
The Other Realm

Book Three of the Utgarda Series

Joab Stieglitz





Chapter 4

July 16, 1929

Lamb descended the dark stairwell. The steps were steep, and creaked despite his slow, deliberate steps. Given all the noise that they had made upstairs, the doctor was sure that whoever, or whatever, was down there knew they were coming, but he proceeded with care out of habit. O'Malley had produced a flashlight from his valise, but its narrow beam did little to pierce the darkness while it advertised their location.

A few steps short of the bottom, right before the stairwell cleared the bottom of the ground floor, Lamb raised his hand and stopped. O'Malley walked absently into him, and the doctor sprawled on the floor at the base of the steps with a crash. The priest descended quickly to his side, shining the light on his colleague, when something struck his hand. The flashlight fell to the ground and disappeared out of sight.

Suddenly, Anna saw a blur as a hunched figure hit what she believed to be O'Malley on the back of the head. The priest fell on top of Lamb. Anna fired in the direction the blur had moved in. She heard the sound of a ricochet, and then there was silence.

“Who’s there?” Anna heard a muffled voice say from farther into the darkness.

A moment later, a beam of light darted in all directions. Lamb had recovered the flashlight and was seeking out their assailant. Not finding anyone, he directed the beam onto O’Malley, who was sprawled face down. Anna descended quickly to his side, and saw a bloody gash in the back of head. Lamb knelt beside her and gave Anna the flashlight. Then he examined the priest’s head, wiping the wound clean with his handkerchief. He pointed at Anna’s necktie. She set her pistol and the flashlight down on the step with the beam pointing toward O’Malley and started to remove the tie with her free hand.

No sooner had she released hold of the gun than a disheveled, hunched man in a pair of stained overalls appeared with a fire poker in his hand intent on striking Lamb. Before Anna could alert him, she was deafened by the report of O’Malley’s automatic. The assailant screeched, dropped his weapon, and fell to the ground clutching his shattered knee. Lamb turned to the man and punched him several times in the face until he stopped moving.

Lamb wiped his bloody fist on the man’s shirt before returning to O’Malley and placing a hand gently on his back to keep him from moving. Then he accepted Anna’s necktie and tied the wadded handkerchief into place over the priest’s wound.

“Hello, out there,” the voice said. “There’s no need for stealth. We are quite alone here now. That miscreant is the only soul for miles. If you’ve vanquished that fiend, you’ve earned yourself a respite.”

In the center of the room was a low stone table. On the far side of the chamber was a covered well. Along one wall were racks of stout shelves containing dozens of what looked like smooth, metallic, gallon-sized paint cans bearing strange symbols. Each one had numerous sockets of different shapes along the surface. On the wall to the side of the entrance was a table, upon which sat two of the can-like devices. Several oddly-shaped attachments were plugged into the sockets of each.

As she stared at the devices, she was startled as a segmented, antenna-like appliance on one of the kegs bent in her direction, revealing mechanical lenses that focused on her. Another convex attachment bore numerous, small convex protrusions that blinked sporadically in various colors. A third resembled four long, rectangular trumpets, arranged in two pairs side-by-side, also attached to the base by a segmented, antenna-like appliance.

The Other Realm

“Good day, miss,” came a staccato monotone from the trumpet-like devices of the canister that was “looking” at her as lights blinked in unison from the convex attachment.



“Hello?” Anna said tentatively to the device.

“Hello,” it replied in the same staccato monotone with corresponding lights. The harsh quality of the sound caused her neck to tense and an uncomfortable sensation to form behind her eyes. “Have you dispatched Billy?”

“If you mean the man who attacked us,” Anna replied guardedly, “I do not believe that he is dead.” She shone the flashlight about the room.

“There is a light switch to your right,” the voice said.

Anna flipped the switch, and the chamber was revealed. She could see now that the table was stained with blood. There was a trail of red leading to and over the lip of the well. The “paint cans” on the shelf appeared identical except for one, which had a different arrangement of sockets.

The device that was “speaking” to her sat on its table next to another one, but the latter had only the convex attachment plugged in, and no lights flashed. On the other side of the communicative container was a chessboard where a game had been in progress. The black player, whose pieces were nearest the device, was winning. There was a chair on the other side of the board, possibly where their attacker, Billy, had been the white player.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be my opponent now,” the voice said. “If you would reset the board, we can begin anew.” At that moment, Lamb entered the chamber, followed by O’Malley.

“By all that’s holy,” the priest said, covering his mouth and nose as he looked over the bloody table. Anna had not noticed the smell of the place, but seeing the father’s reaction brought it to her attention and she withdrew a handkerchief from her purse.

“That smells like embalming fluid,” Lamb said. “But whoever was doing the work must have botched it.” Then he noticed the well. “I bet he dropped his failures in there.”

“Actually,” the staccato voice said, “the Junazhi are most adroit in the surgical arts.” Lamb jumped and O’Malley backed into and fell over the chair at the sound of the voice. “But you are correct. They dissected their subjects expertly, and discarded those deemed

inadequate to their interests in the well.” It paused. “I imagine that I should be grateful to the Junazhi for not providing me with olfactory facilities.”

“You,” Anna said with a pause, “are human?”

“Of course,” the voice said. Then it added, “Please forgive my lack of manners. You have no idea who I am. My name is Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce, and I’m a writer for William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers.”

“Ambrose Bierce?” Lamb said with disbelief. “He was killed in Mexico fifteen years ago! Murdered by Pancho Villa!”

“Poppycock,” Bierce said flatly. “The Junazhi caught me and brought me here just yesterday.”

“Bierce’s body was never found,” O’Malley said.

“And it still hasn’t been,” Lamb replied. He started looking around for wires leading out of the room. “The walls are too thick, and we’re underground here, so it can’t be a wireless signal. Where are you transmitting from?”

“You confound me,” Bierce said. “I am present here on the table next to Kovacs.”

“Meyer Kovacs?” Anna said with suspicion.

“Why yes,” the voice said. “Are you acquainted?”

“I am renting his house,” Anna replied. “He also disappeared. In 1916.”

“So where, and when, do we find ourselves now?”

“Today is Tuesday, July 16, 1929,” O’Malley said, and reached into his pocket for the stub of his train ticket. Anna guided his hand over so the paper was in front of the lens attachment. “You are outside of Chatham, New York on the estate of a Dr. Martin Langford.

“Some kind of barbaric surgery was done here,” Lamb said, examining the table. “There’s no way anyone could have survived. Unless this blood came from several people.”

“While the Junazhi do appear to be barbaric in their methods,” Bierce said, “their subjects do not suffer. I have witnessed many such procedures. And if what you say is true, and I have been in this state for fifteen years, our minds have been sustained within these devices without any kind of maintenance for quite some time.”



“What do you mean ‘*our minds*’?” Lamb asked with surprise.

“Almost all of these devices contain extracted brains,” Bierce replied in his staccato monotone.

“And they’re human?” O’Malley said.

“Most of them,” Bierce said. “The one on the lower shelf with the additional sockets is something else.”

“And they are all ‘alive’?” Anna asked.

“Yes, though Kovacs here has been inert since the procedure, and Teplow has been unresponsive.”

“Brian Teplow,” Anna asked.

“Yes, I believe that is how he was introduced.”

“Where is he?” Lamb demanded.

“He is in the device on the right side on the middle shelf.”

O’Malley picked up the chair he had fallen over and slumped into it aghast.

Lamb glanced to the rack and noted three of the canisters on the middle shelf. The one on the left was the one with the extra sockets. The one in the middle and the one to the right were identical except for some kind of hieroglyphics etched into the surface. There were three canisters on the lower shelf, as well, and Lamb noted that one was coated in a slimy residue. The other two, which bore no hieroglyphics, were open at the top, and empty.

When Lamb reached forward to swipe a sample of the leaking fluid with his finger, the voice said, “Don’t touch that. It is most unpleasant, if Billy’s reaction was representative.”

Lamb withdrew his hand. “What happened?” he asked.

“There was a flash, and it appeared to burn his skin,” was the response.

“Some kind of electric shock, then,” Lamb conjectured. “And that is what is inside the container?”

“So it would seem,” Anna said.

“You said that Brian Teplow has been unresponsive since,” O’Malley said, then paused to shudder before continuing. “his brain was deposited in that container?”

“That is correct.”

“And when was that?” O’Malley asked.

“It is impossible to measure time accurately in here, but the Junazhi have returned three times since then.”

“The things that did this have come back?” O’Malley said with alarm.

“Of course,” Bierce said. “This is their covert. They gallivant for some time and return. Billy was installed to maintain their privacy in their absence. Sometimes they return with a new subject.”

“And how long have they been gone?” Anna asked.

“We have played approximately fifty-three games of chess, which is fewer than we usually complete between their visits,” Bierce mused, “but Billy’s skill has improved over time. I expect that they should return soon.”

Lamb returned the canister to the shelf and tentatively lifted the one identified as Brian Teplow. It was noticeably heavier than the other. The container was sealed with no evidence that the top had ever been missing. There were no seams and the entire surface, save for the sockets and the hieroglyphics engraved on the side, was smooth.

“How do we know that Brian is in here,” Lamb said with frustration, “and still alive?”

“You could connect the receptors and try to communicate with him,” Bierce replied, “I’m sure Kovacs won’t mind. But as I said, Teplow has not been responsive since the procedure.”

Lamb placed the canister on the chess board, knocking the pieces aside.

“That was not necessary,” Bierce said.

Lamb examined the attachments on Kovacs’ canister. “Do I simply unplug them and insert them in the corresponding socket?” he asked. “Or is there a switch or something to enable the transfer?”

“Simply remove them from Kovacs and insert them in the appropriate receptacle.”

“Which is the auditory device?” Lamb asked. Bierce guided the doctor in removing the devices from Kovacs and inserting it into Brian’s container. As soon as he connected the first attachment, the convex device, the tension and discomfort that the newcomers had experienced returned, increased significantly. Anna swooned, but caught herself, descended gracefully, and sat on the concrete floor. O’Malley grasped his head in his hands and leaned forward in anguish. Lamb persevered, and when the final convex attachment was connected, the sensations dropped to a tolerable level. One of the lights blinked intermittently.

“What does that light mean?” Lamb asked.

The Other Realm

“I believe it means that young Brian’s mind is active,” Bierce replied, “but not conscious. Perhaps he is dreaming.”

“Do we risk waking him up?” Anna asked as she slowly rose to her feet and leaned on the table. “It is said that waking people while dreaming is extremely traumatic.”

“And we have no idea what condition he might be in, in this state,” Lamb agreed.

“So there are six of these containers,” O’Malley said with renewed vigor. “And this-thing, who claims to be famed journalist, Ambrose Bierce-”

“You flatter me, sir,” Bierce said with the same emotionless monotone.

“This thing,” O’Malley continued, “claims that three of them contain preserved and functional human brains, while the other has some kind of unknown being in it?!” He shook his head. “By all that is righteous and just, if these wild assertions are true, we should release these poor souls from immortal torment!”

“That is preposterous,” the staccato monotone and Lamb said in unison.

“If these people-” Lamb started.

“If they can still be considered people,” O’Malley interrupted.

“If these people are truly alive,” Lamb continued, “in some form, then we must study them and learn how this was done!” O’Malley shook his head vigorously. “Think of the medical advancements that could be derived from this research! Millions of lives could be saved with this technology.”

“And what sort of life is it?” O’Malley retorted. “A mind with no physical form? Does that even count as human?” He paused for breath. “And what of that other thing,” he said pointing at the unusually configured canister on the shelf. “With their physical form, humanity and whatever that is are indistinguishable.”

“Would that not be beneficial to human, and interspecies relations?” Bierce asked. “Does is not say in *Romans* ‘live in harmony with one another. Repay no one evil for evil?’”

“At the very least,” Lamb said, “we need to first determine if there are human minds encased in these cans, and if so, what mental state that they are in.”

“I assure you,” Bierce said, “that there is no sensation of pain. And after the initial adjustment, no feelings of loss or misfortune.”

“Do you still feel your body?” Lamb asked. “It’s called Phantom Limb Syndrome. It was quite common among amputees during the Great War.”

“There will be time for these philosophical discussions later,” Anna interjected. “But right now, we need to determine what to do with Brian Teplow. We clearly can’t take him to his moth-”

“Did you hear that?” O’Malley said after shushing the others.

“I did not hear anything,” Anna replied.

“I heard howling,” O’Malley said, “but it stopped.”

“The Junazhi have returned.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joab Stieglitz is an avid tabletop RPG player and game master of horror, espionage, fantasy, and science fiction genres, which he plays 3-4 times a week.

Joab is a Senior Business Analyst for a software company. He has also worked as a software trainer, a network engineer, a project manager, and a technical writer over his 30 year career. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

You can follow Joab on Twitter @JoabStieglitz and on his blog: joabstieglitz.com