

THE TRUE COST OF MISCONDUCT

by Jano Venter

I

As the sun set on the antiquated campus of Northmoreshire University, the administrative building's flying buttresses and their razor point gothic pinnacles cast shadows that crept up the cobblestone road on which John Clawe was walking. Just as the dark reflection of the building's main tower scathed the tips of his soles, he stopped short as if shook from an absent minded reverie. He looked up at the skeletal frame and then back to the shadows. *Spiders*, he thought. *They look like spiders. Or maybe. . .* Laughing at the irony of the other possibility, he quickly fell into a gloomy introspection and continued his walk with a sombre resignation, his shoulders sagging and a melancholic frown cutting into his brow. Amusing as it might sound for something claw-like to be grabbing for him, the humor was dispersed by the memory that he was on his way to a disciplinary hearing. He was caught stealing the master copy of his semester final; he knew all too well that the institute didn't usually turn a blind eye to theft. Of course, there were exceptions – seniors and athletes have de facto exemptions from the student code of conduct, although the former are only exempt during the final semester or as long as they don't get caught. The thought of being ensnared by the admin building was all too fitting considering the sheer magnitude of the stranglehold the academic code had on John in his predicament. With echoing steps John ascended to the entrance, a brass-embellished ebony wood door that towered above him, culminating in a spearpoint arch. In his musing thoughts it occurred to him that the building could believably pass for a hell gate if the building were only a bit warmer.

The door opened into a ribbed hall where the only illumination came from the last rays of sunlight that cast low beams of colored light onto the floor from stained glass windows inlaid with coats of arms and the images of school patrons whose wealth, like them, had long since ceased to support the school. John shivered. *Definitely not a hell mouth, but a crypt.* In a feeble attempt to stay warm, he tightened his cravat until it stung. Because of Northmoreshire University's financial circumstances, the boilers controlling the heat were only turned on in the winter months to conserve fuel. Despite slightly less expense, the financial scheme had little

other noticeable benefit, and on most late autumn nights students were at the mercy of the cold. As John would gladly tell anybody who listened, the cold had a sadistic streak that could rival hell's designated torturer. The wind howled past John. It was like the skeleton of the building was wheezing from old age. Clutching his blazer tighter around him, John passed rib vault after rib vault in the maze-like halls of the admin building. At last he turned at a junction which led to a catenary arch with an office inlaid at the opening. How the architects had managed to carve out an office within an arch made in the corner of a supporting wall was one of those things that everybody on campus had assumed to just have happened without questioning it. Nobody, not even the most senior staff, remembered when the feature was added or its construction; they just accepted that it was one of those little things they didn't notice until after it was done.

John checked his pocket watch in frustration but sighed in relief when he saw he was still on time. He dug in his pocket for his identification card to feed into the babbage lock on the door. After procuring it, he was confused when he saw that the slot had somehow been shrunk to about a third of his card's diameter. *What on earth is going on?* he thought angrily. In the dark, he squinted at the lock and found to his chagrin that it was now coin operated and that the cost was a pound according to a sign so small he could only read it after some further squinting. The choice to change the locks was another of the bursar's budgetary adjustments, and while such mechanisms can scarcely keep anybody with a full wallet from forcing entry, it is rare for people to willingly enter the administrative building unless they had a bone to pick, and for the most part, the only people with vendettas against the staff were usually broke regardless. John grimaced and took out his coin purse.

The dean's office was in an almost equivalent state of disregard. There was a protective coating of dust on everything from the windowsills to the dark wood desk. Pneumatic mail tubes coming down from the roof were stained unnatural colors by ink from stationary deliveries and drainage from the lubricants spilling down from the pipes above. Shelves were lined with disheveled books haphazardly thrown onto them, and there were cigarette butts and pieces of uneaten food that marred the floor. Like all young single men, the dean had an idle lifestyle,

although in the case of the aging administrator, the lifestyle was more the result of a regression to his early adulthood and the college's lack of cleaning services than actual age. Leaning back in his chair with a glass of fine sipping whiskey, a severe expression crept onto the round man's face. A pair of thin but full mutton chops connected his jawline to his upper lip which was naturally as stiff as his drink resulting in the overall effect of slack jawed surliness. With his advancing age, his hair had become bicolored with an auburn layer on a ghostly white layer. When the whirring of the locking mechanism alerted him of his appointment, he took his legs off his desk, straightened his posture to a suitably pompous manner, and rotated the vintage whiskey so as to make sure the year was as visible as possible from the seat in front of him. As the knob turned, he raised a manilla folder so as to appear engrossed in review. Aged wood creaked as the heavy door opened, and John Clawe paused abruptly on his way in as he caught sights of the chaos within.

"Ah yes, Mr. Clawe, come right in," he said in a condescending grandfatherly tone. Though when he saw John's apparent discomfort with the state of the office, he quickly added, "Pay no attention to the havoc surrounding you. Regrettably the maid was laid off during the last round of budget cuts to make room for the new state of the art lock systems which you no doubt saw on your way in. Very effective too; you would have barely made our appointment without that system."

"Well if I didn't have a guinea that I was saving for the holidays, the lock would have made me completely late," John grumbled to himself.

He seated himself across from the dean in the armchair that smelled the least of pharmaceutical hair tonic as the dean nodded absent-mindedly as if he hadn't heard what the student said. The dean let out a sigh, seated himself in his opulent velvet chair, and spent a good half minute staring at Clawe.

"Well John, what are we going to do with you?" he said finally.

“I’m guessing you’re not going to kick me out of school?” John mused half-sarcastically.

“Oh?” the dean intoned, a smile almost shaping itself in his very English facade, “for cheating on the most important exam of the year. We shouldn’t expel you?”

“Why not? Everybody else cheated!”

“Of course they did, but they weren’t stupid enough to get caught.” The dean inclined his head toward the infuriated student with a venomous look in his eyes.

“By the way Johnny boy, I can’t help but notice you’re being awfully rude to somebody who will have a say in your future at this institution.”

The dean had struck a painful nerve; anybody who left Northmoreshire University will have about as much value to society as a vagrant. But vagrants can’t help themselves but be a liability. Dropouts were liabilities who had a chance at betterment, so being a dropout was similar to having the busted plumbing leak into the pneumatic workings of a bed and breakfast’s kitchen when the civil servants comes by. *But if he WILL have a say in my future then that means there’s no official decision*, John realized to his excitement. But then he noticed something sinister in the expression of the dean, it was like his mask of austerity was hiding some sadistic countenance that suddenly made the nervous student feel dread that exceeded anything he felt during this phantasmal dusk.

“Will I be expelled then?” he asked, the words sounding hoarse with a sudden dryness of his throat.

For just a moment, John thought he saw the expression he feared the dean was hiding cut into the administrator’s face, but the dean’s stoic composure came back before John could even place what he saw. The dean stood up and poured himself another glass of whiskey.

“No,” he said, “Professor Barnabus Hall suggested an alternative to the disciplinary board, which passed unanimously.” He turned to face John leaning back against his desk. “All seven

chairs took to it like flies to the freshman laundry chambers.”

John’s heart nearly leaped for joy, but then he felt a certain icy caution.

“What am I supposed to do?” he inquired slowly.

“You are to run an errand for him,” the dean said and smiled. It was the kind of expression a night worker in Whitechapel might see before he dies, a smile so broad it induced pain, and eyes that are devoid of any human warmth. John did not excuse himself before he hurried out the door, as the sound of whirring gears, the bang of the closing door, and mirthful laughter followed him through the administrative labyrinth as he ran.

II

The science building was, fortunately, less eerie at night than the administrative building. However, even the elegant simplicity of the pure rectangles of the building’s Queen Anne design hid an imposing interior at night. There was also something sinisterly insistent in the monotonous delivery of the phonographic summons that Professor Hall sent. And now that John had come here in the dead of night, after all the Professors left and the cleaning automatons had clanked off to their winding stations, there was a certain ominousness to the science building as well. As John passed the central babbage engine, there was something that just felt wrong about the complete silence of its dedicated lab. Indeed, in some less educated parts of the northern moorlands surrounding the university, witching hour legends have resurfaced in stories of haunted mail rooms and analytical engine chambers. As he actively tried to remind himself of the difference between superstition and reality, John turned at a junction in the direction of the only faint mechanical sounds in the building. *The old codger is still up and about*, he reasoned curiously. *What could it be that is this important to him?* Led by only traces of sound in the quiet of the after-hours darkness, John found himself outside the welllit laboratory of the Professor of Comparative Alchemy, Barnabus Hall.

Opening the door, Clawe saw a trail of some sort of neon green fumes billowing through the

narrow gap under the door. *I don't even think I want to know.* He let out a sigh as he remembered the strange way the dean delivered the news about his new charge. Something about the dean's expression chilled him to the bone. In the brightly lit laboratory, he saw the origin of the greenish mist; it was cascading down from an opening in the lower brass beaker of a syphon arrangement that was in the process of draining a chemical that smelled like some ungodly pharmaceutical tonic. Above the syphon was a retort draining thick, transparent oil into the queer smelling liquid with a soft but perpetual hiss. In the corner of the lab was a beaker above a gas flame boiling under the cover of a suction cup-like plate which led by a pipe to an input port in a difference engine that was clacking and whirring away, with keys faintly typing out something on a piece of paper on the other end.

Am I supposed to be his lab aid or something? John wondered. Watching the paper slowly emerging from the automated printing press at the side of the engine, he couldn't help but get closer to take a look at the rapidly emerging data. With the speed of a striking viper, a wrinkled, charred, oil covered arm shot out from behind the machine and grabbed the paper from his hands. John jumped back with a silent scream.

"Just as I thought. It's tapping into the æther," came an energetic baritone voice from behind the contraption.

John breathed a sigh of relief. *Just Professor Hall.* From behind the machine stepped the wild haired, thick-sideburned, grinning face of Professor Barnabus Hall.

"Sorry for startling you, my boy," he said heartily, rolling up his one sleeve over his withered arm. "Lab accident earlier today."

"Good heavens," John said, wincing. "What could have burned your arm like that?"

"Burned?" the Professor asked confused. "My arm was completely severed in the steam turbine that powers my phase transmograph setup. This arm is the replacement from the surplus

locker of the university surgery theater.”

John grimaced at the Professor, who just smirked back at him.

“Don’t worry, the donor of this arm consented for third party access to his limbs when he signed the volunteer release for experimental surgery.”

Without saying anything further, the professor unclasped the airtight plate sensor on the beaker, and poured the liquid onto the floor where it flowed into the drainage duct. He ran a veiny hand through his graying hair and stepped spryly to the syphon contraption. He then added in a chemical from a test tube he procured from his coat pocket, the fumes of which had an analgesic effect on John who swayed on his feet. The Professor cranked the top beaker of the syphon setup higher to increase the speed of the chemical flow and adjusted the height of the retort. *He doesn’t seem to be affected by the fumes at all. He must have aged exceptionally well to still have a fortitude like that. Or maybe he’s immune. . . .* John’s thoughts were interrupted by the professor turning and beaming at him.

“So,” the professor said, clapping his hands together, “you’ll no doubt be wondering what kind of an errand you’ll be running for me, eh?”

“Well Professor, actually I was wondering more why you would want to vouch for me regarding the uh—” he struggled to find a subtle word for it, “cheating. . . on my alchemy test.”

“Because I needed somebody to steal something for me, and luckily for me, the student who happened to get caught cheating stole the test. Since I wrote the test, and given my position in the alchemy department. . . .” he trailed off and leaned back in his chair grinning.

John was taken aback at how openly and how casually Professor Hall talked about theft. For about seven or eight seconds John turned the words over in his head, hoping to find convenient homonyms or homophones that might yield a different chore than the one he thought he heard.

“Steal something you say?” he finally spluttered awkwardly.

“Indubitably, Mr. Clawe. But don’t concern yourself. It’s a lot more legal than you would lead yourself to believe.” Upon seeing John’s incredulous look, the professor leaned forward. “You see Mr. Clawe for the last seven years I have been involved in a tit-for-tat scientific rivalry with the Warlock of Speartop Mountain, Val Tempestirae.”

John’s eyes widened. Warlocks were renegade alchemists who broke the oaths of the Royal Society of Alchemists. They were usually depraved, psychotic, power hungry maniacs. As such, it always seemed odd to John just why they were kicked out of the Alchemical Society in the first place.

“Professor,” John said carefully, “believe me I’ve heard about the extremes scientific rivalries can escalate to. But I don’t think the university will be that keen hearing that you’re initiating industrial sabotage with a fellow alchemist, even if it is a renegade alchemist.”

“Why, Mr. Clawe, I’m sure I’m not hearing the implication of blackmail from a man in your position,” Professor Barnabus Hall said, grinning madly. John just shrugged.

“Besides,” the Professor said indignantly, “I’m not starting it. Tempestirae stole something from me first. A type of alchemically infused coal called perpetuum fuel, which I believe is the direct precursor to developing stable anti-matter.”

“Couldn’t you just fabricate more perpetuum fuel and then sabotage Tempestirae’s efforts instead?”

“I could, but then I would be doing a disservice to the Highlands surrounding Speartop Mountain. You see, the Warlock is also trying to produce stable anti-matter through the transmutation of perpetuum fuel as I’ve already mentioned. However, since the energy requirements for creating a non-volatile sample of alien matter is so immense, Tempestirae has been using an energy condenser to stockpile enough of the perpetuum fuel — are you familiar with energy condensers?”

“Not really, no,” John admitted.

“Well,” Hall continued, “energy condensers are artifice that converts the matter from anything placed inside into something else. This process requires a focus unit of the desired output for the transmutation to take place. Now, as with alchemy’s sister science, chemistry, reactions are limited to the material composition of the focus, the physical components of which must be met before an object can be manufactured by alchemy. However, unlike most sciences, there are certain extremely dangerous ways of bypassing the material requirements by taking advantage of the law of conservation of energy and then manipulating matter on a quantum level and simply working with energy requirements as opposed to material requirements. Think of the process as a weaver creating a pattern from scratch without regard for using a physical template — it’s a similar concept.”

“So Professor, how are you doing a disservice to the Highlanders again?” Clawe asked with his eyes darting to the clock on the wall behind Professor Hall.

“I’m getting there.” the Professor said nonplussed. “Now the Warlock has decided to use a particularly vile setup for the condenser, one utilizing energy collectors for the process. You see, energy collectors usually have the effect of stealing carbon dioxide, nitrogen or oxygen for use as a medium, but the damned Warlock has a setup that draws energy directly from the luminiferous æther! I’ve obtained a sample of the vapors from the condenser in the Highlands, and through spectroscopic phase changes, I’ve determined that the æther is being removed from the air.” He leaned forwards. “Light itself is fading from the land. Correspondence with the Meteorological Society has confirmed the nights are becoming exponentially longer. My estimate is if the perpetuum focus isn’t removed from the energy condenser, and the collectors shut down, then the Highlands will be reduced to an abysmal canopy of pure darkness within seven days.”

John nodded absent-mindedly.

“So what I really want to know is, after I bring you back the perpetuum fuel and this test

ordeal is over, what will my grade be?"

Professor Hall broke into a manic grin.