of hatred.

Charlie could find no sympathy for Slupp. There had been too many beatings, too much of the knout, too much hate. He could think only of Eldritch. He had to get Slupp to take him to the Castle. But how?

As he spoke, Charlie had put the quill back in his vest pocket. The cool glass of the draggoth-eye now brushed across his fingers, and he clutched it tightly in his hand. It seemed to thrum with energy, as if it were alive.

That was it - the eye!

Slupp had been bitten by Begbie, and would be Turning. That explained the starved, hungry look. The eye, then, should cure him as well as Eldritch. Hope flashed in Charlie’s breast. Words spilled out of him.

'You’re sick,' he said. 'You’re Turning, faster and faster. You’ve been bitten by a draggoth, Slupp, and its poison will make you Turn faster. And the only thing that can cure you is the eye from the draggoth that bit you. An eye like this.'

Charlie raised his hand and showed Slupp the glass vial. Slupp’s eyes seized greedily on it.

'Inside is an antidote.'

'Give it ‘ere, Cheesegra’er,' he said, brandishing his skull-mace and lunging forward. Charlie stood his ground and shook his head. He did not want to risk battling with Slupp, but nor could he back down.

'If you try to take the eye from me, Slupp,' he threatened, 'I’ll break it, and the antidote will be lost.’

Slupp curled his lips and looked petulant. He appeared to consider for a moment, eyes rolling upward, almost into his head. Charlie knew then that Slupp also did not want to risk a fight.

'What do ye want, Cheesegra’er?’ he grumbled.

'You have…’ Charlie struggled to keep control of his voice, ‘…a friend of mine in your Castle. Bring her to me.'
Slupp shook his head. ‘I’ll takes ye to her,’ he said, an oafish grin spreading across his face. He seemed pleased with his cleverness.

Fury burned inside Charlie, and he struggled to keep it from flaring up. He tried to think. It might be safer if he went to the Castle. What good would it do to bring Eldritch here, into the midst of a battlefield, with draggoths and gloombeasts all around? He could not do that. He found himself nodding.

‘Alright,’ he said, hardly believing what he was saying. ‘Take me to the Castle.’

His only chance was to gamble, gamble that Slupp would not try to attack him, not while he had the precious eye. He was relying on Slupp’s greed, and that it would blind him from realising that Charlie would use the eye to cure Eldritch, not him. He did not seem to know – or perhaps his selfishness had overruled his reason - that she, too, had been bitten by a draggoth, and required the same cure. Could it be that Lady Slupp had not told him?

Slupp considered for a while longer, then said, ‘If I takes ye to yer friend, then ye’ll gives me the eye?’

Charlie nodded.

‘And I’ll be cured?’

Charlie nodded. He had no intention of giving Slupp the eye. But he had to get to Eldritch, give her the eye as soon as he saw her, and then let whatever may happen, happen. It was all he could do.

‘Alrigh’, Cheesegra’er,’ said Slupp, almost softly. ‘But ye have to leave these little buggers ‘ere!’

He swiped his mace at the puppets, who slashed back with their claws, but kept their line in front of Charlie. The puppets shook their heads furiously, and pawed Charlie’s legs to change his mind.

‘But remember,’ Charlie said, ‘if you try to take the eye by force, I’ll break it, and you’ll Turn. Do you hear me? I’ll break it and you’ll Turn.’

Slupp leaned over, seemed to gargle, and then spat hugely on the ground. This, Charlie realised, was his way of showing his displeasure at having to bargain with someone as lowly as Charlie. But he raised himself up and, with a sneer, nodded.

Hope fluttered in Charlie’s belly.

Soon, he would be with Eldritch.
The puppets gathered around Charlie. The little shapes nodded and jostled. They were a peculiar sight: half pale skin, half blackened rags. Looking at them, he realised that they were the survivors of the Spider fire, and must have followed him into the tunnel. They stared up at Charlie like a pack of small children waiting to play a game. But when they moved, their limbs shifted awkwardly, as if an unseen hand were moving them.

Despite what they had done to Nefandous, he felt a feeling of gratitude well up in the pit of his stomach, warming him. Without the puppets, he would not have made it out of the ridge. And they were Eldritch’s puppets, after all. Perhaps that was why the quill had suddenly begun to work.

‘I’m going to find her,’ he told them, looking down at their upturned faces. Charlie had never met any children, but he had read about them in *The Grim War*; the puppets seemed to have the same innocence in their bearing and manner as children.

‘I’m going to find Eldritch.’

At the mention of her name, the puppets bowed their heads.

‘I’m going to find her and save her if it’s the last thing I do. And then, we’ll come to find you.’

The puppets raised their heads again. Charlie noticed dark smudges beneath their glittering eyes; he had not seen them before. The smudges were ink-like, as if the puppets themselves – or someone - had applied it.

And the smudges were shaped like teardrops.

They stood in a ring around Charlie, and he looked down at their upturned faces, and at the teardrops beneath their eyes. He would have to leave them, Eldritch’s sake.

He heard Slupp snort hugely from the wagon. It was time to go.

Charlie turned from the puppets. The Welkin of Gloom stretched before him. The battle had not seemed to extend to this side. There were no dying bodies, either in the sky or on the ground. All was calm. Was the battle over, he wondered. Had all the grey draggoths and gloombeasts died? He did not know.

He began to walk toward the wagon, trying not to look at the Lost. He climbed into the back, wanting to be as far away from Slupp as he could, without tumbling out.

The wagon was a long, cart-like box, and the wood was rotting and worm-eaten. Chunks broke off the sides in Charlie’s hand if he gripped them too hard. Discarded bones
littered the floor, forcing Charlie to pick his way through them. When he at last reached the back, he drew his bony knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around them.

Slupp lumbered into his coach seat. Two white serpents lay coiled beside him, at his command, one at each side. Behind his seat were three cages, crammed full of small, black-haired rodents.

As soon as Slupp sat down, the serpents sprang up, diamond-shaped heads bobbing and weaving.

'Alright, ye slithery beasts,' Slupp said.

He leaned back into the wagon to extract a rodent from one of the cages. He pulled the creature out by its tail and held it, dangling it above the serpents, who snapped at it wildly. Charlie could see enough of Slupp's face to watch it break into a black-toothed grin. He seemed to take pleasure in tormenting both the rodent and the serpents. At last one of the latter caught its prey, sinking its teeth into it and devouring it. This serpent gorged itself, and just before he could slap his hands over his ears, Charlie heard the sickening noise of crunching bones.

'Makin' me 'ungry, ye are,' said Slupp.

He thrust a hand down into a place hidden from Charlie's view, and a moment later pulled out an enormous leg bone of some unfortunate beast. It was so laden with burnt meat that it looked like a club. Grease dripped from it all over Slupp's smock; it seemed that he had kept the leg soaking in a bucket of fat. He eyed it hungrily, his mouth watering, before finally falling to it, ripping chunk after chunk from the bone.

'Famished, I am,' he declared, smacking his lips between chunks. Then he bellowed, 'Alrigh', get movin', get movin'!

The serpents sprang up and lunged at the Lost. Charlie could just see their hairless, bobbing heads beyond the mountain of girth that was Slupp.

The wagon jerked into motion. With one hand, Charlie clutched its wooden side to stop himself from toppling head-first into the stacks of bones in front of him. His other hand clutched the eye.

They jostled forward, rolling past the little ring of puppets.

Charlie turned to watch them recede. Then he bowed his head in his hands, wondering if he had not just done a terrible thing by giving himself up to Slupp.

....

He endured the ride in the Slupp-wagon as best he could, taking generous swigs from the draggoth-gourd, swilling the bitter stuff around in his mouth. He could not help wincing
as he swallowed. Would he ever get used to the taste? He did not think so. All the same, he was glad of it. He would need whatever strength it could yield.

They clattered through oceans of gloomlight, the spiked wheels of the wagon pocking the rock as it went. It was anything but a smooth ride. Charlie was bucketed about, and many times came very close to falling headlong into the piles of bones that lay before him. In fact, Charlie thought that Slupp was deliberately trying to make him fall. Each time he swerved the wagon, he turned around and glared at Charlie, to check if he had succeeded. Then he would turn back round, muttering. Charlie grew determined to hold on, never to give Slupp the satisfaction of seeing him plunge forward into the stinking bones. His grip on the wagon's sides was tenacious. If a chunk broke off, he clutched the next bit.

Charlie had been forced to reach out and pull the cured skins together, so that they hung like curtains at the back of the wagon. They were being escorted back to the Castle by a team of gloombeasts. Charlie did not want to see their twisted horns or slobbering tongues. He peeked through the skins from time to time, but did not see any draggoths. Were they all dead and vapourising? He had no way of knowing, and tried not to think about it.

They passed an endless Welkin of chancre-like hills, blasted gloomrock, and scatterings of the ghostly pale trees. They passed a hovel-town, and a picture of Charlie - drawn by Eldritch and pasted to a crumbling wall - stared back at him. He must have been to the town for a Showing, but it was difficult to tell one jumble of hovel-holes from another. Seeing the picture made Charlie feel wistful about the time he had spent in the Spider. And for the remainder of the gruesome journey, he lost himself in memories of Eldritch inside the Spider.

... So pleasant and transporting were Charlie's memories that he had nearly, and dangerously, begun to doze. But the eye grew icy cold in his hand, as if to warn him, and he snapped his head up. He was exhausted, but to succumb to it would be disastrous.

The Lost stampeded faster, the serpents springing this way and that, snapping at their heels and emaciated bodies. The wagon swerved and jerked. Charlie could not see - and did not dare creep forward to look past Slupp's shoulder. The wagon finally settled, and at last, he saw it.

The Castle squatted on a lofty peak of black rock. To Charlie its dark, crumbling battlements and jagged parapets seemed both dead and alive, as if it were the exhumed corpse of another castle. Gloombeasts circled and roosted on the Castle like vultures.
Charlie’s eye was drawn morbidly to his old Turret. It rose high above the rest of the Castle, at the summit of a crumbling tower, and it seemed like a deadly claw poised to clamp down over him, and never let him go. About its base the gloomlight coiled in thin, glowing strands, and Charlie watched as, like a thousand silver serpents, they began to slither up and over the spiky shards of the Turret’s crumbling walls. He had the queer sensation that the gloomlight mocked him, inviting him back to this place of nightmares. He sat mesmerised by the snaking silver tendrils, watching them wind and twist themselves up and over the Turret’s jagged lip. A peculiar longing rose within him, a longing to follow the gloomlight; it tugged at his heart, pulling him. And a strange but powerful certainty formed within him that there was something in the Turret, something important, desperately important.

Charlie felt overwhelmed, dizzy. It was the Castle, he told himself. The Castle was evil, and it was trying to lure him back.

A long, precarious road stretched down from the Castle’s courtyard, and the Slupp-wagon rattled up toward a high, looming gate. As they came closer, the gate’s black iron bars seemed to grow out of the high courtyard walls of gloomrock, and like a congeries of twisted black tentacles, the bars interlaced and took shape, forming a giant ‘S’ in the gate’s middle. A sleek serpent’s head grew out of the top end of the ‘S’, and leered down at Charlie as if about to strike at him. The serpent’s eyes sparkled, and it bared not fangs but rows of teeth as sharp and jagged as the hills that surrounded the Castle.

Charlie’s flesh crawled.

The gate creaked open. The wagon hurtled through a gloomy courtyard, under an overpass, and down into a wide tunnel that seemed to burrow under the Castle, the feet of the Lost thunderous in the cavernous space. Then they came to a sudden stop that nearly sent Charlie tumbling up the wagon.

With surprising speed, Slupp leapt off his seat and seemed to disappear.

‘Slupp!’ Charlie called. ‘Slupp!’

Where was he?

Suddenly Charlie felt two blubbery arms coil around his middle.

‘Slupp!’ he cried.

The arms hoisted Charlie in the air, lifting him out of the wagon. ‘Out Cheesegra’er, blast ye!’

Charlie was raised high above Slupp’s head, as if he meant to dash Charlie on the ground.

‘Oooo I’d luvs to, Cheesegra’er, I’d luvs to…’
‘Put me down!’
Slupp was puffing like a chimney, belching more than breathing.
‘The eye, Slupp,’ shouted Charlie. ‘I’ll break it in a thousand pieces.’
Slupp wavered.
‘I’ll do it, I swear I will!’
Charlie felt himself thrust down. As soon as his feet smacked the ground he turned, looked Slupp in his cracked eyes, and whispered,
‘Don’t touch me.’
Slupp’s mouth twisted, his cheeks puffed up, and his chest heaved. He raised his hands and pretended to throttle an imaginary Charlie with them.
But his eyes fell longingly, greedily, on the dagger-shaped eye that Charlie clutched in his hand. He turned and hobbled to a wooden door in the tunnel wall.
Heart pounding, clutching the eye, Charlie shambled after him, into the place of his darkest nightmares.
The heavy door slammed shut behind Charlie. He stood, already shivering, inside the Castle. He rubbed and chafed his arms and legs but they could not be warmed, not in such a place. Finally he folded his arms across his chest, and cupped his elbows with his hands.

The flickering torchlight revealed a narrow staircase that rose up and lost itself in a heavy darkness. Slupp had already disappeared into it; Charlie could hear the thudding of his bone leg on the stone steps. He had no choice but to follow.

Limbs heavy as stone, Charlie dragged himself up, every step seeming to bleed him of strength. The rank and heavy air, the numbing cold, the black stone, the darkness—he was back in the Castle, back in a nightmare, with Slupp ahead of him and Lady Slupp lurking somewhere in the shadows. Dread welled in his belly and seeped into his veins, working like poison. But Charlie battled it. He clutched the eye, and stroked Eldritch’s luminous quill, and drew strength from them.

The steps climbed deeper and deeper into the Castle’s gloom, rising to a crest by the foot of a rotting door, beyond which they plunged down into nothingness. Slupp hobbled past the door without a glance. Charlie watched the fiery ball of his head disappear into the darkness.

‘Where are we going?’ Charlie called.

Slupp only snorted a response.

‘Clump...scuff...clump...scuff...

Charlie had no choice but to follow.

Down, down they went, deep into the nitrous bowels of the Castle.

Soon Charlie became aware of a noise, a low, grating noise, as if some great beast were asleep in its lair.

‘Don’t worry, luv,’ Slupp called out. ‘I’m comin’!’

Charlie crept slower and slower down the steps, his limbs growing heavier by the moment, as he realised where Slupp was leading him.

Eldritch could not be...there, Charlie hoped.

The grating sound grew louder, and the loathing inside him festered. Finally he came to the bottom step.
He stood at the end of a corridor lined with the black bars of dungeon cells. He watched Slupp pound his massive frame down the corridor, muttering as he went.

‘Get away wi’ye. Get away!’

Arms – dozens, perhaps hundreds, of them - white as a fish’s belly, reached out between the bars and flailed at him as he passed.

Charlie propped himself up against the staircase’s wall. He watched Slupp thump his way down the corridor. He was heading for door at the corridor’s end, a door slightly ajar, and from which came the grating sound.

Slupp stopped at the door, and turned to face Charlie. A leering grin twisted his fleshy face, and he flared his swine-like nostrils, as if he meant to snort Charlie up them.

‘In ‘ere, Cheesesgra’er,’ he snarled, pointing a porky finger at the door. ‘In ‘ere!’

He swivelled round on his bone leg. With a mighty pound from a fist, he knocked the door open and disappeared behind it.

‘Comin’, luv!’

Charlie gazed down the corridor, past the pale writhing arms, to the door that yawned open. And behind which was...

He shook his head. He could not...there was no way...

Charlie took out the eye. If Eldritch was there, he had to save her. He could not fail.

Brandishing the eye, he steeled himself and began to shamble down the corridor.

The arms writhed like silent serpents or the squirming tentacles of some great sea monster. Their long fingers snapped like fangs at Charlie as he reeled down the corridor. Faces passed him in a blur – faces that were little more than death masks, with sallow skin stretched over hollowed out features. And eyes red as blood.

Charlie spun and twisted away from the Lost. He did not have time to think about the creatures, why they were here at the Castle, and what the Slupps were doing with them, or to them. At last he reached the other end, and stood before the door.

Charlie knew it, knew its pungent, crypt-like odour, the sliminess of its walls. Worst of all, he knew the Rack, which he had been strapped to more times than he could count, with Lady Slupp bent over him like a crone, performing her experiments.

The Dungeon.

He wavered on its doorstep.

Please, he thought, please do not let Eldritch be here...

‘Luv, it’s Cheesegra’er, ‘e’s come back. Cheesegra’er’s come back!’

Slupp’s coarse voice seemed to claw its way out from behind the Dungeon door.
Then another voice came, beyond coarse.

*Charlie...Charlie*

It was a phantom’s voice, or like one half-heard in a whispering nightmare.

*Charlie...you’re too late...too late...*

Charlie stepped into the Dungeon.

Through the wafting gloom, he first saw the Rack – the long wooden table, its skinstraps, the wheels underneath. In his head Charlie heard its moaning creak, Slupp’s cruel laugh...

He clutched his head and shook it.

‘Eldritch,’ he cried. ‘What have you done with Eldritch? Where is she?’

In the corner of the Dungeon, a long figure in tattered white robes sat slumped in a high-back chair. The figure’s head was bowed and covered with a hood, and Charlie could not see its face. He could only see its clawed hands, which hung down like crooked icicles from the robe’s drooping white arms.

Slupp was on his knees beside the unmoving figure.

‘Oh, I’ll smash ye, Cheesegra’er, I’ll smash ye...’ he said, shaking his fist at Charlie. Then he turned to the figure in the chair. ‘He says ye’ve got someone ‘ere, luv, and ‘e wants her. If we give ‘er to ‘im, ‘e’ll cure us, ‘e says. ‘e’s got somethin’ from a...a *draggoth!’*

The figure did not move and no sound came from it.

‘Where’s Eldritch?’ Charlie shouted. ‘Tell me!’

Charlie watched Slupp. His face was growing redder and redder. It seemed as if he were trying not explode. He was truly desperate.

‘Luv,’ he said, fighting to restrain his voice. ‘Luv, where’s the girl? Tell me an’ I won’t...I mean, we won’t Turn.’

There was no movement, no sound.

‘Luv!’ Slupp said, sharply. ‘Luv, tell us!’

At last, the figure raised its head.

Two blood red orbs stared sightlessly out from under the hood, and in its phantom’s voice, the figure said two words that pierced Charlie’s heart:

*She’s dead.*

... . . .

The eyes moved, they looked, but they had no pupils, did not see.

‘Dead!’ said Slupp. ‘Dead?’

*Too late...too late...the draggoth bite...*
Charlie stood very still. He felt as if what was happening around him were very far away.

‘Did ye experiment on her? Did she give ye what ye needed?’

Lady Slupp slowly shook her hooded head.

*I experimented, but she was no use...*

Slowly, she raised one of her arms. She pointed a long, bent finger at Charlie that ended in a sickle-shaped claw, like a twisted knife.

...like Charlie...like Charlie...there are two...the White Sage did not know...

‘The White Sage,’ said Slupp, hope rising in his voice, ‘e’s comin’ like ye said ‘e would, to save us?’

Lady Slupp writhed in her chair, and thrust her head back in silent agony.

...no shape...not yet powerful...the Grey Sage is stronger...doomed, Slupp, we are doomed...

Slowly, slowly, Lady Slupp began to rise from her chair.

...doomed...we are doomed...

She rose to her full height and towered over the kneeling Slupp.

Charlie stared at her. She was so deathly thin that the robes she wore were like tattered robes draped upon a stick, and when she moved, she was like a skeleton wrapped in a shroud.

...the boy will trick you...the White Sage has sent word...the Grey Sage needs not only the boy...he needs something that was lost...

Slupp turned his gaze slowly round and glared murderously at Charlie. He sucked in all his breath, and the fat of his belly seemed to rise to his chest, padding it out like a giant stuffed cushion. Slowly he rose, the massive shape seeming to fill the room. Without a word, he hobbled across the dungeon toward Charlie, bone leg stabbing the floor in cruel thrusts.

‘Tricks me, will ye?’ he bellowed.

Charlie began to stumble backwards, out into the corridor. The arms of the Lost groped at him; a finger or two scraped him, and the touch was the icy touch of the dead. He wrenched himself away, raising the eye, as if to smash it on the cinderblocks of the Dungeon floor.

Slupp stopped, his girth filling the space of the Dungeon door. He reached down to his bone leg. With a grimace of his fleshy lips, he plucked the skull-mace from his leg, and brandished it in the air.
'Gives it 'ere, Cheesegra'er.'
Slupp let go with a mighty swipe of the mace that sliced through the air with a heavy *whoosh*!
Charlie toppled backward, and nearly fell sprawled on his back on the cinderblocks, steadying himself before he did. He hunched over, almost bent double, and crept backwards down the middle of the corridor. The eye he kept clutched in his hand, in Slupp's full view. He stared at Slupp defiantly.

'I'll smash it,' he whispered. 'I swear I will!'
Slupp hobbled out of the doorway and into the corridor, the chain of his skull-mace clanging as he moved.

'Ye heard 'er, didn't ye, Cheesegra'er?' he said. 'She's dead. Now, gives it 'ere!'
The mace flew through the air once more, and Charlie stumbled back again, but did not fall.

'I don't believe you!' Charlie cried, unable to restrain himself. 'She's not dead! She can't be!'
Slupp guffawed and his fleshy lips peeled back in a grotesque grin. The arms of the Lost clawed at his chest, and he swatted at their arms as if they were mere flies.

'Get away wi' ye!' he muttered. Then, cracked eyes looking straight at Charlie, he said 'She is, Cheesegra'er – if she says so, she is...'
Charlie shook his head. The gloomlight – it had tried to draw him to the Turret. Perhaps it was not mocking him. Perhaps it was trying to tell him she was there.

'Take me to her! Take me to her and I'll give you the eye!'
Charlie lifted his gaze from Slupp. Beyond him Lady Slupp emerged from the Dungeon, more shroud and robe than body. She cast about with her orbs, as if desperate to glimpse something with her sightless eyes.
She plunged into the corridor, raising her arms before her like a sleepwalker, tottering toward the cages of the Lost.
Slupp continued to prowl down the corridor, like a beast after its prey.
Beyond him, Lady Slupp swayed on her legs. She raised a hollow arm and threw a cell door wide open. The Lost began to spill out into the corridor, a silent rabble. Satisfied, she lurched to the next cell.
The Lost began to spill out into the corridor, a silent rabble.
Charlie turned and began to run down the corridor – if the scuffing, shambling gait that his legs permitted him to do could be called running.
He plunged into the torch-lit shadows of the winding staircase. On his hands and knees he began to scramble as quickly as he could up the stairs, ignoring the slime and filth that squirmed over his fingers.

After him came Slupp, bone leg thudding on the steps, skull-mace whooshing through the air.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
THE STAIRCASE

Charlie hobbled upward into the gloom of the Castle. Below him, the door banged shut, and he heard pounding and scuffing noises.

‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’

Slupp’s voice boomed and echoed off the walls of the close staircase. Charlie felt the stone under his fingers and knees tremble at the force of it. He looked over his shoulder and saw a hulking, shadowy shape hoisting itself up the stairs. Slupp’s fiery hair emerged into a patch of flickering torchlight, then his round pate, and a forehead slicked with glistening sweat. The head reared back and two cracked and stricken eyeballs glared up at Charlie. The eyes were so feral that they seemed to cast a wild light of their own into the Castle’s murk.

‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’

Charlie turned and scrambled as fast as he could. But it was no use. Behind him Slupp’s relentless pounding grew louder and louder. He knew that there would be no escape. Charlie turned around and held up the eye. It was his only hope. It gleamed in the torch light, casting an eerie silvery light over the staircase.

Slupp hobbled into its light. In his eyes Charlie could see little sense, little feeling; he was a mass of malice. Though he was a few stairs below Charlie, still Slupp loomed over him.

Charlie pressed himself against the stairs, their jagged edges cutting into his back. He was terrified that Slupp was so far out of his mind, and so completely consumed with hatred for him, that he would kill him in his rage and forget about saving himself. Charlie thrust the eye in front of him like a sword.

‘Slupp!’ he barked, his voice hoarse and parched. ‘Think! Do you want to Turn like Lady Slupp?’

Something seemed to creep into Slupp’s eyes, something like awareness. He still swung the skull-mace over his head, ready to bring it crashing down on Charlie. But he stood still, his massive chest rising and falling, like a pumping balloon.

‘You have to listen to me,’ said Charlie. ‘If you kill me without getting the eye, you’ll be just like her, just like Them.’

Charlie pointed down the stairs into the darkness. Both he and Slupp could hear the scratching and thumping of the Lost on the Dungeon door.
Slupp’s sweaty face was dappled with torchlight. As he listened to the thumping, his skin seemed to grow whiter before Charlie’s eyes.

It’s working, Charlie thought.

“You’ll become one of Them,” he said. ‘Your only hope is to take me to Eldritch; I can’t find my own way.’

“But she’s dead!” Slupp sneered.

‘Don’t say that!’ Charlie shouted, unable to restrain himself. ‘Don’t...’

Charlie struggled to control himself. He could not fall to pieces, not here, not now. He had to fool Slupp into taking him to Eldritch, so he could see her with his own eyes, hold her, save her, if he could. Then, and only then, could he let himself go.

‘I have to see her,’ he said quietly. ‘I need to see her.’

Slupp snorted deeply and he ran his eyeballs over Charlie.

‘What else do ye want, Cheesegra’er?’, he said. ‘What else are ye lookin’ for? Somethin’ that was lost? The White Sage said...’

‘We’re wasting time!’ Charlie cried. ‘The draggoth-venom won’t wait, Slupp. It’s poisoning you!’

Slupp’s face contorted, and he flared his swine-like nostrils.

‘Draggoths, Cheesegra’er!’ he bellowed. ‘Ye wokes ‘em up, ye did!’

Charlie closed his eyes, fearing the worst. But instead of the skull-mace swinging through the air and pulverising him, he heard and felt the pounding of Slupp’s bone leg on the stair beside him.

Charlie opened his eyes, and twisted himself round. Slupp was on the stairs above him, his boulder-like body engulfed in shadow. Charlie was nearly sick at the thought of Slupp stepping over him. He could have been squashed like a bug.

‘Move, Cheesegra’er!’ came Slupp’s snarling voice.

Charlie put the eye back in his vest pocket. He drew a breath of the foul air, and began to splutter and cough.

But he had done it.

Ignoring the fiery pain that flared in the joints of his limbs, ignoring the hunger that gnawed at his tight belly, he began to crawl up the stairs after the hobbling Slupp.

Every step, he told himself, brought him closer to Eldritch.

Charlie followed Slupp, who grumbled and growled to himself as he went.
'After all I dones for her, she turns Them loose on me, she do...a bite from Them makes ye Turn...me leg, it hurt, it do...Draggoths...Cheesegra' er wokes 'em, 'e did!' At times a rage would suddenly engulf him, and he would whirl around on his bone leg and glare and snarl and roar at Charlie, who flashed the eye as his only protection. Slupp would stare longingly at it, snorting and flaring his swine-like nostrils. Then, just as suddenly, he would whirl back around and clump even faster up the stairs, doubling his muttering and howling.

This scene happened again and again, exhausting Charlie. He tried not to think about how tired he was. But he was so weary, so hungry, so chilled, and his arms and legs as heavy as sacks filled with rocks, that all he could do was follow Slupp at a very slow crawl. At other times he pushed himself to walk, feeling his strength return, and he would shamble up the stairs at a burst, only to drop to his knees again.

But Charlie never allowed himself to rest. He could not fail Eldritch. And the thought of perishing on the staircase inside gloomy Castle Slupp terrified him.

Charlie struggled to keep his wits about him. He searched the shadowy stairs and gloom, both ahead and behind, for the slightest sign of danger or trickery. For all he knew, gloombeasts could be lying in wait around every twist of the staircase.

Bearing all this as well as he could, Charlie kept on, until at last Slupp came to a stop. He shuffled round on a step and peered down at Charlie as if he were a bug.

'We're 'ere, Cheesegra'er! Back 'orne ye are. Used ter come up and gets ye from 'ere, whenever she wanted ye.'

Charlie stopped climbing. The Castle's gloom and chill settled over him as he slumped down on the staircase. He struggled against exhaustion and forced himself to raise his head.

Beyond Slupp the stairs rose high above his head, out of the torch-light's reach and into sombre darkness. To Charlie it seemed that the steps led nowhere, into nothingness. But the nothingness seemed alive, hungry. Looking into its black depths made Charlie's flesh crawl; if he stayed where he was, slumped on the steps, the darkness would open its great, black maw and slowly, greedily, swallow him up.

Then it dawned on Charlie.

All those blindfolded trips down to the Dungeon, Slupp whipping him with the knout and gloating as they went.

It was here! He was on *that* staircase!
He had been so intent on escaping from the Dungeon, on getting to Eldritch, that he had not realised...had not understood...

And now here he was, back again.

Charlie looked up. Slupp loomed over him, bathed in torchlight, like an overfed ghoul. He had put a hand over his protruding belly and thrown back his head, thoroughly enjoying Charlie’s unease. A series of low barks came out of his mouth.

‘Ye don’ look ‘appy to be ‘ome, Cheesegra’er! To be back where ye belong!’

He laughed for a time, even as he turned round and stumped his way up the stairs.

The torch-light flashed palely on his dirty white smock and enormous shoulders as he disappeared into the darkness.

Charlie lay on the steps. The Castle seemed to fall silent. But the silence was uneasy, and thick with tension. Charlie felt a surge of loathing slowly rising up inside his stomach and into his throat.

And then, grating.

That terrible grating.

‘Ohhhh...’

Charlie could not stifle a deep groan at hearing the sound. A thousand times he had heard it: a deep grating noise, like the sound of a crypt being pried open by dead hands.

Charlie raised his head and saw that the door to the Turret was open. Charlie did not see Slupp pass through it, but he was no longer on the stairs. A grey mist of gloomlight wafted through the trap door, and began to waft down the stairs. Charlie almost welcomed it, being preferable to the hungry darkness. Like a thousand stars it glittered in the torchlight, moving with deathly slowness down the steps, settling over Charlie like a cloud.

‘She’s ‘ere, Cheesegra’er, she’s ‘ere!’

‘Eldritch,’ he whispered.

He struggled to his feet, and as if in a dream, Charlie dragged himself up the last remaining stairs and passed through the gloomlight.
He reached the last step; the trap door yawned open before him. The misty gloomlight swirled and eddied, feeling cool on his skin, like a fine spray of water. Charlie reached out and put his hands onto the black stone of the Turret floor to balance himself. He pushed himself up and through the door, into his old Turret.

For a moment, he saw nothing but the dirty-grey density of gloomlight. No swirls, no plumes, no curls: only gloomlight, thick as fog. For a moment Charlie wondered whether Slupp had tricked him. And then, moving with its own power, the gloomlight lessened and shifted, revealing glimpses of crumbling black stone, and the solid black bars of a cage.

The Cage.

Charlie stared at it. The gloomlight curled like a vine around its black bars, rising to a funnel-shaped peak above the Cage, as if carrying a spirit aloft.

Inside, a small figure, dressed in the pink frills of a dancer’s costume, lay sprawled on the floor. Like a broken, neglected puppet, it seemed flung to the ground in a careless heap. Wisps of gloomlight swept over and around it, as if prodding and poking at the unmoving body.

Nothing else mattered to Charlie: he saw only the figure in the Cage. All else - the Castle, Slupp, the draggoths, - dropped from his mind, as if merely illusion.

He stumbled across the Turret, eyes never wavering from the crumpled shape in the Cage. He wrapped his hands around the cool black bars. The gloomlight now smouldered like smoke. He gazed down.

‘Eldritch,’ he whispered, nearly overcome. ‘You’re not dead. You’re not. You can’t be.’

Tears welled behind his eyes, but he strove to keep them back.

She was little more than a heap of stick-like limbs wrapped in the torn pink outfit. She lay on her back, her slight shoulders and upper body twisted unnaturally, her face pressed against the stone floor. Charlie saw only the back of her head, and he longed to stroke the straight black hair, to feel its silkiness.

\[Thump...thump...thump...thump...\]

‘CHEESEGRA’ER!’

Charlie whirled around. How could he have been so...?

The skull-mace came smashing down.
Charlie dodged just in time; Slupp’s weapon soared past his ear, smashing into the Cage with a mighty clang.

Charlie tried to roll away along the bars, but Slupp had thrown his weight against him, squashing him against the Cage. Slupp was so close that Charlie could feel his hot, foul breath burning the top of his head. Sweat rolled off Slupp’s face onto Charlie’s, and slid like streaks of greasy oil down his cheeks.

‘Gives it ‘ere, Cheesegra’er!’

Charlie heard the skull-mace drop, clanging to the Turret’s rock. A huge hand closed over his throat and began to squeeze; and another closed over one of his own hands, the one that held the eye.

Slupp snorted and gasped, his breath hot and foul, striking Charlie’s face like blows. Charlie twisted and kicked, trying desperately to breathe. The corners of the world began to fade into darkness.

Slupp gave a mighty wrench.

Charlie felt the eye being ripped from his hand. The vice-like grip around his neck suddenly disappeared, and then he was falling, crashing to the stone floor.

Charlie lay with his back against the Cage, his legs splayed in front of him. He soothed his neck with his hands, and looked at Slupp.

He clutched the eye in a meaty fist. He stared at it for a moment, his cracked eyes feasting upon it. Then, grunting in triumph, nostrils flaring, he threw back his head and emitted a long gloating howl.

When the howl had subsided, he began to reel, almost dance, about the Turret, holding the eye aloft, his bone leg stamping on the Turret’s stone. He snorted, puffed and crowed, glorying in his victory.

Charlie watched him, his lips curling in disgust. A blind fury stirred within him. He shifted himself, and his hand struck something cold and spiky.

Slupp’s skull-mace.

It lay beside him, coiled like the tail of a strange creature.

Charlie snaked his fingers round its bone handle. Slowly, he rose to his feet, eyes never leaving the prancing Slupp. He bent over and grasped the weapon in both hands; it was a dead weight. Hunched over like a beggar, he began to creep across the Turret toward Slupp.

Slupp made a last gesture, twirling himself round on his bone leg. He came to a stop in the middle of the Turret.
Charlie could not believe his luck. Slupp was so enraptured by the eye that he took no notice of Charlie, and even turned his hulking back to him.

Charlie crept along, dragging the skull-mace, its spikes scraping along the rock, hoping Slupp would not hear, hoping the bitter fury inside of him would give him strength to lift the weapon and...

As if he were examining a glass of the finest port, Slupp raised the wobbling fat of his arm and studied the eye and its swirling contents.

‘Works yer magic now,’ he muttered, ‘works yer magic!’

He unstoppered the eye.

Charlie was close enough now, at arm’s length from Slupp. With every step he had taken, his fury had grown. Now, now was the time.

Slupp raised the eye and...

‘SLUPP!’

Startled, Slupp spun on his bone leg and glared at Charlie. He had forgotten all about him; his cracked eyes bulged out at Charlie, as if wonderstruck.

With a shattering war-cry, Charlie hoisted the weapon and swung it over his head, the spiked skull flying through the air.

Charlie swung it so hard that the momentum pitched him forward. The skull-mace flew out of his hands, and he tumbled clumsily into Slupp’s fat, stumpy legs, and then slid down onto the rock.

...whump...

Dazed, he lay at Slupp’s bloated feet, his cheek pressed to the slimy black stone of the Turret.

Charlie flipped himself onto his back, and pushed himself up on his elbows.

Slupp loomed over him, the eye still raised to his lips, as if he were a statue frozen in time.

The spiked ball of the mace had wedged itself into the crown of his head.

Rivers of blood had welled there and spilled down in rivulets across his shoulders, dripping thickly onto the black rock.

His eyes bulged, his fleshy lips curled.

And he began to fall.

Down toward Charlie, an avalanche of fat.

Charlie gasped, and rolled.
Slupp’s enormous frame came crashing down to the rock. The blow of Slupp’s body was so massive, so mighty, that the Turret itself quaked, and a fissure erupted in the crumbling rock underneath Slupp.

Charlie watched it spread across the Turret, slicing it in half. Separating him from Eldritch.

Charlie scrambled.

Around him he heard the ripping noise of the rock splitting. The Turret was going to break.

Charlie threw himself across the fissure.

With a thunderous cracking noise, the Turret fell away below him. His legs kicked nothing but air and gloomlight.

But his hands were clamped fast on the remains of the Turret, his long finger-tips wedged into a groove between the uneven rocks. Charlie held on for his life, hoping his finger-tips would hold, and not snap like sticks.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an enormous shape in a dirty white smock. As if every moment lasted an eternity, Charlie watched it slide, and then slip, over the edge of the Turret. He turned his head, and looked down. Slupp’s body hurtled down through the gloomlight, the skull-mace still lodged in his head.

He was gone.

....

Charlie pedalled his legs, trying to find purchase on what was left of the Turret. Throbbing pain streaked from his clenched white fingers all along his arms. He was not going to fall down into the Castle’s rubble with Slupp; he would not allow it. His eyes locked on the Cage, he kicked and pedalled and swung his legs up and over the Turret’s edge.

He crawled forward, and, his body spent, he slumped to the rock. He sucked air into his lungs, trying to ignore the pain that seethed in his arms. He felt as if he had been stretched on the Rack.

When he could, he raised his head. Inside the Cage, he saw the unmoving heap of limbs that was Eldritch.

And it was only then that he remembered the eye.
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE GRIM WAR

Charlie wheeled around and peered over the Turret’s edge, down into the gloom.

The eye!

‘No!’ Charlie whispered. ‘No!’

He clutched his head in his hands and shook it, unbelieving. The eye had gone, gone with Slupp down into the gloomlight.

‘It can’t be, can’t be.’

A gleam caught his eye. He looked down.

Teetering on the edge of the Turret, hilt jutting out into air, was the eye.

Charlie stared at its dagger-shape. He had to get to it, quickly, or it would plunge down into the gloom with Slupp, and be lost forever.

Slowly, trying not to cause even the slightest movement of air, Charlie bent down.

His hand shook badly, and his knees cracked and bent as he lowered himself carefully down.

Please, he begged, please...

A terrible thing happened next.

Just as Charlie’s long, slender fingers were poised to wrap around the eye, the Turret gave a final shudder.

Charlie moaned.

The eye tilted and slipped over the rock’s sharp edge.

His fingers clutched nothing but air.

Charlie watched the gleaming eye fall like a shooting star. He was on his knees now, on the edge, thrusting his arms out, nearly throwing himself over.

But his arms were not long enough, and they grasped nothing but gloomlight.

The eye fell, spinning now as it gathered speed.

And then it disappeared into a spire of gyrating gloomlight.

Not a sound was heard in the crumbling Turret, not a movement made. A strange and sombre stillness had fallen, and the gloomlight settled over the Turret, like a pall.

Charlie lay on his knees by the Turret’s fractured edge, his head in his hands, stricken with grief.

He had failed.
The pain of that realisation tore at his heart, crippling him. It was a thousand-fold worse than any torture Slupp could have devised. Those tortures he could endure; but this one, this one...

After a long time, Charlie turned and began to crawl towards the Cage. Through the gloomlight, as if she were a mirage, he could see the pink of Eldritch’s clothes and the black of her hair. Somehow, he managed to cross the Turret. He did not have the key for the Cage, but the skull-mace and Slupp’s girth had bashed two bars wide apart. Charlie was thin enough to slip through them.

Once inside, he tumbled forward, falling to his knees once again, beside Eldritch. He slipped one hand under her head and one under her slight waist. Gently he raised her up and lay her drooping body across his lap. He began rolling back the fine silky paper of her pallid mask. He gazed down at her, stroking her burnt cheek with a finger. He wanted to admire her for ever and ever.

He cradled Eldritch’s head, tears trickling down his cheeks onto hers.

How long he lay next to her, holding her small, cold body against his, Charlie did not know. An eternity seemed to pass; the gloomlight fell gently on his skin in cool silver droplets, like rain. He held her, wrapped his arms around her, trying to invest in her whatever warmth and life he could spare. But she was like a puppet or a doll, lifeless, limp.

Charlie had failed, and he felt failure’s cold knife-stabs puncturing his body, his will, his heart. Only Eldritch had kept his hope alive. And now, now that she was gone...

He clutched her against him.

‘I’ll never leave you, I’ll never leave you, never...’

On and on he went, whispering in her ear, as if mere words could bring her back.

After a time, Charlie became aware of a dull, dolorous droning. The Turret – what was left of it – was filled with dark shapes that stared at him with grey dagger-like eyes. They huddled so closely together that they seemed to pour into one another like liquid darkness. Some perched on the battlement, others hovered above the Cage. All of them stared, without emotion, perhaps without understanding. Charlie deeply resented their presence.

‘She’s gone!’ he cried. ‘She’s gone!’

The amorphous black shapes hovered and droned, expressionless, unfeeling.

Then, they began to chant.

‘...we are your protectors...we are your protectors...’
Charlie clamped his hands over his ears. He wanted only to be with Eldritch. Never again would they be separated; never again would he be without her. He resolved to lie down beside her, here inside the Cage. He would make it his final resting place. Only this resolve could quell the cold fire of his grief.

Gently, he lay Eldritch down, and prepared to lay himself down next to her.

But as he slid his legs out from under him, he glimpsed a glowing light. One of the stones outside the Cage seemed to burn like a silver coal. Its pulsating glow was hypnotic, capturing Charlie’s eye. By degrees the grey fire grew, stoked by an unseen bellows. The Turret, bathed now in the grey light, seemed to glow like a furnace of hot grey coals.

But the stone by the Cage glowed the brightest.

Charlie remembered the stone, and smiled. He had longed for what lay beneath it, longed for the feel of its old leathern cover and the roughness of its parchment. Now he could have it with him as he lay beside Eldritch, perhaps read one last story.

He reached his arms through the Cage and removed the stone, the old, warm feeling surging within him.

And there it was: the burnt-leather cover with the pattern of circles, the clasps of white, black and silver gems; and the words in grey stitching:

_The Grim War_

This time, however, the Book was different. Charlie blinked and shook his head. The stitching was sparkling, even glowing, as if little glittering stars were running up and down the ornate lettering. The book had never done this before; he was certain of it.

Slowly, Charlie lowered his hands into the hiding-place and picked up the Book. The creased leather warmed his fingers. In fact, it was nearly too hot for Charlie to hold. It seemed to thrum in his hands as if it were alive, as if some power welled inside of it, a power longing to burst out. The thrumming ran through his hands and up his arms, numbing the pain that throbbed there.

Charlie had always imagined this moment, of once again holding his Book in his hands, to be richly fulfilling, like coming home.

Now, he found that even its glittering and thrumming could not inspire him. It was as empty and pointless as everything else.

He was about to fling it across the Turret to the draggoths, like flinging a scrap of meat to hungry gloombeasts, when the circles on the Book’s cover began to change. They turned to alternating white and black halves, as they had done in the draggoth-pit. As Charlie
watched the white and black began to spill over their borders, and the circles turned into a glowing grey.

The Book fell open in his hands, and the pages began to riffle. The silver trim on each page glittered like the stitching on the cover, and Charlie could not help but watch as the pages continued to riffle.

At last the Book came to rest.

On the last page, the blank page that Charlie had always wondered about.

Charlie felt something in his vest begin to rustle.

Eldritch’s quill.

He reached inside and carefully pulled it out of his pocket, admiring once again its soft but strong feathers. The quill was illuminated with the same energy that powered the Book. And that energy now pulled the quill out of Charlie’s hand. It leapt out, twirling in a graceful circle, and leaving traces of silver in the air. Then it dived down to the Book, to the blank parchment.

And it began to write.

The quill’s nib made scribbling sounds as it ran over the parchment. Charlie watched as glowing letters appeared on the parchment, forming words:

I am the Grey Sage.

The words blazed on the page. Then the letters began to fall away, one by one, dropping like shooting stars.

The quill scribbled again, longer this time.

You were hidden here, in the Castle. She, the one you hold, was lost.

Deep magic stirs within you both; it drew you to one another. Only this magic can destroy the gloomlight. This magic is in your teeth.

Again, the letters dropped away.

Charlie lowered his gaze to Eldritch’s black, still face. Dark eyebrows arched in fine lines over her closed eyes, as if a painter’s brush had made them. They had the same dark lustre as her hair.

Emotion welled within him like a rising tide; trying to stem it was like trying to force a lid on a boiling pot. Gently, he brushed her dark hair from her closed eyes.

‘Eldritch,’ he whispered.

Slowly, gently, his eyes closed, as if he had been waiting his whole life for this moment, he leaned forward, lowering his head, lowering his lips to hers.

For the quill had now scribbled the words in the Book:
Join yours with hers
And that is what Charlie did.

His lips met Eldritch’s. An unstoppable, mysterious force within him surged, and he felt warm and light, as if he could drift away and soar through the air forever. The same force awakened within Eldritch. Warmth coursed through her, he could feel it in her lips, which he kissed, in her hands, which he held. His heart shook within his breast.

Her eyes opened; they were dark and moist and alive with an inner light.

Charlie lifted a hand and gently stroked her face. Slowly, she raised her own, and closed it over Charlie’s. Their touch now radiated a beautiful warmth.

Her mouth began move, her lips to tremble, as she realised that her mask had gone. Charlie stopped her hand.

They looked into one another’s eyes, and, reborn, cried out for joy.
Charlie and Eldritch lay together for a time, until the droning of the draggoths crested
and then, all at once, as if by silent signal, they stopped.

For a moment, silence reigned on the Turret.
And then a chant rose, softly this time, but Charlie could not understand it. It sounded
like,

...shantak...shantak...shantak...

Above the chant, distantly, came a flapping noise.

Charlie gathered Eldritch up in the cradle of his arms. She was still very weak –
carrying her was like carrying the shell of a person. Her stick-like arms and legs dangled and
swung as Charlie moved, and she dozed in and out of a calm, quiet sleep. When she awoke,
and looked at Charlie with her dark eyes, a serene smile parted her lips, exposing the three
broken lines of her teeth. And Charlie returned the smile. She was alive and warm and
Charlie would never leave her again.

He rose to his feet and carried her out of the Cage. He looked up at the approaching
shape, which, swooping on powerful wings, emerged from the gloomlight like a shining star.
On and on it came, the rhythmic thrusting of its wings growing louder and louder.

This was how it all began, he thought.

More graceful than any flying beast, a silver birdcage straightened its magnificent
wings and swooped down. It hovered in the air, then came to a gentle landing on the Turret
before Charlie. It sat on its base, ruffling and folding its wings.

Charlie stared at the wondrous presence before him. Its bars and wings and entire
being seemed suffused with the power that galvanised the Book, and radiating a deep silver
glow.

The draggoths heightened their chant:

...shantak...shantak...shantak...

The birdcage’s clasp came undone, as if by itself, and the door swung silently open.
The quill fell to scribbling in the Book once again:

Come to me

Charlie bent down and lifted the Book from the stone. It seemed heavier and more
substantial than Eldritch. He took both the Book and Eldritch into the birdcage. It was
spacious enough for her to stretch out, and he lay her gently down. He removed his vest and
crumpled it into a makeshift cushion behind her head, and she slept like a princess in one of *The Grim War*’s stories.

Still holding the Book, Charlie climbed into the birdcage. He sat inside it, and held Eldritch’s hand in his. The quill spun in a graceful circle, and then floated through the air into the birdcage. It lowered itself not to Charlie, but to Eldritch, disappearing into the folds of her dirty rags.

Charlie looked out through the silver bars at the half-crumbled Turret, and at the chanting draggoths who covered it like a black liquid blanket.

He took a deep breath and sighed.

He had magic within him, he had saved Eldritch. He thought of the Slupps, the Beastmen, and the Lost; and all the cruelty and violence; the blasted landscapes; and all the terrible things that the Clash and the gloomlight had created.

If, like the Grey Sage had written, together he and Eldritch could master the magic within them and destroy the gloomlight, then they would.

But that was all in the future. A great weariness came over Charlie, and he struggled to keep his eyes open.

The door swung closed and the birdcage lifted itself up into the gloomlight. The draggoths followed, rising one after the other into the air.

Charlie sat in the birdcage, soothed by the gentle rising and falling of its wings and its gentle rocking rhythm.

But before they were too far away, and the gloomlight too thick, Charlie turned and with a final effort looked over his shoulder and through the bars.

The Castle stood its ground, defiantly, the jagged Turret like a claw that still threatened to reach out and grab him.

And then, all at once, as if the dark force that had held the Castle and Turret up for so long had finally weakened, they began to crumble. Great chunks of black rock ripped and fell away, as if hewn by an invisible axe. They fell one by one, and then faster and faster, dashing on the ground below in a thunderous, Slupp-like roar, until there was nothing left of them but a great heap of smouldering rock.

Charlie turned away. *The Grim War* sat on his lap. The beaten cover was no longer luminous, no longer glittered in white, black and grey. It was how he had always remembered it. He began turning the pages, a warm smile spreading across his face, his fingers once again feeling the old familiar coarseness of the Book’s paper. He turned to his favourite tale, the one about the boy trapped in a castle who sought out the light. He was like
the boy, he thought, but he had not yet found his world of light and sun. He was still seeking, still trapped.

Charlie took Eldritch’s hand in his. Looking up from the Book, he wondered when they could at last be free.

THE END
The Gothic Meets the Weird: A Critical Analysis of Charlie Cheeseegrater and its Influences

Introduction

Charlie Cheeseegrater: A Weird Tale (hereafter referred to as Charlie Cheeseegrater) is a novel aimed at young people ages 10 and up, and is about 60,000 words in length. The novel’s genre is stated in the title, A Weird Tale. Weird fiction is a genre closely related to gothic horror/dark fantasy, with prominent writers being Ann Radcliffe, ‘Monk’ Lewis, Charles Maturin, Edgar Allan Poe, and, perhaps most particularly as relating to the novel, H.P. Lovecraft. The primary goal of this exegesis is to trace the literary heritage of Charlie Cheeseegrater. Through an examination of the principle texts and features of gothic, weird and fantastic fiction, it will be shown that Charlie Cheeseegrater is firmly rooted in these traditions. However an analysis of how Charlie Cheeseegrater reshaples and rejects many of those traditions will show that the novel is in fact a synthesis of the traditional and the modern. Similarly, the analysis will reveal that in addition to synthesising the traditional and the modern, the novel straddles the worlds of adult and young adult fiction.

Section I: Gothic Fiction and Charlie Cheeseegrater

Gothic fiction generally refers to the series of novels beginning with Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Ann Radcliffe’s novels (in particular The Mysteries of Udolplo), Matthew Lewis’ The Monk, and Charles Robert Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer. Herbert Read, in his foreword to Devendra P. Varma’s The Gothic Flame, asserts that ‘it is possible that Lewis, Maturin, and Radcliffe, should, relatively to Scott, Dickens and Hardy, occupy a much higher rank among English novelists’ (1957: xiii). Many other novels, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Bram Stoker’s Dracula also define the genre. However, these works, dealing primarily with the tropes of zombie and vampire do not bear as direct a link to a dark fantasy work such as Charlie Cheeseegrater as do those of Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis and Maturin. A discussion of those latter novelists will provide a sufficient tracing of the development of the gothic novel and its components, and apply them to Charlie Cheeseegrater. By doing so, a context is created for the novel.

The term ‘gothic fiction’ should be clarified before any analysis of texts is undertaken. Gothic fiction, as it has come to be known, is a genre that sets out to explore the darker corners of human existence and the human psyche, and often its intention is to strike fear into the hearts of its readers. There have always been such tales told; indeed, Edith Birkhead claims that ‘the tale of terror is as old as the history of man,’ (1927: 1) citing the ‘universal myth of the great flood’ (1927: 1) as one of the earliest examples of the form.
Both Stephen King and H.P. Lovecraft assert that for them ‘fear is the purest emotion’ (Lovecraft, 1973: 6) and Birkhead maintains that this is so not only because every author knows that ‘fear is a potent spell’ (1927: 3), but because ‘Human nature desires not only to be amused and entertained, but moved to pity and fear (1927: 3). Elisabeth MacAndrews, in her book *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* defines gothic fiction quite succinctly as a ‘literature of nightmare’ (1979: 3).

Befitting a literature dedicated to ‘probing humanity’s deepest fears’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 8), much of gothic fiction can be characterised by scenes ‘wrapped in profound darkness, occasionally pierced by moonlight’ (Varma, 1957: 21), and wherein authors conjure a supernatural effect by the accumulation of telling details (desolate scenery, tempests, unidentified moaning, etc) that build to a hair-raising climax (Varma, 1957: 21). Indeed, the ‘effective romantic setting, the continuous spell of horror, the colour of melancholy, awe and superstition’ (Varma, 1957: 21) create impulses in the reader. These impulses, Devendra P. Varma claims in his book, *The Gothic Flame*, ‘are the impulses of the gothic spirit’ (1957: 22). In a typical gothic novel, scenery and weather are entirely subjective: ‘Gothic villains plan dark and unholy murders against a background of black clouds and hellish thunder, establishing a concord between man’s mood and nature (Varma, 1957: 20).’

However, Gothic fiction is not limited solely to books of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. A 1996 treatment of gothic fiction by Fred Botting, entitled *The Gothic*, brings a contemporary understanding to the study of the gothic. In his introduction Botting states that the genre has developed from delineating only the ‘dark upside of suppressed elements and energies’ and thus moved from ‘darkness and into the spotlight’, keeping pace with or perhaps reflecting society’s interest in and acceptance of ‘darker’ psychology. He further indicates that gothic fiction has been subjected to a range of modern interpretations, representing the genre as ‘expressions of class violence and anxiety, female oppression and rage, sexual repression and freedom’. Maggie Kilgour in her 1995 study *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* treats the genre as ‘a deviant and subversive form’ that ‘presents an alternative model of relations between individuals, characters, parts of narrative, and men and women’ (Kilgour, 1995: 6).

A brief examination of one aspect of the gothic - the castle – may provide some evidence for these varied interpretations. In a gothic novel, the castle, even in decay, is ‘majestic and threatening’ (Varma, 1957: 18) and from it come much of the trappings of gothic and horror fiction: clanging doors, crumbling staircases and battlements, hidden
chambers, dungeons, subterranean passages, ghosts and/or visions, etc. They are also often associated with an evil character, drawing a parallel between sinister places and sinister characters, a common feature of novels generally which might be said to have originated in gothic fiction (Varma, 1957: xii). In Herbert Read’s foreword to Varma’s *The Gothic Flame*, an explanation of the use of castles is offered. For Read, the castle, though ruinous, is ‘an effective prison’ by being ‘cut off from light and human contact’ (Varma, 1957: xiii), and in light of Freudian analysis, can be seen as ‘a symbol of neurosis’, and in particular as a ‘symbol of anxiety, the dread of the abyss, the response to the political and religious insecurity of disturbed times’ (Varma, 1957: xiii).

Gothic fiction, then, because of its use of symbols like castles and its intention to create melancholic effects in the reader, is a literature of nightmare. Given the centrality and psychology of the use of castles in gothic fiction, it is perhaps, then, no surprise that Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the book generally regarded as being the first true ‘gothic’ text, contains the castle that in many ways set the mould for all subsequent castles in gothic fiction.

**Section I i): Gothic Fiction: The Castle of Otranto and Charlie Cheesegrater**

Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* on Christmas Eve 1764 and so ‘must be assigned the honour of having introduced the gothic romance and of having made it fashionable’ (Birkhead, 1921: 53). The novel is taken up with action that transpires inside the Castle Otranto, where on the eve of a marriage Conrad, son of Manfred the usurping prince of Otranto, is crushed to death by the mysterious fall of an enormous helmet shaded with black plumes. The old and evil Manfred then declares that he will marry the bride in place of his son, only to find her having escaped through subterranean passages to sanctuary in a nearby church. Manfred is foiled in his nefarious plans by the arrival of Frederic, the real heir to Otranto. A new marriage scheme is initiated by Manfred whereby he and Frederic agree to marry the daughter of the other. The sordid affair ends with Manfred mistakenly killing his daughter. As she expires, a clap of thunder shakes the castle to its foundations.

The above summary cannot do justice to the ingenuity of the tale itself or of its highly influential impact on the fiction of its own and subsequent periods. It is generally agreed amongst scholars of the English novel that Walpole, quite unwittingly, had inaugurated a new form of fiction that provided nearly all of the elements that would come to be known as the ‘gothic’ genre. One of the primary features of the novel (and of Gothic novels in general) is the identification of the castle (or home) with its owner, in this case, Manfred. He dominates
all other characters in the castle and confines them to it. Most importantly, as MacAndrew observes, the castle is a manifestation of Manfred’s mind and perhaps his inner moral state (1979: 14). The relationship between Manfred’s mind and morality is made clear when the novels ends in Manfred’s moral collapse, which is accompanied by the collapse of his castle, ‘disobeying the rules of nature’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 14). This feature returns in many subsequent gothic novels.

*Charlie Cheesegrater* is one such novel. For example, a castle figures prominently in the story, thus making a direct connection with gothic fiction. At the novel’s outset, Charlie is a captive of his wicked aunt and uncle, the Slupps, who keep Charlie in a cage in the turret of their castle, Castle Slupp. Indeed, the Castle is merely an extension of the Slupps themselves (as Otranto is for Manfred). For example, Slupp’s teeth are as ‘yellowed, blackened, and crumbling as his Castle’ (Engin: 8). Along with its owners, the Castle embodies all of Charlie’s deepest fears, and is frequently described as a threatening claw. It functions as an element of deep anxiety for Charlie, and his harrowing time there – having been stretched on a rack, starved, and physically abused – has scarred him psychologically. Like the eponymous hero of *Oliver Twist*, whose greatest fear is to be recaptured by Fagin’s gang, Charlie’s greatest fear is to be recaptured by Slupps and returned to his Cage in the Castle. It therefore creates drama and tension when, at the novel’s climax, Charlie returns to the Castle to rescue Eldritch, who has been captured by the Slupps. By returning to the Castle and rescuing Eldritch, Charlie triumphs over his former tormentor, Slupp, thus representing his triumph over fear, his psychological scars, and the Castle itself. This triumph is made abundantly clear when, after Charlie’s defeat of the Slupps and he is being carried away on the shantak, he turns to see the Castle implode, as in *Otranto*, in a symbolic catharsis for Charlie’s past tortures at the hands of Slupp and the brooding castle itself.

Another prominent feature of *Otranto* is Walpole’s deliberate attempts to create a sense of culminating gloom or terror. This is created in part by the castle itself, which, as a manifestation of Manfred’s twisted mind, features a brooding, foreboding darkness, rusty hinges and subterranean passageways, all of which have come to be known as ‘gothic machinery’. It is through his use of the castle, the machinery, the simplistic character types (the pure heroine, the tyrant, etc) that often embody certain virtues or certain vices, plots that revolve around inheritances or prophecies, the use of ancestral portraits and old manuscripts, that he achieves an atmosphere of ‘gloom, mystery and terror’ (Varma, 1957: 58), and nearly all of which are to be found time and again in subsequent gothic novels.
Charlie Cheesegrater also attempts to create a melancholic or horrific effect in the reader. This is shown most prominently in Charlie Cheesegrater’s use of the gloomlight, the silvery fog that appears to have blocked out the sun and moon. The gloomlight was created by a Clash between light and dark, and white and black. The Clash resulted in a kind of magical holocaust which destroyed the Welkin of the White Sage, and resulted in the burnt, blackened and barren Welkin of Gloom. Thus the gloomlight is a melding of white and black, of light and dark, and creates an overall ‘foggy’ effect in the novel. Like the weather mirroring characters’ moods in gothic fiction, the gloomlight also functions as an ‘energy’ that seems somehow connected to Charlie’s moods. When Charlie finds Eldritch’s quill, after falling out of the Spider, he is overcome with emotion and vows to find her. The gloomlight responds by turning into rain: ‘All about Charlie droplets of gloomlight fell in a gentle rain (Engin: 89). Charlie can also control the gloomlight and its energy, though for much of the novel he does not know this. Charlie’s ability to control the gloomlight takes the concept of weather mimicking mood a step farther. Thus the effect of darkness and light in Charlie Cheesegrater is twofold: it creates a melancholic atmosphere and relates to the convention of weather mimicking human mood.

In creating Otranto, Walpole unwittingly bequeathed a rich inheritance to artists that would improve upon his crude or simplistic machinery and lend it touches of brilliance and refinement. All commentators and scholars consulted have unanimously credited Walpole with the innovation of a genre. Indeed, Varma observes what many authors must also have observed after reading Otranto: ‘[the book] possessed potentialities; the atmosphere of gloom and terror; and stock romantic characters’ (1957: 57), to which Birkhead adds ‘the castle itself, trap doors, easily extinguished lamps, - objects trivial and insignificant in Walpole’s hands but fraught with terrible possibilities’ (1927: 22) for future authors. Indeed, the consensus appears to be that Walpole should be honoured not for what he achieved in Otranto, but rather for what he instigated others to perform’ (1927: 23).

Section I ii) Gothic Fiction: The Mysteries of Udolpho and Charlie Cheesegrater
After Walpole, the next innovator of the gothic form was Ann Radcliffe, called by Sir Walter Scott ‘the first poetess of romantic fiction’. In her series of novels beginning with The Romance of the Forest (1791) and in particular her masterpieces The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and The Italian (1798), she has been credited with assuming the gothic mantle after Walpole and further popularising and developing the genre. The Mysteries of Udolpho, hereafter referred to as Udolpho, is generally considered to be the most representative of her
fiction and is consequently the ‘most widely read and highly respected’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 75) of her oeuvre.

*Udolpho* tells of Emily, the heroine of the novel, who, because of the death of her father St Aubert, falls into the clutches of her aunt, who marries a villainous figure named Montoni. Montoni, an unfaithful and oppressive tyrant, takes Emily and her aunt to live near Venice, in the castle. Emily manages to escape the castle after her aunt’s death, and the action of the novel shifts to Chateau le Blanc, where Emily makes a series of discoveries regarding the haunted chamber of a marchioness who died twenty years before Emily.

The novel’s richness of atmosphere and melancholy cannot be adequately conveyed by a mere plot summary. Mrs Radcliffe employs all of Walpole’s techniques, retaining the tradition including ‘setting the novel in a distant time...descriptions of the haunted castle, and increased attention to the ritual attending the mysterious castle’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 77). However, Radcliffe is important for more than her gothic machinery. Her advancements in gothic fiction, and the English novel, lay not in plotting or in use of the familiar creaking doors and twisted tyrants, but in introducing something entirely new to fiction at the time. Varma states that Radcliffe ‘by her insight into the workings of fear... contributed to the development of the psychological novel’ (1957: 107), and even credits her with being ‘perhaps the first English novelist to dissect human motives in characters’ (1957: 107). Radcliffe also created finely wrought suspenseful tales, and it is this feature, her ability to sustain a suspenseful or ‘terror-inspiring’ mood that does not descend into outright horror, that is perhaps her most significant contribution not only to gothic fiction but fiction in general (MacAndrew, 1979: 85).

*Charlie Cheesegrater* does not bear as direct a line of influence to Radcliffe as to Walpole. However, one scene in the novel bears a resemblance to Radcliffe’s style and in particular the creation of tension and suspense. After Charlie has witnessed the creation of the Grey Draggoths and they have engaged the gloombeasts in battle, Charlie falls off or is thrown from Begbie’s back, finding the Spider smashed into a ridge of rock. Thinking that Eldritch may be inside the crushed Spider, Charlie decides to risk entering it. Once inside, he finds it deserted:

A long, dark corridor stretched before him. Cracks in the darkness came from the dull, dying light of nearly burnt-out torches on the walls. The torches were kept in cases of deep red glass, which cast a swampy red pall in the corridor. Charlie reached up and plucked the best torch from its sconce. Holding it before
him, the pale streaks of light revealed that the walls, ceiling and floor were ribbed as if with bones. It was like staring down into the ribcage of some monstrous beast. (Engin: 116)

Like Emily in Udolpho, wandering through the labyrinthine corridors of Chateau le Blanc, Charlie journeys into the Spider, and his progress is fraught with Radcliffian suspense, which builds gradually through description. However, when Charlie discovers that Nefandous is in fact being attacked by the puppets he had once abused (‘They were above him, too, in the rafters, and they came shimmying down a rope after him, tearing at his bald pate with their claws’ Engin: 116), and he realises that there would be no escape for him, the suspense turns to outright horror. Where Radcliffe creates suspense but does not, in MacAndrew’s words, descend into horror, Charlie Cheesegrater happily ‘takes the plunge’.

The fiction of Ann Radcliffe brought a new refinement to Walpole’s often crude creation in The Castle of Otranto. If Mrs Radcliffe could be called by 18th century critic Nathan Drake the ‘Shakespeare of Gothic fiction’, introducing a ‘new sense of purpose to the novel’ that included a more ‘fully developed narrative technique’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 74), then Matthew Lewis, author of The Monk, might be said to advance the gothic novel in other, less ‘enchanting’ forms.

Section I iii) Gothic Fiction: The Monk and Charlie Cheesegrater

Matthew Lewis (1775-1855) wrote The Monk (1796) with his predecessors Walpole and Radcliffe very much in mind. While the novel was in its early stages, the nineteen year old declared that he was writing a novel ‘in the style of the Castle of Otranto’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 111). However, in his novel Lewis conjures scenes and subject matter that would have shocked both of his antecedents. Indeed, the differences between Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis have been aptly described by Michael Sadleir:

‘The Radcliffians are like persons who sit about a blazing fire on a stormy night...Into the firelit refuge of the Radcliffian novelist the follower of Lewis would fain intrude, haggard, and with water streaming from his lank hair, shrieking, perhaps, as would befit a demon of the storm; then, when he had struck the company to silent fear, he would wish to vanish again into the howling darkness’ (Varma, 1957:130).
Upon its publication *The Monk* became instantly infamous, along with its author, prompting Lord Byron to remark that Lewis ‘awoke one morning to find himself infamous’ (MacAndrew, 1979: 113). This wild, fast-moving and oft-lurid story treats of Ambrosio, an abbot of a Capuchin monastery at Madrid, who is renowned for his piety. At the monastery Ambrosio discovers that his erstwhile favourite novice is in fact a girl, with whom he reluctantly succumbs into temptation. This sends Ambrosio off on a rampage of evil, involving himself in sorcery, matricide, rape, incest, and murder. In particular he uses sorcery to bewitch a new favourite, fifteen year old Antonia, so that he can indulge in pleasures of the flesh. By novel’s end, the scheming and fornicating monk is caught, plunged into a vault of the Inquisition, but just as he is about to burned at the stake, Ambrosio makes a pact with the devil, who hurls him down a mountainside to his death. The rest of the novel (a further one-third) is taken up with a subplot that need not be discussed here.

In Lewis, gone are the well-known elements of gothic machinery (flickering candles, haunted chambers/castles, etc), replaced with a new set: stalking spectres, devils, evil spirits, sorcerers and demons, magic mirrors, enchanted wands, phosphorescent glow and other elements associated with black magic (Varma, 1957: 143). It is the ‘pitiless accumulation of gross, incidental detail [that] is different’ from the somewhat genteel terror of Walpole and Radcliffe (Varma, 1957: 145). Varma states that Lewis ‘carries his technique to its extreme form...his incidents come in quick kaleidoscopic succession, like the disjointed phases of a delirium or nightmare’ (1957:145). One example of Lewis’ style, taken from the novel itself, describing the fate of Ambrosio, will suffice:

Myriads of insects were called forth by the warmth; they drank the blood which trickled from Ambrosio’s wounds; he had no power to drive them from him, and they fastened upon his sores, darting their stings into his body, covered him with their multitudes, and inflicted upon him tortures of the most exquisite and insupportable. The eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal, and dug out his eyeballs with their crooked beaks. (Lewis, 2006: 255)

While his predecessors would have recoiled from detailing such horrors, Lewis seems to revel in it. The result is that Lewis’ story and prose style entrances and repels the reader in equal measures.

*Charlie Cheesegrater* (like nearly all horror stories) attempts much the same feat, both to repel and engage, and even transport the reader. Perhaps the most salient example of
this desire to repel and engage occurs early in the novel when Charlie is being tortured by Slupp on the rack. The harrowing scene is described in Lewis-like fashion, with the author seeming to revel in the details and the general awfulness of the action. The scene takes place in the dungeon (another borrowing from the machinery of gothic fiction), which is described in some detail:

   He had seen the Dungeon all too many times, in reality and in his nightmares - the bare, black walls, and the mysterious charts, globes and old tattered books; the skeletons in the upright coffins; and worst of all, Lady Slupp’s Experimenting Table, a long rickety structure laden with black tapers, operating instruments, and, worst of all, a frightening apparatus of tubes and bottles and burbling potions that she would pore over after she had finished her experiments, while Charlie lay groaning on the Rack. (Engin: pg 16)

Charlie is handled brutally by Slupp, and even though he begs Slupp not to torture him, Slupp answers with ‘I like the sound o’ yer beggin’, Cheesegra’er, music to my ears, it be’ (Engin: 16). Charlie’s confinement is similarly horrible:

   Charlie’s arms were raised above his head and pinned down to the Rack. Then his feet were yanked until he thought they would come off. His stomach was as tight as a drum. Straps were pulled across his body, which was torture enough - their coarse leather bit into his ribs as if studded with razor-sharp teeth. (Engin: 17).

The terrible scene has many effects. It both repels and engages the reader, who perhaps wonders how far this torture is going to go, and keeps reading to find out. The scene also serves to highlight Charlie’s bravery. No matter how much Slupp tortures him on the rack, Charlie does not reveal that it was the White Sage’s Messenger who has come to rescue him. Charlie’s bravery is important to establish, for without seeing some elements of a hero in Charlie it would be difficult to develop interest or sympathy in the reader for his plight. The violent nature of the scene also illustrates that Charlie’s predicament at Castle Slupp is deadly serious. The torture he undergoes here must be drastic for it to haunt him and the reader for the rest of the novel.

*Charlie Cheesegrater*, then, might be said to include *The Monk’s* feature of attempting to both repel and engage the reader. The gothic tradition, begun by Walpole, and
extended and refined most notably by Radcliffe and Lewis, culminated in the work of Robert Maturin.

Section 1 iv) Gothic Fiction: Melmoth the Wanderer and Charlie Cheesegrater
Robert Maturin was an Irish clergyman who exorcised his personal demons by drinking brandy late into the night and writing tales of horror. His most remarkable and memorable novel, and perhaps the last and greatest of the early gothic masterpieces, is Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). The novel is a series of intricate tales strung together by the presence of Melmoth, an omnipresent, demonic figure, who has sold his soul in return for immortality. Melmoth is described by Maturin as a shadowy figure whose eyes shine with a hellish brilliancy and a mouth that breaks into an evil, Byronic smile. A misanthrope, he wanders the earth in search of sufferers who are willing to exchange fates with him. Through Melmoth, Maturin seizes the opportunity to create scenes of terrible suffering, in particular the suffering of a man at the hands of the Inquisition and wicked monks in a monastery. However, through Melmoth Maturin also confirms his own faith and his faith in human integrity, because no one sufferer in the novel agrees to change places with him.

In terms of his content and technique, the poetic style of Radcliffe and the lurid horror of Lewis are, in Varma’s words, ‘fused in Maturin’ (1957: 160). Maturin employs a mysterious portrait, decaying parchment, ruins, storms, the Inquisition, convent cells, idyllic nature, and entombed lovers, and thus falls squarely in the gothic tradition. However, there is more in Maturin than just the synthesis of two different talents. Maturin’s province, in which he excelled both Radcliffe and Lewis, was the creation of a horrifying realism, and the detailing of psychological suffering, or the torment of the mind. The passages of the novel that deal with the unjust imprisonment of a young man in a monastic cell are masterpieces of moral horror. The reader is appalled not only by the conditions of his imprisonment, but by the suffering caused him by the abuse of his brothers in the monastery:

The next moment I was chained to my chair again – the fires were lit, the bells rang out, the litanies were sung; - my feet were scorched to a cinder – my muscles cracked, my blood and marrow hissed, my flesh consumed like shrinking leather, - the bones of my legs hung two black withering and moveless sticks in the ascending blaze; - it ascended, caught my hair, - I was crowned with fire, - I closed it, the fire was within, ...and we burned and burned! I was a cinder body and soul in my dream. (Varma, 1957: 168)
This is but one example of Maturin’s prose, which can be remarkably gentle, or rise to a fever pitch as the occasion demands. In general, Maturin’s novel is ‘distinguished by a powerful eloquence of style, and his dignified and stately language is in tune with the grandeur and sublimity of his theme (MacAndrew, 1979: 66). Maturin also has ‘a much deeper, clearer, and more organised vision of the place of evil and horror in the world than his predecessors, and Melmoth of all novels of horror comes nearest to artistic greatness’ (Varma, 1957: 166).

Charlie Cheesegrater strives to achieve the kind of blend of realism and supernaturalism that characterises Melmoth The Wanderer. The aforementioned ‘torture scene’, in which Charlie is stretched on the rack by Slupp, can be characterised as a scene of moral horror, similar to that found again and again in Maturin. The scene is rendered with a brutal and unforgiving realism that causes the reader to feel outrage over what clearly is a morally reprehensible act perpetrated by an aggressor upon an innocent victim. Thus Charlie Cheesegrater, in this scene and in others, strives to achieve a horrible realism equal to that found in Maturin. Also, the novel attempts to include gentle passages that are also a feature of Maturin’s style. These scenes generally occur between Charlie and Eldritch, the two main characters. After she has rescued Charlie from the Beastmen, Eldritch comes to inform Charlie that the puppeteers intend to take him back to Castle Slupp. The style of this scene, coming after the action of the rescue, is calm and intimate:

They sat by the door, hand-in-hand, watching the pale fire of the gloomlight surge into the room.

He had never really been this close to her before. Looking at her extraordinary face, he could see faint lines spiralling and curving under the cloth-like surface. There were hundreds, thousands even, more, it seemed, than there were age-lines in the grain of a tree. Every picture that she had ever drawn, Charlie realised, seemed captured there forever in faint layers under the surface.

Charlie could not help himself. He reached up a pale thin hand and gently stroked Eldritch’s cheek with a finger. Her face was as beautifully soft and smooth as silk. Charlie’s finger made a gentle indentation in the mysterious fabric of her face, and nothing more. (Engin: 78)

Gentle scenes such as the one between Eldritch and Charlie above serve several purposes. Firstly, they provide a contrast with previous faster paced scenes, adding variety to
the novel. More importantly, they provide a moral heart to the story and some much-needed warmth in what might otherwise be a very bleak story and reading experience. Were these scenes not present, the reader might feel that the Welkin of Gloom is simply too horrible to bother with. Charlie’s tender relationship with Eldritch, based upon loyalty and kindness, might be an idealistic one, but it engenders a sense of hope in the reader. The scenes between them indicate to the reader that in the uncertain world presented in the story, the reader may find security by putting his/her faith in the main characters, who provide the story’s moral foundation.

Charlie Cheesegrater’s gothic roots have been demonstrated by examining a selection of salient texts written by Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis, and Maturin and by tracing the similarities in points of style and content between the novel and gothic fiction. By doing so, a traditional heritage has been created for Charlie Cheesegrater.

However, Charlie Cheesegrater, being a blend of many genres, is not a slavish imitation of the great texts of the gothic era. The weird modernist fiction of H.P. Lovecraft has also been a profound influence on the novel. Lovecraft’s fiction will be explored with the aim of framing Charlie Cheesegrater in another tradition. More importantly, it will be shown that Charlie Cheesegrater makes significant departures from Lovecraft’s work by rejecting and/or reshaping some of his common themes, highlighting the fact that the novel is a synthesis of the traditional and the modern.

Section II: Weird Fiction: H.P. Lovecraft

H.P. Lovecraft has been called by E.F. Bleiler ‘the most important American supernaturalist since Poe’ (Lovecraft, 1973: 3). The praise from these and other authors stems not only from a recognition of Lovecraft’s own unique and studied theories of weird/horror fiction, and the excellence of his tales, but from a recognition of his importance as a seminal figure, along with Poe, in the transition from traditional gothic horror, as outlined above, to a more modern form.

In 1829, William Hazlitt, referring to Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland (1798), an attempt to bring the Gothic novel to the newly minted USA, stated ‘no ghost, we will venture to say, was ever seen in North America’ (Joshi, 1996: 29). Hazlitt’s quote makes evident the fact that the gothic novel, perhaps even in Europe, had been ‘played out’, and seems to suggest that something new must emerge. Edgar Allan Poe, with his short, nightmarish tales such as ‘The Black Cat’ and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’, amongst others, and their emphasis on psychological horror, would provide this new American form. Fellow American Ambrose
Bierce (1842-1914), and on the Old Continent, writers such as Arthur Machen (1863-1947), M.R. James (1862-1936), Lord Dunsany (1878-1957) and Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951), all recast and expanded the gothic variously with their finely wrought new fiction.

Lovecraft admired, was influenced by, and built upon all the achievements of the aforementioned authors. Perhaps the briefest and most effective way of exploring Lovecraft’s fiction, and Charlie Cheesegrater’s close relationship to it, is to examine one of Lovecraft’s best known short stories, ‘The Outsider’.

Section II Weird Fiction: H.P. Lovecraft i) The Outsider and Charlie Cheesegrater

Published in 1926 in the famous pulp magazine of horror and fantasy fiction, Weird Tales, ‘The Outsider’ tells of a young man who has spent his whole life alone in a decaying castle, surrounded by gloom, a ‘putrid moat’ and ‘dark mute trees’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 108). He decides one day to forsake the castle and try to find the light by climbing its highest tower, vowing that ‘it were better to glimpse the sky and perish, than to live without ever beholding day’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 108). The young man succeeds, reaching the pinnacle. Upon removing a grate, expecting it to open into an enthralling vista, the young man finds that the castle’s highest tower only brings him to ‘solid ground, decked and diversified by marble slabs and columns, and overshadowed by an ancient stone church, whose ruined spire gleamed spectrally in the moonlight’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 110). The young man continues undaunted, travelling a while in the new-found land, coming upon yet another ancient castle where many fine ladies and gentlemen are gathered. The young man steps through an open window and sees looks of terror suddenly come over the faces of the fine ladies and gentlemen of the castle. The looks baffle the young man until he sees ‘in full frightful vividness the inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 112) that has terrified everyone. The last line of the story reveals the identity of the horror, which is the young man himself: ‘I stretched out my fingers to the abomination...stretched out my fingers and touched a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 113).

‘The Outsider’ has become very well-known over the years, being one of Lovecraft’s most anthologized tales. However Lovecraft himself thought that the tale ‘is almost comic in the bombastic pomposity of its language’ and represents his (perhaps not so) ‘unconscious imitation of Poe at its height’ (Joshi, 1996: 254-255). Lovecraft’s own aspersions did not stop ‘The Outsider’ from becoming a signature story, a fictional representation of what many have assumed was Lovecraft’s personal, reclusive situation: a man alien to the times he lived
in, an eternal ‘outsider’. Lovecraft himself remarked, late in his life, ‘I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men’ (Joshi, 1996: 254). Indeed, the tale’s ending, where the young man realises the horror of his own self, or the manner of his existence, is a theme that typifies much of Lovecraft’s work. S.T. Joshi, the world’s foremost Lovecraft scholar and biographer, includes in his *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life*, an observation made by fellow Lovecraft scholar Donald R. Burleson on the topic of ‘The Outsider’:

> The rotting finger that touches the glass sets ringing a vibration that will endure, will continue to resonate in varying pitches and intensities, throughout the whole experience of Lovecraft’s fiction...the grand theme of the soul-shattering consequences of self-knowledge is the one defining notion into which Lovecraft’s other themes feed in confluence, rivers running to a common sea (Joshi, 1996: 253)

Gone are the ghosts and evil tyrants and many other trappings of the gothic, replaced by the horror of the self. With this theme, Lovecraft perhaps weighs in with Franz Kafka and other modern writers of the weird or surreal.

Lovecraft’s main theme, the horror of the self, can be found in *Charlie Cheesegrater*. Charlie frequently remarks upon his own supposed ‘hideousness’. So conscious is he of the horror of his self and, in particular his teeth, that when Eldritch runs away after having seen his teeth for the first time, it is his ugliness that he blames. This is quite ironic because Charlie, being unmarred, is certainly not hideous, at least not when compared with the Slupps or the puppeteers. The Beastmen, the puppeteers, the Slupps – in particular Lady Slupp – are all horrified by what is happening to their bodies as they ‘Turn’, and hate Charlie because he is not ‘Turning’. Charlie comes to re-evaluate his own self, and could be said to move from horror of his self to a position more like wonder. He is amazed, even frightened, by the revelation that he can control the gloomlight, and that magic exists within him. *Charlie Cheesegrater*, it could be said, pays homage to Lovecraft’s theme of the horror of the self, rejects it, and expands upon it.

*Charlie Cheesegrater* and ‘The Outsider’ are companions in more than theme; they are siblings in technique and content. This close relationship is particularly evident in the following paragraph taken from ‘The Outsider’:

> I know not where I was born, save that the castle was infinitely old and infinitely horrible, full of dark passages and high ceilings where the eye could
find only cobwebs and shadows. The stones in the crumbling corridors seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up corpses of dead generations. It was never light, so that I used sometimes to light candles and gaze steadily at them for relief, nor was there any sun outdoors, since the terrible trees grew high above the topmost accessible tower...I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time. (Lovecraft, 1971: 180)

This passage might have been written by Charlie himself. It describes his predicament at the novel’s outset, Castle Slupp, and, by referring to the lack of light, also describes the shadowy Welkin of Gloom. Moreover, the above quote actually appears at the beginning of Charlie Cheeseegrater for a number of reasons. Primarily it is there as an acknowledgement of the debt owed by the writer to Lovecraft; but more importantly the quotation, with its sombre phrasing and heightened register, sets the atmospheric tone for the novel, which will have much to do with gloom and light and dark and use a similar phrasing and heightened language to express them. Lastly, the quote may serve to put the reader in the correct state of mind for the proper enjoyment of the novel. Charlie Cheeseegrater makes a direct reference to ‘The Outsider’ by making Charlie’s favourite tale in his Book (The Grim War) a story about a boy who lives in a world of gloom. In the novel’s closing pages, Charlie remembers the story, and wonders whether, like the boy, he might finally reach ‘the light’.

Section II Weird Fiction: H.P. Lovecraft ii) The Shadow Over Innsmouth and Charlie Cheeseegrater

Another Lovecraftian theme, perhaps related to the horror of the self, is the horror of racial degeneration or miscegenation. This peculiar brand of horror stems from Lovecraft’s own regrettable, virulent racism. While Lovecraft’s letters are the product of a mild, well-read and gentlemanly individual, they are marred by many embarrassing and hateful diatribes against cultures other than his own. Until the end of his days, Lovecraft maintained a belief in the ‘biological inferiority of blacks’ (Joshi, 1996: 586) and ‘advocated an absolutely rigid colour line against intermarriage between blacks and whites, so as to guard against miscegenation’ (Joshi, 1996: 586). Evidence of such beliefs crept inevitably into his fiction, and perhaps the foremost example of the horror of miscegenation can be found in his masterful novella, The Shadow Over Innsmouth (1931).
The Shadow Over Innsmouth tells the story of a young man, Robert Olmstead, who celebrates his coming of age by taking a tour of New England. Olmstead takes a discounted fare and finds himself in Innsmouth, a once-thriving coastal town that has fallen into decrepitude. The oppressive atmosphere of the decaying town and its strange ‘fishlike’ inhabitants repulse Olmstead. He decides to leave, but not before finding out from a derelict that the inhabitants of Innsmouth have been mating with ‘fish-frog’ creatures from the sea, which gives them fishlike qualities and a type of immortality: they will eventually return to the sea and live in the Deep forever. The ultimate horror comes for Olmstead when he learns that he is a direct descendant of an Innsmouth family, and the fishlike ‘change’ begins to overtake him.

The Shadow Over Innsmouth is successful on many counts. Lovecraft’s descriptions of both the decay of the town and its bizarre inhabitants are vivid and horrify the reader. They also overpower the reader’s aversion to the tale’s preposterous subject. Lovecraft’s description of Olmstead’s bus driver seems to encapsulate the whole tale and its purpose. The driver repulses Olmstead with his ‘dull, expressionless face’ and ‘bulging, watery blue eyes that never seem to wink’ and his fishy smell (Lovecraft, 1971: 126). But it is not simply his appearance that is repulsive; it is the fact that he is an example of degeneration or miscegenation that is truly horrific. Lovecraft makes this abundantly clear when he has Olmstead remark ‘Just what foreign blood was in him I could not even guess...yet I could see why the people found him alien...I myself would have thought of biological degeneration...’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 126). For much of the tale Lovecraft builds horror masterfully by providing only oblique hints at the fish people’s deformities. However, near the end of the tale Lovecraft delineates their physical horrors in detail and with Lovecraftian prose and bombast in full flower:

And yet I saw them in a limitless stream – flopping, hopping, croaking, bleating – surging inhumanly through the spectral moonlight...they were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaguely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish...and at the sides of their necks were palpitating gills... (Lovecraft, 1971: 175)

The description continues, reaching a fever pitch that recalls Lewis and Maturin, yet it is the statement by Olmstead – ‘yet for all their monstrousness they were not unfamiliar to me’
(Lovecraft, 1971: 176) – that is crucial for the story. For all their fishlike qualities, the creatures are still demonstrably human.

The Shadow Over Innsmouth occupies a special place within Lovecraft’s oeuvre. Though Lovecraft himself did not value it, thinking the tale ‘full of the defects I deplore – where hackneyed phrases and rhythms have crept in despite all precautions’ (Joshi, 1996: 500) many critics and Lovecraft scholars have ventured opinions as to the success of the story. August Derleth, a contemporary of Lovecraft’s, praises it for being ‘typical of Lovecraft at his best’ and for ‘the powerful hold it has upon the imagination of readers’ (Carter, 1972: 83). However it is Lovecraft’s biographer, ST Joshi, who offers the most insightful commentary. For Joshi The Shadow Over Innsmouth is ‘Lovecraft’s greatest tale of degeneration’ and ‘a cautionary tale on the ill effects of miscegenation’ (1996: 498). Yet despite these racist currents running through the story, for Joshi Shadow represents a triumph for Lovecraft. The author, he states, ‘never achieved a greater atmosphere of insidious decay’, or a shattering conclusion that ‘simultaneously focuses on the pitiable fate of a single human and hints...at the destruction of the entire human race’ (1996: 500). For Joshi, all of Lovecraft’s themes are present: ‘The cosmic and the local, the past and the present, the internal and the external, and self and the other are all fused into inextricable unity (1996: 500).

As we have seen, Charlie Cheesegrater makes use of Lovecraft’s theme of the horror of the self. While there is no racist undercurrent in Charlie Cheesegrater, the novel nevertheless uses the theme of the horror of degeneration. It is seen most prominently in the idea of ‘The Turning’, which corrupts people, gradually turning them into Beasts, both physically and psychologically. People can also change from Beastmen into automaton-like beings called the Lost, after which there is no return to full ‘humanity’. Only eating in great quantities seems to retard this inevitable degradation.

Beastmen are creatures described at some length in various places in the novel, but it is when Charlie is wheeled out by the puppeteers for his first showing that Charlie (and thus the reader) makes his first prolonged contact with them. Like Lovecraft’s fish people, they display a half-human, half-beast like physical appearance that initially repulses Charlie:

The Beastman was missing a foot – it seemed to have been torn off, leaving a bloodied stump, which it dragged across the ground as it shuffled toward Charlie’s cage. It wore breeches and a vest, and its two arms snaked through the holes. The arms seemed to end in claws, like a shellfish’s snappers, which the Beastman raised as it crept toward Charlie. (Engin: 47)
But, as in Lovecraft, the essential humanity of the Beastmen is made manifestly clear. Charlie realises that the Beastman he has encountered does not have snappers, but ‘hands, hands that had been gnarled, hardened and misshapen until the fingers seemed melded together into a pointed, curved lump (Engin: 47). Charlie sees also that the Beastman’s ‘face was still human’ and when he looks into its eyes he sees that they ‘were not like the inscrutable eyes of a beast. They were the eyes of a person. (Engin: 47).

Charlie’s realisation is a key one, and it represents a point of separation between Charlie Cheesegrater and The Shadow Over Innsmouth. Unlike Olmstead, who feels nothing but horror at the appearance of the fishlike people, Charlie’s realisation that Beastmen are (or were once) people causes him to feel enormous pity. He even wonders what they were like before the Turning had come upon them. Charlie is also reminded by Eldritch that the puppeteers, for all their cruelty, had once been different, before the Turn had come upon them. Charlie even makes a similar realisation concerning Slupp and Lady Slupp, his chief tormentors.

When Slupp makes his frightful return appearance late in the novel, he is hobbling on a peg leg and suffering the heightened effects of the Turn, having been bitten by a draggoth. Charlie tells his uncle that he knows that Slupp and Lady Slupp lied to him, that the Grey Sage made his teeth, and that his aunt and uncle were experimenting on him to extract his power over the gloomlight and the Turning. Slupp’s reply startles Charlie:

‘Can ye blame us?’ he said. ‘Can ye blame us for not wantin’ to be like them!’
Slupp pointed at the Lost, who shuffled and stamped senselessly before the wagon.
‘Ye don’t know what it’s like,’ shouted Slupp, ‘to feel it workin’ on ye, the Turnin’!’
Charlie swallowed. He had not been expecting this.
‘If ye did, ye’d do anythin’ – anythin’ – to stop it.’
Slupp glared at Charlie, his face scrunched into a grimace of hatred.
(Engin: 126)

Because of this exchange, and because of his experiences with the Beastmen and the puppeteers, Charlie (and thus the reader) better understands the Slupps and their motivations;
though, in the case of the Slupps, he is unable to ‘find any sympathy...there had been too many beatings, too much of the knout, too much hate’ (Engin: 126).

These realisations serve many purposes in the novel. Charlie’s pity towards the Beastmen, the puppeteers, and the Slupps serves to reject Lovecraft’s horror of degeneration. While the aforementioned characters are loathsome and even repulsive, Charlie understands that their degeneration into beast-like forms and behaviour has not been made by choice, unlike the inhabitants of Innsmouth, who have brought their evil fate upon themselves. Rather, Charlie understands that the Turn is an inescapable fate, caused by the Clash between the White and Black Sages, and shared by all creatures in the Welkin of Gloom. Thus, it is not an easy matter for Charlie to parcel out blame to his various tormentors. Instead, faced with the knowledge of the Clash and the Turn, and his own unique personal situation of immunity to the Turn and its effects, he adopts a near philosophical acceptance of his fate as ‘gloombreaker’, though he does not fully understand what it may entail. This acceptance is part of his development as the novel’s hero.

Charlie’s realisations also serve to reject common notions of good and evil, resulting in a much more complex and nuanced novel. The author has attempted to show that the ‘evil’ characters – Slupp, Lady Slupp, the puppeteers – are motivated by self-preservation, rather than pure evil. As Slupp’s response to Charlie’s questions above show, their ‘evil’ stems from their fear of the terrible effects of the Turn. Similarly, their hatred of Charlie arises from jealousy of his ‘unmarred’ status. This point is made clear in an exchange between Charlie and Gibbous before a Showing:

‘Kill it dead, I will, if I get a chance. And you too, Unmarred.’
‘Why?’ Charlie asked. ‘What have I ever done to you?’
A strange look came over Gibbous’ ugly face. ‘We’re all changin’, turnin’,’ he said, ‘because of the gloomlight. Eatin’ usually helps, keeps us from turnin’ too quick. But ever since that thing bit me, I feel like I’m turnin’ even faster, no matter how much I eat. But you’re not. You’re Unmarred. And it ain’t fair!’
(Engin: 45).

The Slupps, the puppeteers and their torture of Charlie are somehow understandable, though not acceptable. Perhaps the author’s intention is to suggest that faced with a world such as the Welkin of Gloom, the reader may also ‘do anything’ for self-preservation. The author
seems to suggest that humanity, given certain life-threatening circumstances, is capable of anything, and that this is neither good nor evil, but simply a fact.

*Charlie Cheesegrater’s* rejection of good and evil is also seen in the novel’s ‘colour-coding’. The gloombeasts are white, and the draggoths black, but it is not entirely clear which is ‘evil’ and which ‘good’. When Begbie expires, Charlie considers these notions of good and evil, ultimately rejecting them: ‘Looking at the draggoth, he realised that he did not know what good and evil really were (Engin: 120). This rejection of traditional notions of good and evil perhaps risks alienating or confusing the reader, and especially younger readers, because it reverses or frustrates expectations of having clear distinctions made between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’. The matter may be further complicated by the novel’s inclusion of ‘the grey’ into the colour scheme. Begbie is a grey draggoth, and at the novel’s end Charlie and Eldritch are taken away to see the Grey Sage. Charlie and the reader are not entirely certain who the Grey Sage is and how he might be different from the White and Black Sages, who caused the Clash. However, in an exchange between Begbie and Charlie, the draggoth provides some clues as to the Grey Sage and his intentions:

> Charlie was suspicious. The draggoth must be lying, he thought.
> ‘I’ve never heard of the Grey Sage,’ he said.
> ‘...grey Sage...destroy gloomlight...black and white Sages...control gloomlight...use it...for war...take you to grey Sage...magic...his magic ...inside you...kept you pure...uncorrupted...power to destroy gloomlight...destroy good...destroy evil...’

(Engin: 95)

Begbie indicates that the Grey Sage is different from the Black and White Sages because, unlike them, he does not want to use Charlie to control the gloomlight; he wants to destroy it. Thus, the Grey Sage may be something beyond basic good and evil, beyond ‘white’ and ‘black’. His magic is within Charlie and Eldritch, preserving them from the Turn, and allowing them to use or control the gloomlight. Even the gloomlight itself is perhaps not fully evil. It swirls in Charlie’s and Eldritch’s teeth, and they can control it; it seems to be within them. Charlie and thus the reader are left feeling uncertain by the novel’s end. The Slupps have been defeated, but the fates of Charlie and Eldritch, and the fate of the Welkin of Gloom, are as uncertain as ever.
Section II Weird Fiction: H.P. Lovecraft iii) Cosmic Horror, *At the Mountains of Madness*  
and *Charlie Cheesegrater*

In addition to the horror of the self and the horror of degeneration, *Charlie Cheesegrater* is also indebted to another of Lovecraft’s most prominent themes, that of cosmic terror. In his *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, one of the earliest and most penetrating essays on weird fiction, Lovecraft opens his discussion of the weird with the now famous line, ‘The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’ (Lovecraft, 1973: 12). Lovecraft would further elucidate the concept of cosmic terror frequently in his letters. Writing to fellow American fantastiste Clark Ashton Smith in 1930, Lovecraft provided the following remarks concerning his theory of weird fiction, written in typically Lovecraftian prose:

> The true function of phantasy is to give the imagination a ground for limitless expansion, and to satisfy aesthetically the sincere and burning curiosity and sense of awe...toward the alluring and provocative abysses of unplumbed space and unguessed entity which press in upon the known world from unknown infinities and in unknown relationships of time, space, matter, force, dimensionality, and consciousness. (Joshi and Schultz, 2000: 213)

In addition to the sense of awe and curiosity brought about by contemplating and being terrified by the vastness of the universe, Lovecraft’s theory of cosmic terror included a view of mankind that was the opposite of anthropocentric. In a 1927 letter to Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft stated that ‘all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws...have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large’, and that ‘one must forget such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate and all such [things] attributed to a negligible and temporary race called mankind’ (Joshi and Schultz, 2000: 209). Lovecraft evolved his theory of cosmic terror in part as a reaction to the type of tale often appearing in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* that, in Lovecraft’s opinion, featured ‘thoroughly conventional human values and motives’ (Joshi and Schultz, 2000: 209), and that were, for Lovecraft, simply too terrestrial in their conception and execution. A show or work like *Star Trek*, for example, would have outraged Lovecraft. Doubtless he would not have been able to accept that the crew’s engagement with alien life served, to a large extent, as a pretext or excuse for the show’s writers or producers to indulge in social commentary, to say nothing of the matter of aliens speaking English. At the very least, Lovecraft would have dismissed the show and its entire conception as puerile.
However, Lovecraft was a contradictory individual. The development of his theory of weird fiction and cosmic terror coincided with his most famous tale-cycle – the Cthulhu Mythos. Consisting of ten or so of his most artistically realised and substantial tales, the Cthulhu Mythos (sometimes called the Arkham Cycle) was a loose association of stories linked by a common ‘realistic’ backdrop in fictional Arkham, Massachusetts, and featuring terrifying appearances of forces from ‘beyond the stars’ that threaten mankind’s very existence. Central to the Mythos is a pantheon of ‘Old Ones’ (Cthulhu being one, Yog-Sothoth another) who once ruled the earth and who would return again, ‘when the stars are right’, to enslave or eradicate mankind. Lovecraft admitted that this conception (which he often termed ‘Yog-Sothothery’) was also puerile: ‘I really agree that Yog-Sothoth is a basically immature concept, and unfitted for serious literature’ (Joshi and Schultz, 2000: 257). But what prevented the concept from total puerility was the fact that Lovecraft’s aliens were completely alien, in form and execution, and wanted nothing whatsoever to do with humanity. The Cthulhu Mythos, or Yog-Sothothery has become Lovecraft’s main contribution, if not to literature proper, then at least to the literature of the weird and horrific.

One of the most useful examples of the Mythos and Lovecraft’s theory of cosmic terror at work can be found in his short novel, *At The Mountains Of Madness* (1931). In this complex and multi-layered short novel, called by ST Joshi ‘the greatest of Lovecraft’s attempts to fuse weird fiction and science fiction’ (Joshi, 1996: 357), a team of scientists voyage to the Antarctica to investigate the disappearance of a previous mission. To their astonishment they discover a towering lost civilisation belonging to the Old Ones, who ruled earth tens of millions of years before the appearance of humankind. The horror of the tale rests upon the scientists’ realisation of the insignificance of human civilisation in comparison to that of another, perhaps even superior, antecedent race. Interestingly, the alien Old Ones in *At The Mountains of Madness* are not creatures of evil, to be feared and loathed, as they are usually portrayed in Lovecraft’s stories. Instead, they are treated with sympathy, and Lovecraft even has one of his scientists write the extraordinary line, ‘Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn – whatever they had been, they were men!’ (Lovecraft, 1971: 255).

*Charlie Cheesegrater* also attempts a kind of cosmic horror, though one of a different hue from Lovecraft’s. There are no Old Ones in *Charlie Cheesegrater*, and consequently the Welkin of Gloom is not threatened by forces from behind the stars. Nor does *Charlie Cheesegrater*’s horror rest upon a realisation or discovery of the insignificance of humanity’s position in relation to the vastness of space or to entities of inconceivable age and power. However, a kind of cosmic horror of an existential nature could be said to be working in
Charlie Cheesegrater. The novel’s horror lies in Charlie’s gradual realisations about himself and his place in the Welkin of Gloom. He realises that there are unseen forces - the Sages - working and controlling his life, and that these forces have also caused the destruction of the Welkin of Gloom, and are perhaps a threat to his very life. These realisations force Charlie to reconsider everything that he had believed, and been told, about his life and the world in it.

This is perhaps most profoundly illustrated in the novel when the nature and creator of Charlie’s teeth is finally revealed to him. Until that point Charlie believes that his teeth had been created by his Uncle Slupp:

Lord Slupp, who hated Charlie with a passion, told him that one day he had decided Charlie’s teeth were growing too straight, and so he set about making a set of special fittings out of some warped iron bars that would make sure Charlie’s teeth grew ‘crookeder and crookeder’, in his uncle’s words. When he had finished putting the special fittings on Charlie, Slupp clutched his enormous belly and howled with laughter. (Engin:2)

But after Charlie bares his teeth at the Beastmen, and Nefandous the puppeteer tells him that they are made of gloomlight, Charlie knows that his uncle has been lying to him: ‘Charlie was astounded. He had believed all his life that Slupp had been responsible for his ugly teeth.’ His wonder increases to outright shock when he discovers that Eldritch also has the teeth. This discovery leads both Charlie and Eldritch on a quest for their identity:

Come with me,’ he said. ‘We’ve been brought together to find out the truth about who we are, Eldritch. Finding out about our teeth - what they are, how we got them - will tell us who we are. And it might be important for the Welkin of Gloom itself. We might be able to…change it. (Engin:80-81).

Begbie the draggoth tells Charlie that it is the Grey Sage’s magic that allows him to control the gloomlight. But at the novel’s end, the Grey Sage writes rather cryptically in Charlie’s book, The Grim War, ‘You were hidden here, in the Castle. She, the one you hold, was lost. Deep magic stirs within you both; it drew you to one another. Only this magic can destroy the gloomlight. This magic is in your teeth’ (Engin: 155). The Sage does not state that the
power is in fact his (despite what Begbie has told Charlie earlier); thus Charlie and Eldritch’s histories and identities are ‘left hanging’.

Where a Lovecraftian anti-hero on a scientific quest might discover information that shatters not only his scientific knowledge but his also his sanity, Charlie Cheesegrater makes similar shattering discoveries that force him to reconsider all that he has known. Charlie keeps his sanity, though it is often tested to breaking point, but these discoveries send him on two quests: to destroy the gloomlight, and to find his (and Eldritch’s) true identity.

*Charlie Cheesegrater’s* deep indebtedness to Lovecraft and his fiction does not end with the examples cited above. The draggoths are based on shoggoths, Lovecraftian creatures created as slaves by the Old Ones in *At The Mountains of Madness*, but who evolve to overthrow their masters. The shoggoths have been changed in *Charlie Cheesegrater*, however, into draggoths, a type of ‘marred’ dragon. Kadath, the mountain where the draggoths in *Charlie Cheesegrater* originate, and the word ‘shantak’ – the birdcage - that visits Charlie and Eldritch and whisks them away at the end of the novel, have both been lifted from Lovecraft, who wrote a weird novel titled *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*. This pilfering of Lovecraft’s words and creations has been done deliberately by the author. Lovecraft himself frequently adopted the weird creations of his fellow writers (such as Tsathoggua, the furry toad god invented by Lovecraft correspondent Clark Ashton Smith) and encouraged others to use and build on his own creations.

*Charlie Cheesegrater’s* roots in gothic and weird fiction have been demonstrated. The novel’s relation to Lovecraft’s fiction and his themes of horror of the self, degeneration and cosmic horror, as well as the novel’s special relationship with ‘The Outsider’ have been explored. *Charlie Cheesegrater*, while firmly placed in the tradition of the gothic and in Lovecraft’s weird fiction, nevertheless expands or rejects themes commonly found in those genres, thereby creating a new synthesis of the traditional and the modern.

In addition to gothic and weird fiction, the novel might be said to have a third root, that of the tradition of the fantasy novel for children or young people. *Charlie Cheesegrater* should also be placed within this tradition to achieve a full understanding of the novel and its various contexts.

**Section III Fantasy Fiction**

**Section III Fantasy Fiction i) definition**

While it is easy to point to fantasies both old and new that have been composed primarily for young people and children (*Tolkien’s The Hobbit*, *Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia*, and, more
recently, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series) fantasy is a notoriously difficult and slippery concept to define. It has been described variously as a ‘literature of paradox’ and ‘the discovery of the real within the unreal, the credible within the incredible, and the believable within the unbelievable’ (Egoff, 1981: 80), or ‘like poetry, fantasy uses a metaphorical approach to the perception of universal truth’ (Smith, 1953: 140). For fantasy critic Ann Swinfen, fantasy is simply ‘the marvellous – anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world’ (Swinfen, 1984: 5). Rosemary Jackson writes that fantasy ‘traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent’ (Jackson, 1981: 4). Others, like E.M Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, describe fantasy as ‘like a sideshow in an exhibition where you pay sixpence as well as the original entrance fee’ (quoted in Bator, 1983: 242). By this Forster means that the reader of fiction, already subject to the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, must suspend his/her disbelief even more to enjoy or read fantasy fiction. American fantasist Ursula K Le Guin, author of the acclaimed *Earthsea* series, in her 1973 acceptance speech for receiving the National Book Award, comes to fantasy’s defence by stating that ‘at this point realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence’, and that ‘the fantasist, whether he uses... myth or legend...may be talking as seriously as any sociologist...about life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived (quoted in Heins, 1977: 169).

Section III Fantasy Fiction: ii) time and space and *Charlie Cheesegrater*

With regard to *Charlie Cheesegrater*, it is Egoff’s statement concerning finding the real within the unreal and Swinfen’s definition of the ‘marvellous’ that probably have the greatest application to the novel. The Welkin of Gloom is a fantastic creation where realistic notions of space and time do not exist: ‘The Welkin of Gloom had no moon or sun to mark the passage of time. There was only the gloomlight, ever swirling, ever grey, ever present’ (Engin: 57). The characters in the novel have no official means of telling time. When Charlie asks Eldritch how far they are from Castle Slupp, she replies only in terms of how many sleeps there may be between where the Spider is and their destination. Charlie’s attempt to keep time or a count of days by scratching ticks on the Castle walls is continually frustrated. Thus, Charlie has no idea how long he has been kept prisoner in the Castle. Whatever conception of and method of keeping time there may have been has been destroyed in the Clash.
This absence of time measurement has several effects. It signals to the reader that the Welkin is a very different place from our own world, and which exists according to its own rules (or lack thereof). The absence of time might also be said to heighten a sense of fear or wonder on the part of the reader, who is plunged headlong into a seemingly chaotic world without sun or moon or daylight or time. The absence of time in this chaotic world also evokes sympathy in the reader for Charlie’s plight. When he escapes from the Castle with Begbie and is left to journey through the nightmarish land, the reader feels the enormity of Charlie’s struggle and his vulnerability. He has no map, no markers, no destination, and no real mentor accompanying him.

Closely related to the absence of time in Charlie Cheesegrater is the absence of a sense of location or direction. When Charlie is wheeled out in his cage for Showings, he is uncertain whether he is being shown the same or a different town. There are roads, and the puppeteers drive the Spider along them. However Charlie does not know where they lead. The Welkin of Gloom simply seems to him and to the reader like a vast dark and barren land.

Section III Fantasy Fiction iii) world building, inner consistency and Charlie Cheesegrater

If Charlie Cheesegrater might be said to reverse or frustrate expectations of good and evil, the lack of time and a sense of place reverses or frustrates expectations of fantasy conventions of ‘world-building’. World-building is a component of all fiction, and in most fiction the realistic or poetic evocation of landscape or environment, along with credible characters and character development, are of paramount importance to a novel’s success. However, for the fantasy author, world building is his/her particular bane. If the reader of fantasy is required to ‘pay a little extra’ in the willing suspension of disbelief, then the fantasy author is required to expend perhaps more ‘blood and sweat’ in creating their fantasy worlds. The fantasy author, then, ‘it is more true...that they struggle more than any other authors except poets that...with the inexpressible’ (Smith, 1953: 140). Ann Swinfen provides perhaps the best summary of this aspect of world-building:

The first essential in making a secondary world acceptable to readers is that its physical nature should be comprehensible and logical...The fundamental physical laws of gravity, heat and cold, dark and light, are the same...the sun, moon and stars have their appointed stations in the sky...and compass directions are preserved... (Swinfen, 1983: 77).
Authors such as Tolkien, Lewis and Le Guin have all laboured to provide histories, myths, legends, geographies and, in Tolkien’s case, languages for their imaginary worlds, thus making their creations comprehensible and logical.

*Charlie Cheeseegrater* only partially satisfies the world-building requirement as outlined by Swinfen. There is a history of the Clash, related to Charlie in Eldritch’s Myth of the Welkin of Gloom, which explains to him and the reader why the Welkin is the way it is. However, it is not given as a certainty, and Charlie wonders whether what he has seen is a dream or reality. When he asks Eldritch whether what is in her show is the truth, the puppet-girl shrugs her shoulders in response. There are no real certainties in the Welkin of Gloom. Other than the history or myth of the Welkin, the novel, at the risk of alienating readers, provides no map, no time, and no directions. However, the very fact that these elements are absent draws attention to them, and highlights their importance. The Welkin of Gloom is clearly corrupt and unnatural; it is Charlie’s mission to heal it.

Despite this non-conformity to the world-building convention, *Charlie Cheeseegrater* does conform to the convention of fantasy fiction’s fidelity to an ‘inner consistency’. Fantasy critic Lloyd Alexander has stated that ‘In the algebra of fantasy, A times B doesn’t have to equal B times A. But once established, the equation must hold throughout the story’ (Bator, 1983: 241). Similarly, Jane Yolen states that the rules of fantasy ‘have to work as surely as gravity works on our own world’ (Bator, 1983: 241). Fantasy, however unbelievable it may be, ‘must maintain an internal consistency to be believable to its audience’ (Bator, 1983: 241). Presumably this is to offer a reward for the heightened suspension of disbelief that is required of the fantasy reader, who will not countenance a change of the rules once they have been set out and accepted.

The reader of *Charlie Cheeseegrater* has been asked to accept a world where a terrible calamity or magical holocaust has occurred that has resulted in a corrupted world without sun, moon or time. The reader has also been asked to accept that there are no certainties in this world, especially with regard to typical notions of good and evil. Also, the novel demands that the reader accept that the inhabitants of this world, with the exception of the hero and heroine, are subject to a process called the Turn, whereby they gradually succumb to their beastly natures, eventually to lose their humanity altogether. The reader comes to accept these rules or realities along with Charlie, who, like the reader, is piecing together information about his world as he goes along. The reader’s understanding of the novel’s fantasy world is mirrored by Charlie’s gradual understanding and acceptance of the world around him. Once accepted, these realities or rules do not change. They form the backdrop...
against which the action of the novel is played out and become the avenues by which Charlie develops as a character.

In order to accept these requirements, the reader must feel some connection with the fantasy world. Anne Swinfen remarks that ‘the secondary world, like all fantasy, requires a firm basis in primary world reality’ and that ‘the inhabitants and affairs of a secondary world will awaken an interest in the reader only if he can feel some underlying comprehension and sympathy for them’ (Swinfen, 1984: 76). In the *Lord of the Rings*, for example, the hobbits, clearly very human and even typically English in their behaviour and general outlook on life, provide this connection for the reader. In the Narnia series, it is the war evacuee children with whom the reader connects, and in Harry Potter it is Harry himself, who straddles both the primary and secondary worlds of Privet Drive and Hogwarts.

In *Charlie Cheesegrater*, it is the character of Charlie himself that provides the connection and evokes sympathy in the reader for his plight. The novel’s success depends upon the reader identifying with Charlie and feeling sympathy for his situation, and ultimately wishing for him to overcome his tormentors. This is perhaps achieved by making Charlie the only recognizably human figure for much of the novel. We are ‘on his side’ from the outset. Though terribly mistreated and abused, Charlie is admirable in his defiance of Slupp. No matter how much his uncle stretches him on the Rack, Charlie refuses to tell him about the Messenger. Charlie also refuses to accept violence and cruelty, and will not stand to have them visited upon others. He feels pity for Gibbous, who hates him, and when Nefandous abuses Gibbous and is about to thrash the boy with his cane, Charlie yells defiantly for Nefandous to stop. These and other examples of Charlie’s humanity form the moral backbone of the tale, and provide a means for the reader to identify, admire and sympathize with him and his plight. These feelings are increased when Charlie meets Eldritch, the only other recognisably human figure in the novel, and when he succeeds in rescuing her. The reader feels somewhat assured that Charlie and Eldritch and their values of kindness, heroism and compassion will eventually triumph, and that together they will either destroy or reshape the Welkin of Gloom.

### Section III Fantasy Fiction: iv) epic fantasy and *Charlie Cheesegrater*

As may be inferred, *Charlie Cheesegrater* also makes use of motifs commonly found in modern epic fantasies. Epic fantasies return imaginative fiction to what Egoff calls its ‘mythic roots’ (1981: 82). Works like *The Lord of the Rings*, Susan Cooper’s *Darkness Rising* series, and, more recently, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series are, in Egoff’s opinion,
characterised by their close relationship to myths like King Arthur, Beowulf, and others. They are ‘chiefly concerned with the unending battle between good and evil’ and are ‘dominated by high purpose’ in which there are ‘worlds to be won or lost and the protagonists engage themselves in a...battle for the common good’ (Egoff, 1981: 82).

In Charlie Cheesegrater, Charlie is the reluctant hero set on a quest to reshape his world for the common good. He lives in a dark fantasy/waste-land once ruled by the White Sage, a paradise-like land of sunlight and harmony, of kings and queens, etc. But the Black Sage fostered discontent, mustered his forces and challenged the White Sage in a battle known as the Clash. The Clash caused a magical nuclear holocaust, leaving only the gloomlight, a mixture of Black and White Magic. However, before the Clash, the Grey Sage, fearing what devastation may occur, preserved elements of primordial magic in jewels that he fit into the teeth of two puppets. The Clash brings these two puppets, and others, to life, one being Charlie, and the other Eldritch. For much of the novel, Charlie (and thus the reader) knows nothing of the Clash, that he is (was) a puppet, or of his special place within the Welkin of Gloom and the power he wields. Instead, the novel charts Charlie’s gradual and very personal journey of discovery, set against the backdrop of ‘world-shattering’ events.

By novel’s end, Charlie has discovered that he indeed possesses magic power; that his teeth were constructed not by Uncle Slupp to torture him, but by the Grey Sage, who hid Charlie at the Castle before the Clash. But the question remains whether Charlie is ready to assume his destiny as the one who can destroy the gloomlight. In the novel’s final lines, he wonders when he and Eldritch can at last be free.

While the epic feature of ‘saving the world’ is present, Charlie Cheesegrater may be said to depart from traditional ‘good vs evil’ epic fantasies in the sense that it is not at all clear to Charlie or the reader what battle must be fought in order to achieve this common good. This matter may become clearer in subsequent books, should they be written. However, in the present volume, by novel’s end the Slupps have been vanquished, Charlie has rescued and revived Eldritch, and the heroes are being taken by shantak to see the Grey Sage. As the shantak carries them off, Charlie thinks ‘If, like the Grey Sage had written, together he and Eldritch could master the magic within them and destroy the gloomlight, then they would (Engin: 152). The reader may assume that establishing the common good will involve battling the white and black sages, who wish to control the gloomlight, not destroy it, but this is not clear. In the novel’s last line, there is a hint that Charlie’s true quest is not to reshape the Welkin of Gloom for the common good, but for he and Eldritch to ‘at last be free’ (Engin: 153).
Section III Fantasy Fiction v) Charlie Cheesegrater and young adult fiction:

Like fantasy fiction, children’s fiction and young adult fiction are similarly difficult to define. For Jerry Griswold in his study of children’s fiction Feeling Like A Kid, he posits five prerequisites for a piece of writing to be defined as children’s fiction: snugness, scariness, smallness, lightness, and aliveness (Griswold, 2006: 1) Two in particular of Griswold’s observations apply to Charlie Cheesegrater: scariness and aliveness. In scariness, Griswold states that ‘children learn the surprising fact that scariness can be surprising fun’ and that ‘children’s literature is not the sunny and trouble-free place that grown-ups often remember it to be’ (Griswold, 2006: 2). To add to his argument, Griswold lists a gallery of gruesome characters (Big Bad Wolf, etc) sprung from the pages of children’s books, to which we may take the liberty of adding the Slupps and perhaps the Puppeteers.

Griswold approaches the matter from a standpoint of what kinds of stories are enjoyed by children. He states that ‘the best writers for children can speak to the young – the young confirm that there are very few who can speak to them – the great writers for children know what it feels like to be a kid’ (Griswold, 2006: 3). However, Perry Nodelman in his study The Hidden Adult sees no real boundaries in children’s and young adult fiction for the reason that ‘in both cases the intended audiences for the texts are defined by their presumed inability to produce such books or make such decisions about purchases of books for themselves” (Nodelman, 2008: 5). The intended audiences for such books, states Nodelman, are really the librarians, teachers, parents and so forth that are traditionally the decision-makers for a child’s reading habits (Nodelman, 2008: 5). They are the books that a writer assumes will appeal, for example, to a parent choosing reading material for a young person or child.

Charlie Cheesegrater contains material that may appeal to young readers and older ones who might read to them. As we have seen, Charlie Cheesegrater features departures from typical tropes found in fantasy fiction (and in the gothic and the weird), which enrich the novel as a text. The departures help the novel to avoid predictability, but, more importantly, they perhaps allow the novel to be read with pleasure by both adults and the young. With its emphasis on plot, action and adventure, the novel might be read by a precocious youth as an exciting, unusual story about a boy in a strange world who saves the day. However, the larger concerns of the novel (ie the lack of clarity between good and evil; the contrast of cruelty and kindness, etc), and the novel’s tendency to frustrate reader expectations, may appeal to older and even mature readers, who might be said to have more appreciation for the novel’s ‘genre-mixing’.
However, this does not come without risk. Younger readers in particular may become frustrated with the novel’s lack of clear boundaries and maps, with the intentional blurring of notions of good and evil, and perhaps most of all with the unrelenting gloom, darkness and cruelty of the novel’s world. Yet the success of the *Harry Potter* series and Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (in addition to a raft of similar novels and films on themes of dark fantasy and adventure) indicates not only the popularity of these types of stories, but perhaps an increasingly sophisticated younger readership, as well as a strong interest in the genre from adults.

It is not intended to suggest that *Charlie Cheesegrater* is in the same league as the aforementioned novels. Rather they are raised as evidence of perhaps a reading public that has come to accept the blurring of the line between adult and young adult fiction. It should also be said that *Charlie Cheesegrater* was not created with a desire to appeal to children, young adults and adults, but rather that the book might be said to possess a depth that could be enjoyed by all three readerships. Its primary readership, however, remains young people. Charlie’s predicament as an orphan and his general powerlessness are, to the author’s mind, evocations of the state of childhood. Charlie’s eventual ‘coming of age’ by the novel’s end, and his triumph over the Slupps, may fall into the category of the child who has passed into the realm of the young person. Allison Waller in her study *Constructions of Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* states that a young person assuming greater power and authority in the world is a significant feature of much fantasy-based young adult fiction (Waller: 4). Thus it could be said that *Charlie Cheesegrater* straddles the traditional and the modern, perhaps forming an uneasy synthesis of the two; in the same way, the novel straddles and pushes the boundaries between fiction appealing to adults and young adults.

*Charlie Cheesegrater*, then, contains elements of fantasy fiction in addition to gothic and weird fiction. In particular, the novel resonates with fantasy fiction’s sense of time and space, and it also connects with its features of world building, inner consistency and epic fiction. However, as with weird and gothic fiction, *Charlie Cheesegrater* often expands or reshapes the tropes found in fantasy fiction, rejecting simplistic representations of good and evil, and the need to conform to typical notions of artistic world building. Thus *Charlie Cheesegrater* takes the traditional elements of fantasy fiction and recasts them into a text with a modern emphasis.
Conclusion

The overall intention of this exegesis has been to establish a literary context for Charlie Cheesegrater: A Weird Tale. Consequently it has explored Charlie Cheesegrater and its literary antecedents. It has been shown that Charlie Cheesegrater, a work of dark fantasy for young adults, has relationships in point of style, content and theme with some of gothic fiction’s most salient texts, such as Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho, Lewis’s The Monk and Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer. Charlie’s Cheesegrater’s indebtedness to weird fiction has also been identified, with special attention having been paid to the novel’s thematic relationship with the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. It has been shown how Charlie Cheesegrater integrates, reshapes and/or rejects Lovecraft’s themes such as the horror of the self, degeneration and cosmic horror. Parallels between Charlie Cheesegrater and fantasy fiction, in particular defining features such as the struggle between good and evil, world-building, and inner consistency have also been drawn and explored. However, with regards to weird and fantasy fiction, it has also been shown how Charlie Cheesegrater often rejects or reshapes themes/tropes commonly found in those genres, thus forging a new creation out of traditional materials. The novel forges a synthesis of the traditional and the modern, and as such, also straddles a blurry boundary between young adult and adult fiction.
Bibliography


