

Yet More Short Snips

By Alexander Saxton

The Starving Giant

That Winter, he came down from the north to trouble the village. If he had stood on his hind legs, he would have been about twelve feet tall, but since he went on all fours, it was easy to mistake just how huge the giant was. He looked a great deal like a man, except that his skin was the bluish white colour of thawing sea-ice, his eyes were milky with a nictitating membrane, he had a white mane that flowed down to his navel and the small of his spine, and his finger and toenails were long and thick and black. Not knowing how to deal with their new neighbour, the townspeople put in a call to the Ministry of Northern Development, but the ministry told them giants were generally harmless, and endangered besides, so the best thing to do would be to leave it in peace, and hope it went back north.

The townspeople were concerned, though. The giant looked sick. His huge legs, which should have been like tree-trunks, looked shrunken, anorectic. It was possible to count all of the giant's ribs, even from a safe distance. He looked gaunt, and shaky, and desperate, and since many of the townspeople still lived the way their ancestors had, before the government had come, they knew that this was when animals were at their most dangerous.

But the Ministry didn't listen to their concerns, which, sadly, was something the townspeople had come to expect.

At first, though, it seemed to go well enough. The giant seemed afraid of humans, and the townspeople knew enough from local lore that giants weren't to be trifled with, and for the first week, things were fine. During the day, the giant would come down to the river, and try to catch arctic char with its strange, six-fingered hands. And those with the spare time would come down from the town and stand watching him with binoculars, a few hundred meters off.

But the giant was used to reaching through arctic sea ice and pulling up seals. The fish were too small and quick for him, and even though he caught a few, he grew thinner day by day. At night, instead of retreating back to the hills, he began lurking around the town dump, digging through piles of trash for foodscraps, and occasionally snatching up crows or arctic foxes.

The people, too, became more comfortable around him. In particular, the children, once they had gotten over their fear, began to see the giant as a figure of fun. They gave him the nickname, 'trashman', and started hanging out within meters of him, shouting insults as he gnawed at old bones, or laughing at his long, solemn features, and the outsized grey-purple genitals that wobbled between his emaciated legs.

Of course, they would get in trouble for this behaviour, but to them, that just became a part of the entertainment.

Finally, the children started to play a game where they tried to poke the giant with a stick, and then run away. The giant gave bad sport, though. Every time they poked it, it would let out a low groan and walk off. So the game had to be heightened. Instead of poking the giant, one of the children suggested the new object of the game should be to thwack him in the testicles.

Now, none of the other kids liked this idea. But the girl who suggested it was a little bit older, and a little bit brighter than the others, and they looked up to her. And she came from a home that was a little bit worse than all of theirs, so she had just a little bit more to prove than the rest of them. And so, after haranguing the other children into following her, she picked up the stick, and crept up behind the Giant.

The giant had caught something and was eating it. As they came closer, they saw that it was a stray dog which had been hanging around the dump, powered through the dog's little skull with an awful crunch, for several months. But because they were children, it didn't occur to any of them that the dog was faster than they were, and that the giant had managed to catch it. The giant's molars but the girl was too concerned with how the others would view her to let something as trivial as a nightmarish sound turn her away. Not even bothering to tiptoe, she marched up behind the giant, gripped the stick with both hands, and swung home.

Whap.

For a moment, the giant seemed to not even notice, so she gripped the stick even more tightly, and wound up for another swing. Then, whisper-quick, the giant stood up on its hind legs.

Her jaw dropped, the other children began to back away, but she stood, transfixed as the creature in front of her appeared to double in size. One of the other children shouted her name: she blinked, and began to stagger backwards. But the giant turned, and with a single huge step, he had caught up with her, snatched her up in one hand, and held her up, twelve feet in the air, to look into his eyes.

These eyes were terrible. Behind that wind-protecting membrane which never withdrew, a pair of bright blue eyes blazed at her. The giant opened its mouth, and the smell was horrific. From her new vantage point, she could see that bits of feather, bone, and black plastic trash bag were caught between its huge square teeth. Its black lips were slick with blood from the dog. She realized the giant's face was built to a slightly different set of proportions than a human's, and that the low-slung jaw was large enough to bite off one of her arms or legs quite cleanly.

She began to cry.

The giant looked at her closely. Its grip loosened- still firm, but no longer crushing. Bringing her close, it sniffed once, twice. Then, taking a deep breath, it shouted full in her face, spraying her with rank saliva and bits of appalling gristle. Its voice was like a man's- uncomfortably like a man's. She closed her eyes, waiting for the end, but the giant was done. It tossed her to the ground, fell back to all fours, and wandered off through the mounds of trash.

Later that evening, a posse came from the village, armed with guns. Luckily, perhaps for them, perhaps for the giant, they found that their northern visitor was already dead. Maybe from malnutrition, maybe poisoned by something it had eaten in the dump, they couldn't be sure.

None of them was qualified to perform an autopsy, and the giant's body had already begun to freeze in the cold.

Because the ground was too hard for a burial, they decided to burn the body. It took a lot of fuel, and after the fact, the townsfolk concluded it would have been better to just leave him out for the scavengers.

After that, people started to move on. For the children, if they remembered the starving giant, it was as a strange isolated event. But the grownups in the village, those who paid more attention to the outside world, couldn't afford to forget about him. Every spring, the arctic ice shrank more and more, and every spring, the grownups of the village would cast anxious eyes northward, wondering and waiting for when the next one would come.

Bad for Business

SFX: Radio crackle

...Tuesday July the 18th... listening to the... -lta City radio hour. Our top story today... (indecipherable)... at the Trilithon Corporation facility by highway eight. ...Praised for their swift response... -ced under quarantine. No word yet on the severity of the breach, but...

Heat Wave

It was the worst heat wave the village had seen in two hundred years. The pavement reflected white under a hateful sun, and old leaves baked and crisped in the eaves. Pools of standing water simmered dry, and the Mosquitos all died, as surely as if the sun had lit their wings on fire and sent them hurtling down in smoke. The villagers were briefly happy, because the mosquitos were their ancient enemies, but then the river began to shrink and thicken, its waters reducing like sauce in a pan until the fish began to choke and surface, bloated with awful gas.

The girl knew whose fault it was. The heatwave had begun shortly after the businessman arrived in town. The coincidence was too neat, and the businessman's concern for the villagers was too oily to be genuine. Alone of anyone in the village, he was unbothered by the heat, for even though he wore a three piece suit of dark blue wool, his car and his home were both air conditioned, kept in icy perfection even as they belched out even more heat on the rest of the town.

But nobody would listen to the girl. Of course, it was a ridiculous notion, a child's way of seeing the world, and the businessman had done a lot to ingratiate himself to the townsfolk. He had brought jobs and industry to the town, and with the jobs, some villagers had been able to afford the small air conditioning units the businessman had started to sell. Of course, they broke down

often and had to be expensively repaired, but wasn't it worth it, to be able to face the heat with that same smiling dignity the businessman had?

The heat wave worsened. Trees began to brown in the jungle. Oxen began to die under their shelters, as their massive bodies produced heat faster than the stifling breeze could carry it away. The girl decided something had to be done.

A certain species of beetle lived in the jungle nearby that bred in the cool and damp, and produced a terrible stink. She released some into the culvert under the businessman's house, and returned to water it several times a day. Within a week, the businessman could be heard to complain about a smell in his house.

In the hills near the village, a set of volcanic springs bubbled up with an undrinkable water that could make metal rust. Each day that week, lightheaded from the heat and the fumes, she hiked out to the springs with a cloudy old glass bottle and returned to splash the undercarriage of the businessman's car. Within a week, its underside was red, flaked, and brittle.

At last, the day came where the businessman had to leave his house for fumigation, and found that his car would not turn on. Like anybody else in the village, he had no choice but to walk outside in the forty degree heat.

Then, a curious thing happened- even though he was still wearing his woolen suit, the villagers realized the businessman did not sweat. They asked him why, and he laughed them off, but it was unnatural. He came from the north, they were used to the heat, yet he was the one unbothered in his wool, while they, barely wearing anything, felt as though they were about to die.

They thought about what the girl had said, and as they gathered around him, they realized the air around the businessman was cool, chill as the morning.

The businessman began to laugh, and as the villagers stepped back, unsure of how to respond, he ran.

But the girl had seen him getting ready to run.

In the jungle near the village, a seed grew that released a thick oil the villagers used for cooking. A plastic barrel of this oil stood in one of the stalls in the village market, and as the businessman ran past, she shoved it over to spill under his feet.

He fell.

And then, as his outstretched arms touched the packed dirt, something strange happened. Like a balloon, his flesh stretched and burst, and inside him was no blood or bone, but an unthinkable amount of clear water. It hit the road like a tidal wave, and washed through the marketplace, hundreds and hundreds of gallons of water, more than could have been contained in a volume ten times the size of the businessman's body. It crashed through the village, calf deep, and all the villagers yelped and jumped in the air, for the water was as cold as frost. As it pooled and settled, they could see chunks of ice floating in it, which slowly dissipated under the equatorial sun.

That night, the heat wave ended.

Castagaites

Until that day late in summer when she stood calf-deep in the shallows where the wild rice grew, she had forgotten the local folklore tradition, which claimed Castagaites, the warrior queen, had died in battle here, near the south end of barrow lake. She tread carefully in the water- the bed of the shallows was thick and slippery with mud that gripped her ankles with every step, sharp with the old shattered stalks of reeds and grass, which were ready to pierce an unwary step like a punji stick.

Her bag full of rice, she began to climb the bank, but the mud gave way beneath the pressure of her foot, and she slid back down into the water. The top layer of mud came with her, and revealed an old skull, stained brown from the peat.

The skull wore the remains of a bright feathered headdress, still gleaming with flecks of gold leaf. It had one gold tooth, and in life, several of its other teeth had been filed to savage points. For a moment, she lay still in the mud, soaking through to the skin. Then, the skull spoke to her. "Uncover me," it said. And, of course, thinking this was the hero on whose stories she'd been raised, the young woman did as she was bidden, and began to drag away the clods of peat, fling aside black fistfuls of mud, and bring the rest of the dead hero's bones to the open air. When she finished, the skeleton pushed itself slowly into a seated position, and massaged the bare vertebra at the back of its neck. A scrap of mummified skin covering one scapula still bore black strands of tattoo, pale streaks of scar tissue.

"Are you... Castagaites?" she asked. She felt lightheaded with the daring it took to ask the question.

"I am," said the skeleton. "I was."

Even without skin or muscle or intervertebral cartilage, the skeleton cut an impressive figure. In life, Castagaites must have been over six-and-a-half feet tall.

The skeleton looked at its hands, and slowly closed, then opened them.

"Do you have any nerves?" it said.

"Nerves?"

"Before anything else," said the skeleton. "I have to be able to feel pain."

Of course, the young woman did have nerves.

"Do you mean-" she started, but fell silent when the skeleton looked at her, with those wide dark sockets.

"You are using yours," said the skeleton.

The young woman felt lightheaded again, this time, with relief.

"Come back to my home," she said. "I may have something."

Her hut was not far from the bottom of the lake. She lived alone. The dead hero had to duck her head to pass beneath the hut's low lintel, and seemed to fill the space, as though the volume outside her ribs was hers as much as the volume contained by them. The young woman searched for something that could be put to service as a set of nerves, but in the end, all she could find was a spool of red thread.

"It will have to do," said Castagaites. Like the eye of a needle, the skeleton threaded the least bone of her finger, and then began passing the spool between her bones like a shuttle through a

loom. At last, the spool ran out, and the skeleton was skeined with red, so, through the light of the door, it seemed as though Castagaites was filled with red mist.

"Ah," said Castagaites. She put a hand over the ribs where her heart had once been, and sank into a chair.

"Do you feel?" said the young woman.

"Yes," said Castagaites. "Do you have any muscle? Now that I can hurt, I have to be able to act."

But besides her own muscle, which Castagaites would not take, the young woman did not possess any. She was poor, and lived mostly on the wild grains and vegetables that grew by the bottom of the lake.

"In a way," said the young woman, "This muscle is yours, since it came from the plants that grew from your body."

Castagaites shook her head.

"It's yours now. The plants gave it freely. Freely, I gave it to the plants."

"Come with me to the woods, then. Maybe we can find something."

The young woman had planned to catch a deer, but Castagaites was impatient. In the end, they found a tree heavy with kudzu, harvested the vines, and wrapped them around Castagaites' bones, who gasped in pain each time one of their fingers brushed against one of her red new nerves.

"I wish I could bleed," said Castagaites, shuddering in the shade-spattered sunlight, as kudzu tendrils curled their way into the shady spots once filled with bone marrow. "I cannot tell you what it is like to feel such pain, but be unable to bleed."

For a moment, it seemed Castagaites had mastered the pain, but then a breeze ripped through the trees and the bones, and Castagaites sank to one knee, hissing between her fearsome teeth. At length, the dead hero stood again.

"Do you have any skin," she said. "A little pain is useful, but to go through the world without skin is too much."

The young woman thought for a moment.

"Castagaites," she said. "By now you know I would offer you my very own skin"

"I would refuse," the dead queen said.

"Something more valuable, then," said the young woman.

She brought Castagaites to the ruins of the town, the wreckage of the atelier which had once belonged to her mother. Under the broken beams of the doors, they found themselves in a dusty studio, its shattered looms and scattered silk screens half-lit by the golden-hour light which slithered through the ruined roof, the ruptured walls.

"What place is this," said Castagaites.

"Nothing," said the young woman. Then, "The life's work of three generations."

"I am sorry," said Castagaites.

The young woman was touched by this, but did not know what to say. Instead, she pushed through to the next room. Unnoticed in the ransack, a trap door was set into the floor along one wall. The young woman pulled it open, and Castagaites watched as she disappeared down into the shadow. A moment- and she resurfaced, and it seemed she had filled her arms with shadow down there, and had brought armfuls of it up.

No- not shadow, silk. She carried a bolt of night-soft black silk, printed with the most delicate flowers in pink and white and palest blue. Gently, the young woman unrolled it, and it spread through the air in front of her body like nightfall.

"My family fortune," said the young woman.

Castagaites reached out with one red and green and peat-dark finger, and caressed the fabric. Even with her makeshift nerves, too crude to feel almost anything but pain, the dead queen could feel its downy warmth.

"It is priceless," she said.

"Priceless, and worthless," said the young woman. "Until somebody has a use for it." She pinched the cloth between one finger and thumb. "It's thick," she said. "It should keep out the wind."

"With your permission, then," said Castagaites.

And together they wrapped the dead warrior's bones and nerves and green cords in silk, until she gleamed black in the gathering blackness of the atelier.

"Ah," said Castagaites, when all was finished.

They had entered back out into the evening, and a cool breeze was rippling in the dead woman's silk skin.

"Is it better?" said the young woman. But Castagaites raised one hand again, and placed it across her un-heart.

"Yes," she said. "And no. One pain goes, another returns. I have a task."

"Is that why you woke up?"

"Yes."

Castagaites raised her head to the coming night, and breathed the breeze, filling the silk on her ribs like a curtain in a stormy window, like a sail.

"The thing I am looking for," she said. "Is nearby. I can feel it."

"The old hill-fort," said the young woman.

"Yes," said Castagaites. "How did you know?"

"I know the story," she said. She was very still.

"It is not a story to me," said Castagaites.

By the time they came to the ruins, the moon had risen, heavy and yellow with the sap of late summer. So bright was the silk, that the moon reflected from Castagaites' new skin, as on dark water.

"How long since the fortress fell," said Castagaites.

"Very long," said the young woman.

"And I-" said Castagaites. "How long have I-"

"Longer," said the young woman. "Much longer."

"Ah." said Castagaites. They were silent for a long moment, before the dead hero made her way into the the maze of tumbled stones and splintered towers.

"This is not how I thought I would pass these gates," she said. "I had thought, in daylight, in triumph, and long before."

"Whenever I heard the story," said the young woman, "That's how I hoped it would end. But it never did."

"Well," said Castagaites. "The story does not end the way we like, but it does end, and there's a comfort in that." With unliving strength, she bent, and pulled a stone larger than the young woman was tall from the blocked entrance of a passage, and flung it to one side. "We have come here now."

Lining up with the mouth of the passage, the moon lit their way a long way down before the young man was forced to light one of the ancient torches that hung from brackets on the walls.

"It is close," said Castagaites, as the torch caught flame.

"The thing we're looking for," said the young woman. "Is it-" she could not finish.

"How gruesome is the end of the story you know?" said Castagaites.

"I never wanted to believe it was true," the young woman said.

"No," said Castagaites. "Neither did I."

"But now?"

"Some sense tells me it is true," she said. "But I do not want to talk about it."

"No," said the young woman. "What could be said?"

The hidden stairs led them deeper and deeper beneath the earth with every pause and word.

"I am still in pain," said Castagaites.

"I'm sorry," said the young woman.

"I am grateful to you for being here," said Castagaites.

The young woman felt a stone in the pit of her throat.

"I consider it a privilege to help you. However I can."

The dead queen stopped and turned, resting a hand on the young woman's shoulder. She was strange and dreadful in the darkness.

"What is your name?" said Castagaites.

The young woman told her. It was a perfectly common, boring name of the day and place of her birth.

"Thank you," said Castagaites, and then thanked her again, by name. The dead queen looked over her shoulder. "We are here," she said.

They entered a little chamber, filled with dust, and found another chamber behind it, with a collapsed ceiling. In the rubble, they found a broken cabinet, half-crushed by fallen timbers.

"This is it," said Castagaites. She reached forward, and pulled open the cabinet's sagging door.

The young woman raised her torch, and the beams crept into shadow. Then- they caught. A white form was revealed in the darkness, gleaming here and there with little golden screws, sheens of enamel, and tufts of golden, splitted thread.

The young woman gasped. The breath went out of her. A wave of nausea washed up through the grotto of her chest.

"Oh," said Castagaites, and sunk back until she was sitting, with one arm supporting her weight, the other thrown over the empty sockets of her eyes. A cloud of dust rose into the air around them.

"I wish I could cry," said Castagaites, shuddering in the light-spattered shadow, as motes of dust floated their way into the hollow spots once filled with bone marrow. "I cannot tell you what it is like to feel such pain, but be unable to cry."

Castagaites reached for the object in the cabinet, but then pulled back her hand.

"I cannot bear to touch it," said the dead hero.

"If you need," said the young woman, but the dead queen held up one silken palm.

"No," said Castagaites. "It should be me. To whatever extent I am still me." She gave one dusty breath of laughter.

"Why should something like me fear something like this?" She said. "We are scarcely different."

Castagaites reached into the cabinet with both palms, and withdrew what seemed to be a little harp, simply carved from ivory, and stringed with broken strings of gold.

But, of course, for anyone who knew the story, the harp was made from nothing like ivory, and threaded with nothing like gold.

"So," said Castagaites, rising to her feet, and cradling the harp in the crook of her silken arm.

"This is what remains of him. I had hoped that we would meet again, and I would see-" she broke off, unable to speak further.

The column of the harp was made from two joined femurs, its neck and body from radii, ulnae, and scapulae. The long-frayed strings were wove from human hair, the tuning pegs, which so gleamed in the lamplight, were straight, white human teeth.

They stayed for a while, the young woman crying, the dead woman sitting in silence, wishing that she could.

"Come on," said the young woman at last. "It's time we left."

Castagaites raised one hand.

"You go," she said. "The dead belong underground."

"Not yet," said the young woman. She put out one hand out to the great skeleton. "He has been here for centuries. Don't keep him here any longer."

Castagaites looked at her, with hollow eyes, unthinkable teeth, clawlike hands barely softened by their silken gloves.

"You presume-" she began, but then turned her head aside, and took the young woman's offered palm, pulling herself to her feet. The young woman was surprised how light the dead hero was. She was just some hollow bones, some stalk, some thread, some memory and silk.

"You are right," said Castagaites. "Time that we left."

They returned to the sight of the moon, in time to see it fade to white on a lightening sky.

"Will you bury him?" said the young woman.

"Not like this," said Castagaites. "Right now he's, the *thing* that they turned him into. If you would help me, I would allow his bones to become bones again. Then, maybe he can rest, maybe I can as well."

She looked to the thickening light in the east.

"I would very much like to."

Gently, they teased loose the little golden screws, they pried out the pegs of bone that held his bones together.

"Ah," said Castagaites, with a fresh rush of pain in her voice. "Even the glue- even the glue is made from him."

At last, the harp was disassembled, laid out on a patch of black silk that Castagaites had pulled from her own bare breast. Only the column remained, two thighbones joined together so cunningly that they had been unable to pry them apart.

“On top of everything, one last little cruelty,” said the dead queen, holding her dead love’s bones in two flowered palms. “That to give him a dignified burial, the gravedigger would have to enact a final piece of violence against his body.” She looked down at the living woman. “He has already suffered so much.”

“One last hurt, and the story is ended,” said the young woman. “There’s a comfort in that.” The dead woman looked back at the bones.

“I wish we could have had a different story,” she said. “But we made the choices we did, the mistakes that we did. We can’t change what’s been done, only bring things to a close. I am sorry.”

She snapped the column in half, creating once again, two damaged femurs, which she placed on the silk, and then wrapped to her chest. Within, she could feel the tendrils of vine wrapping around his bones, making the two of them lovers again, after so long a time.

“What will you do now?” said the young woman.

Castagaites looked down towards the lake. In the morning light, its waters reached for her with fingers of vapour.

“I am tired,” said the dead hero. “I think he must be, too. Will you come with us to the lake?”

“Of course,” said the young woman.

In silence, they came to the edge of the water, and Castagaites waded out to the depth of her knees. Wet, the black silk grew even darker, unimaginably dark, the colour of deep sleep, the colour of unthinkable peace.

Castagaites turned to her.

“What will you do now?” she said.

The young woman looked over her shoulder, toward the ruins of the town. She took a deep breath.

“I think I’ll let this story end,” she said. “I think I’ll go and find another town. I think I’ll let the wild rice grow here in peace.”

Castagaites dipped her head.

“I’m happy to hear it.”

“Goodbye Castagaites.”

“Goodbye,” said the dead hero. “And thank you.”

Then turning, Castagaites strode into the morning mist, hands placed over a chest that was no longer empty. The silk of her new skin billowed around her in the water, turning dark, turning heavy, and pulled her down into the dark embrace of the silk-dark lake.

The next spring, the wild rice grew taller than ever before, and darker than ever before and the ducks grew fat and sleek, and their feathers shone like silk.