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Based on the bestselling comic book created by Mike Mignola

HELLBOY



THE GOD MACHINE
THOMAS E. SNIEGOSKI

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POCKET STAR BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney

The intruder in the doorway was dressed in a long coat with a black cap pulled down tightly on his head. When he saw Hellboy barreling toward him, he lifted Liz Sherman like she weighed nothing and tossed her right at the cloven-hoofed BPRD operative.

Hellboy tried to be gentle, cupping Liz's body against his own to cushion the impact as he caught her and fell backward. He laid her down gently, touching her neck, searching for a pulse. She gasped for breath, the pale skin of her throat already starting to bruise.

"Pal, you better hope your health insurance is all paid up," Hellboy snarled as he rose and sprang toward the intruder.

Liz's assailant was no longer alone. There were six of them now, all dressed in the same long coats and hats, standing perfectly still as they watched Hellboy advance.

"You have friends," Hellboy growled, flexing the stonelike fingers of his right hand. "Good for you."

As if responding to some cue, four of them slipped off their coats and tugged off their hats, moving in unison. Hellboy froze where he was, staring at them, trying to figure out what the hell he was seeing.

"What the...?" he managed.

They'd definitely been human once, three men and a woman. But they were long past their expiration date, the stink of death and rot coming off them in waves. They were each encased in some kind of crude exoskeleton constructed from wood and metal.

"It was a near-perfect day up till now. But zombie cyborgs..." Hellboy sighed. "I'm not sure I deserve this much fun."

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For Jack Kirby...The King.

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Farewell and adieu.

Prologue

Lynn, Massachusetts, July 1891

Ten-year-old Absolom was frightened, afraid that he wouldn't have enough time. But the boy stubbornly pushed his fear aside, repositioned himself upon the stool and continued to work. Time was running out.

He'd realized how close it would be the other day when he'd heard her coughing in the early hours of the morning. Coughing so furiously that it drew him from the protection of his bed and down the hall, where he'd found himself standing in the doorway of his parents' room. His mother had been sitting at the edge of the bed, his father close beside her, gently rubbing her back. She was coughing into one of her pretty lace handkerchiefs--but it wasn't pretty anymore. It was stained a deep red. Even in the early-morning gloom Absolom could see the color, bright as the beacon of a lighthouse.

Blood.

His gasp had been loud enough to catch his father's attention. There were tears on the man's face and he became enraged, angry that his son had seen his weakness.

"Go to your room!" he had bellowed over the sounds of his wife's continued plight, and then he slammed the door closed in Absolom's face.

It was then that Absolom knew he had to do something--but what?

He waved away a fly that hovered above his work, remembering how he had wracked his brain that morning as he returned to his room--what could he do?

The voices of the dead had been especially loud that morning.

Boy, where am I?

Where's my baby? He was with me but a moment ago--help me find my child.

Normally Absolom would have listened to them, as he had most of his young life, but that morning had been different. He had tried to close them out. But there remained one voice--a singing voice far off in the distance--that he couldn't ignore, for it claimed to have the answer to his question.

"Do you know how to make my mamma well?" he had finally asked, sitting on the floor of his bedroom. And he'd waited, holding his breath, for an answer from beyond.

Now Absolom wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow before it could rain down upon his work. Time was running out; he could practically hear it ticking away. His mother had gotten sicker--weaker--in the few days since he'd first heard that faraway voice.

It had told him to open his mind. And though he was afraid, Absolom had done just that. How could he not? His mother was dying.

The voice had filled his mind with a wondrous idea, and now he was racing against time to use that strange knowledge to save his mother.

Last night at supper his father had mentioned taking her into Boston, to see a doctor familiar with her condition. But Absolom knew that he was just going through the motions. The pain of loss was already etched deeply upon his father's face. There was nothing more a doctor could do for her, there was no one who could save her.

Except him.

If this works, there is a way, he thought, eyes focused upon his work, staring into the open chest of a dead bird splayed upon the wooden worktable.

He'd killed the sparrow by drowning it, the most painless and least damaging manner of death he could conceive. Then he had taken it back to his secret place--a fort that he had built with his own two hands--and began his work in earnest.

Using his mother's sewing needles, he had pinned its wings back on a makeshift table--a plank atop an old wooden barrel that had once contained salt. Very carefully, he cut open its chest, and slowly, systematically, began replacing the small organs with the mechanics he had found inside his father's prized pocket watch. If the bird came to life when he was finished, he knew that he could fashion larger parts to replace the ones that had gone bad inside his mother.

It had to work.

He'd asked the voice for guidance as he attempted to utilize the strange information that rattled around inside his head, but the voice had been oddly silent, leaving him to his own devices.

Absolom's eyes burned as he carefully placed the tiny metal wheel inside the sparrow's gaping

chest cavity. He had slept not a wink since the evening before, sneaking out to his fort soon after supper. Though he worked by lanternlight, the first rays of the morning sun began to peek through the slats of the fort, providing him with additional illumination for his chores.

Again he thought of the time and how quickly it was slipping away.

He placed the last of the springs and miniscule cogs inside the body of the bird, just as he'd seen in the diagram in his head. But there was something missing. He could see it there, in his mind's eye, but he didn't know what it was or where he could find it.

Fingers stained with the blood of the tiny animal went to his mouth as he began to panic. The taste tasted of copper, but it barely registered.

"Please," he whispered to the pockets of shadow in the fort, his voice trembling. "Help me succeed in this, and I promise shall serve you all the rest of my days."

The deafening silence continued, and he clasped his hands together, begging to be heard.

Then Absolom felt something move inside his mind, emerging like a tadpole from beneath the mud, and he was filled with a sense of power that he could not begin to understand--or survive. At that moment he knew he would die--that this strange power from somewhere beyond the realm of his understanding would fill him up so that he would be destroyed.

And just as suddenly it was gone, leaving him alone, his body tingling with but a reminder of what had just occurred, and the voice echoing inside his mind as it receded further and further away.

It is not yet time.

Absolom was filled with a nearly overpowering sense of loss. He had been close--so very close. The presence had been about to share the secret that would have helped him save his mother, and it had pulled away because he was not strong enough to know.

"Please!" he screamed aloud. "I have to know!"

Time was slipping; he could feel it with every beat of his frantic heart, and every frenzied gulp of breath. Absolom looked down at what he had done--knowing how close he'd come and realizing he was still so far away.

No, it can't be, he thought frantically, sitting back down upon his stool, determined to finish what he had started. He used a needle and thread to connect the parts inside the sparrow, and then to close up the bird's chest. Completing the last stitch, he bent over the body of the bird to break the thread with his teeth, and he caught the first whiff of it, the smell of death--of decay.

Will Mother smell like this? he wondered.

Then his guard fell, and the spirits of the dead surged forward, all clamoring to be heard. Still, he refused to listen.

He removed the needles that secured the sparrow's wings to his worktable, noticing that its body

had grown stiff. He gazed down at the tiny creature, wishing it back to life.

The dead continued their cries, but Absolom remained firm, all his attention upon the body of the bird resting in his hands.

"Absolom!" called a voice that he mistakenly confused with that of the dead. The door to his shelter swung open to reveal the silhouette of his father.

The boy tossed the dead bird into the air, willing it to live--willing it to fly. But it fell to the floor at his feet, the tiny mechanics spilling through the torn stitching in its chest.

"She's gone, boy," he heard his father say, the whisperings of the dead around him confirming the mournful message. "Your mother's passed in the night."

So close, the boy thought, the scalding tears of loss beginning to fill his eyes as he stared down at his failure. It was not yet time; the voice had told him so.

But soon.

Soon.

Two Months Ago. October, 1995

Things were looking up for Stan Thomas.

The tall, gangly man took in a deep lungful of sharp November air and surveyed what he hoped would soon be his home. He smiled faintly to himself, a king surveying his fabulous kingdom.

According to the real estate agent, Elijah Attwater, the dilapidated farmhouse had stood unoccupied for nearly fifty years. The elderly agent's father had supposedly purchased the property from the city of Lynn, Massachusetts, in the early 1900s, but for some reason could never find anyone other than an occasional renter who was willing to make the house a home.

Christ, somebody even tried to burn the place down ten years ago, Stan remembered Elijah saying. There were still scorch marks visible on the side of the foundation.

The house stood at the end of an unpaved dirt road that bordered the Lynn Woods Reservation. This was the third time Stan had brought his family here. The idea of buying the old place, with all its blemishes, filled his belly with a bizarre mixture of giddy excitement and overpowering dread. He wasn't fooling himself; he knew there had to be a reason why the house had never sold, but he hoped that his skills as a jack-of-all-trades would be enough to tackle the inevitable problems.

Stanley glanced at Bethany and wondered if she was feeling the same kind of trepidation. He thought he saw tears in his wife's eyes and abruptly his uncertainty was suffocated beneath the weight of his devotion to this woman who had stuck by him through thick and thin. Stan had been through serious depression, a layoff from his job, and financial ruin, and now he and Bethany were rebuilding their lives.

She had loved this place from the start, but she deserved so much more. He vowed to himself that this ramshackle farmhouse would be just the start of the perfect life he would make for her.

"I don't even have to ask what you think," he said, as Bethany gazed at the property. They looked at other places in nearby Saugus and Salem, but nothing had spoken to them like this run-down farmhouse with the sagging roof.

"It's going to be one headache after another, but--"

He pulled her closer, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"It's so beautiful, Stan," she continued, and reached up to wipe the moisture from the corners of her eyes before it could run down her ruddy cheeks.

Their seven-year-old daughter, Rebecca, came skipping around the side of the house. She bent down and picked up a stick, waving it in the air like a magic wand.

"Yeah, it is that," Stan agreed. "And it's going to be ours--if that's okay with you."

Bethany stared up at him, a momentary look of confusion on her face. "Do you mean...are you serious?"

He nodded, and she squealed in excitement, jumping up and throwing her arms and legs around him, holding on tight as she planted sloppy kisses all over his face.

"I love you," Bethany said, between frantic kisses and ecstatic laughter. "Love. Love. Love you. really, really do."

He held her close, basking in her adulation, and made a silent promise that he would never again give her a reason not to love him. Then he kissed her passionately.

"Ewww, there they go again," he heard his daughter moan, and they both began to laugh, ending the kiss before things got out of hand.

Bethany made a move to tickle Rebecca, and the child squealed in mock terror, dropping her stick and running in the same direction her older brother had headed a few minutes earlier with the family dog.

"Be careful," Bethany called after her. "Find your brother. We have some really cool news for you guys."

Bethany returned to her husband's side, slipping her hand into the back pocket of his jeans. "I can't believe it," she cooed. "We're actually going to buy a house."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," Stan replied, good-naturedly checking his hip into her. "First our offer has to be accepted."

She threw her arms around him again. "It'll be accepted." She squeezed him tightly. "This is our dream house; we *have* to live here."

Stan glanced at the house, with its listing front porch and peeling red paint. "Yeah," he agreed, imagining the future--their future. "Yeah, I think you just might be right."

Bethany squealed again, jumping up and down, unable to contain her excitement, and planted another wet kiss on his cheek. Stan couldn't help but laugh.

He had discussed the price of the place with Attwater after their first visit and thought it was reasonable, but now after visits two and three, he was beginning to think it might be time for a little game of let's make a deal. The more he looked at the place, the more work he saw that needed to be done, and the more supplies he'd need to buy. Stanley Thomas saw lots of overtime in his future, and was glad that his new job for Costa Construction allowed him the option. *More work than hours in the day*, his foreman Greg Skopis always said, and amen to that.

"First thing we have to do..."

"After we make an offer and it's accepted and the house belongs to us free and clear, you mean," Bethany said, and started to laugh.

"Touche," he responded, bending down to kiss the top of her head. "After all that, the first thing we have to do is slap a new roof on the place before winter hits full force."

She agreed, pointing out specific areas where the ancient tar shingles had peeled and lifted and where the roof seemed to sag in on itself.

Their daughter's voice interrupted Bethany's observation, and the two of them turned to see Rebecca running toward them through the overgrowth that bordered the property.

"What is it, honey?" Bethany called, caution in her voice. Rebecca was often a drama queen, and her excited cries could be for something as simple as the fact that she'd found a quarter, or something worthy of genuine concern, like the time she'd needed twelve stitches in her palm.

"Jack said he found something really weird and wants you to come see!" the little girl bellowed, turning to head back the way she had come. "Follow me!"

Stan and Bethany followed close behind, keeping Rebecca in their sight. "Really weird, huh?" Stan said with a chuckle.

"Wonder what he's found this time," his wife said, as they continued down the winding path, tromped down in the thick underbrush.

Even for November the weeds were pretty high. *Must look like a jungle at the height of summer*, Stan thought.

The three of them came to a clearing where it looked as though another structure had once stood, the remains of a stone foundation still visible, but little else. Stan remembered Attwater saying something about a barn.

Up ahead, Stan could see his son squatting in the square of the stone foundation with their dog, Sadie. The Labrador-German shepherd mix barked excitedly at the sight of them, bounding in the

direction, then circling back to hover around his son. Whatever it was that Jack had found was interesting enough to hold not only the fascination of a ten-year-old, but also that of a dog.

"Probably some animal bones," he said to Bethany, who wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"Hey, Jack," Stan called out. "What'd ya find?"

Jack looked up and waved. He was holding a gnarled tree branch, and had been poking something in the dirt.

"Come here!" the boy cried. "Ya gotta see this." His sister had joined him, picking up her own stick, but it was snatched away by the easily excited Sadie.

"I hope it isn't anything gross," Bethany said as she stepped carefully around the stones and debris that littered the ground.

The couple moved beside the children and Jack looked up from where he was probing with his stick. "It's not gross," he assured his mother, a twinkle in his young eyes. "Just kinda weird."

"Weird," Rebecca echoed in agreement. She had managed to pull the stick away from Sadie and was holding it high so the dog couldn't take it back from her.

"I was looking around at stuff, and these things just pushed right up out of the ground."

"I saw 'em too," Rebecca exclaimed, waving her stick in the air. Sadie sat at attention by her side, eyes on the stick, tail wagging.

Stan crouched down for a closer look and saw five cylindrical objects sticking up out of the earth. They seemed to be made of metal--copper by the looks of them. They reminded him of the old-fashioned batteries he had seen in some of the older houses he'd worked in, but he'd never seen anything quite like these before.

He was suddenly filled with an overpowering dread--the kind of feeling that would strike him when the phone rang in the predawn hours and he would be certain, deep down in his gut, that somebody had died.

"What are they, Dad?" Jack asked, extending the stick to tap one of the copper objects.

"Don't, Jack," he barked, somehow knowing that they shouldn't...*upset them*. "I don't know what they are, but we should get away from here and..."

Bethany moved closer, and Stan wanted to grab the children and run away as fast as he could. But his rational brain overruled his increasingly irrational emotions.

"Look, Mommy," Rebecca said, pointing at the cylindrical objects. "They're like funny plants growing out of the dirt."

Funny plants.

Normally Stan would have laughed at his daughter's ridiculous observation, but he could find nothing humorous about their current situation. The intense sense of apprehension continued to grow.

"They *are* funny," Bethany said, moving even closer herself.

Stan reached out, grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

"Ow," she said, pulling her arm away indignantly. "What'd you do that for?"

"Sorry," he said, his eyes fixed upon the cylinders.

"Mr. Attwater said there was a barn here a long time ago, and that the people who lived in the house got killed when the people in town set the barn on fire," Jack piped up.

"That's terrible," Bethany said, still rubbing her arm. "Why did they do that?"

Jack shrugged. "Mr. Attwater said that the people in the town didn't like what they were doing in the barn. They had machines and stuff."

"What were they doing, Jack?" Rebecca asked. "In the barn."

"He didn't say," the boy said, then extended his stick and gave one of the cylinders another poke.

"Jack!" Stan snapped, and everyone jumped. "Don't touch them," he ordered as he pulled his son away. But that was all he could say. He couldn't tell them *why* the objects filled him with such anxiety, why they made him so afraid, for he didn't know himself.

The air grew heavy with the acrid stench of ozone, like being outside after a heavy thunder and lightning storm.

"What's that?" Rebecca asked, her tiny fingers pinching her nose shut. "It stinks!"

The stink became stronger, and the air seemed to hum with an electrical charge. Stan could sense that the others were feeling it now as well, looking around curiously for some kind of explanation.

Rebecca began to laugh uproariously. "Look at my hair," she cried, pulling off her hood to allow her hair to stand on end. "It's electric."

Stan could feel a tingle in his own scalp, and the hair on his arms stood up, the skin prickling.

"What's going on, Stan?" Bethany asked, reaching out to pull their giggling daughter closer.

He was about to tell them that they had to get out of there right then, when Sadie began to bawl wildly, her hackles rising as she crept toward the cylinders.

The objects were glowing, the terminals on the exposed ends sending snaking arcs of white electrical current up into the air. The exposed portions of the cylinders pulsed with an eerie light.

"I'm afraid," Bethany whimpered, and Stan found himself stepping between the objects and her.

family, yelling at the dog in his sternest voice to come. But Sadie seemed to be picking up on the same vibes as he, sensing a danger to her pack.

What happened next unfolded in a kind of slow motion. With a guttural whine, Sadie lunged snapping at the pulsing cylinders, the loose skin around her muzzle pulling back to reveal glistening pink gums and sharp teeth. And as the tip of her black nose made contact with one of the objects, there was a flash, and a sound like the cracking of a bullwhip.

Sadie cried out.

Stanley stared in horror as a bolt of blue electrical energy shot up from the cylinder and lanced through the dog's left eye. It exploded out of the side of her neck in a puff of oily smoke and arced down to connect with the copper terminals of the cylinder beside it. That was followed by another arc then another until all five of the batteries--if that indeed was what they were--were linked by cords in the crackling discharge.

Stan screamed as the bolt of electricity ripped through his dog's flesh, setting her fur on fire. He knew he had to protect his wife and children, to scoop them all up in his arms, and carry them to safety...but everything was happening so fast--*and yet so slowly*--that there was nothing he could do.

Except scream.

The conjoined cylinders lashed out at him with a single bolt of electrical force, a hissing cobalt strike that pierced his chest, turning his insides to liquid fire before exiting through the fingertips of his left hand.

The lightning current shot into his wife and from her into Jack, and then from the boy into little Rebecca. They were linked together now in a strange kind of circuit--the dog, his family, and the objects that had pushed up from the ground.

Stan wondered if they were going to die.

A voice like an angel's spoke in his mind, reassuring him that his sacrifice, and that of his family would not be in vain, that they would be instrumental in bringing about a new and glorious age for mankind.

A god is coming to the world, the voice inside his head whispered. And this time, there will be nothing to prevent it.

Stanley Thomas wasn't there anymore.

Certainly, if one were to observe the tall man, dressed as he almost always was in his Levi's and heavy leather jacket, suspicion would never be aroused that everything that defined the man as an individual--his loves, likes and dislikes--had been locked away.

Replaced with another's.

The man who was no longer Stanley Thomas stood trembling in the midafternoon New England cold and gazed down at hands not his own. They were strong hands, hands that were used to a hard

day's work.

His vessel had been chosen wisely, for there was much that needed to be done.

How good it is to be seeing through actual eyes again, he thought looking about. The land upon which he stood appeared vaguely familiar, but so much had changed since last he stood here.

There was a sound from behind him and he turned slowly, an expression of rapturous joy blossoming upon his new face as he recalled that he was not alone in this.

He looked upon them, dressed in their new vestments of flesh, blood and bone, and though he did not recognize them--the woman, two children and a dog--he knew them all.

"Brothers and sisters," he said, pleased with the strength that he heard in his new voice.

"It is good to be back."

Chapter 1

Now. December, 1995

This guy seems kinda squirrely, Hellboy thought, as he entered the home of Donald Kramer. Or maybe it was just the fact that a seven-foot-tall, red-skinned demon dressed in a trench coat and packing some serious heat was standing in the guy's foyer. *Not that's not it.* Kramer just seemed like one of those types.

The man's hands hadn't stopped moving; touching his face, running his fingers through his hair as he explained why he'd called in the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense.

"One day it was there in the backyard like it always was," he said with a shrug and a twitch. "And then it was gone." Kramer gnawed at one of his fingernails like he hadn't eaten in a week.

Hellboy glanced at the clipboard in his hand. "We *are* talking about a rock, right?"

The man nodded eagerly. "Yes, a boulder. Been there forever. It separated my property from the woods behind it."

Alarm bells had gone off at the BPRD headquarters in Fairfield when some desk jockey at the Plymouth, Massachusetts, Police Department keyed Kramer's case into their computers. The Bureau had a deal with most of the police departments in the U.S., and hundreds of locations abroad; anything out of the ordinary was reported, it raised a flag and a copy of the file was sent to the BPRD. Most of the stuff was junk, but every once in a while something piqued their curiosity. Lately, that had been happening more often than usual. The brain trust at the BPRD had noticed a pattern. Things were being reported missing--odd things.

The BPRD didn't like patterns.

"Was there anything unusual about this boulder?" Hellboy asked.

"No," Kramer answered sharply. "It was just a rock--a big rock. Why?"

Hellboy scratched the back of his head, unsure how to explain. This particular "big rock" had been cataloged in the Bureau's informational database as an object of religious significance, something worshipped by a primitive people long ago. The cheat sheet Hellboy had on his clipboard didn't give him much more information than that, but he knew that it was only the latest in a long line of similar items that had disappeared throughout the region over the past month or so.

"No reason." Hellboy shrugged his large shoulders. "Just covering all the bases." He placed the clipboard under his arm. "Can I take a look at the scene of the crime?"

A twitch had developed at the corner of Kramer's right eye. "A crime? Do you think a crime has been committed?"

Hellboy sighed. "It's just an expression. So can I take a look?"

"Certainly," the man replied after breathing a sigh of relief. "It's through here." He turned toward a room behind him.

Yep, definitely squirrely.

Kramer led Hellboy into a room filled with books, floor to ceiling, on shelves and in piles on the floor.

"Do a lot of reading, huh?" Hellboy was careful not to disturb any of the precariously balanced stacks.

The man stopped halfway across the room and turned. "Yes, yes I do. For my work. I'm a writer. This is my reference library."

From the corner of his eye, Hellboy saw something dart around one of the piles to disappear behind a heavy-looking, floor-to-ceiling bookcase. It was bigger than a mouse, maybe a rat, but he couldn't be sure.

"Do you read much, Mister...Boy?"

Hellboy looked quickly back at Kramer to find the man glaring at the bookcase. He had seen it well.

"Not as much as I'd like. I read a little Louis L'Amour, some Spillane, and I really like that M. J. Murtry guy."

"Yes," Kramer nodded, obviously humoring him. "I hear he's quite good."

"Wish I had more time," Hellboy said. "But you know how it is, slave to minimum wage and all."

The man nodded--smile way too friendly for an ordinary suburban guy having a conversation with someone big and red, with hooves and a tail. Hellboy normally made ordinary citizens nervous first, and as squirrely as Kramer was, he didn't think he was the cause.

Kramer continued on across the room. "I know what you mean."

Hellboy followed, searching for anything else out of the ordinary. "So what kind of writing do you do?"

An arched doorway at the end of the room opened into another hall. A large, winding staircase on the right led up to the second level, and the hallway straight ahead would take them to the kitchen.

"Fantasy mostly," Kramer said, turning back to face Hellboy. "I have a best-selling series about a wandering knight who--"

"You got dragons in those books, Don?" Hellboy interrupted. "I can tell you some stuff about those babies that'll curl your toenails." He winked conspiratorially.

Kramer forced a smile. "That...that would be wonderful. Maybe after you find out who took my stone..."

Something crashed to the floor in the room above them. Hellboy's gaze darted to the ceiling and then the stairs.

The writer laughed uneasily, moving to the staircase. "It's nothing," he said. "Probably just the cat getting into something he shouldn't."

"Yeah, they're like that," Hellboy said.

Kramer gestured down the hallway. "The back door is right down there."

There was another, louder crash, followed by the sound of breaking glass. The look on Kramer's face was one of absolute terror. He shrieked, frantically starting up the stairs on his hands and knees.

"Leave it alone," he screamed. "I told you I would make it right!"

There was more commotion from above, and Hellboy took a wild guess that it had nothing to do with a curious cat. He pulled his revolver from its leather holster. He didn't want to chance being caught with his pants down. A few months back he'd been chasing a Stullenwurm across the Alpine passes from France to Austria. He thought he'd had the cat-headed, lizard-bodied beastie cornered in an ice cave and barreled inside with a flamethrower, only to find a nest of pissed off Fire Drake eager to eat his weapon and fry his ass black.

Man, did he catch a ton of crap from the guys back at the Bureau for that.

Hellboy winced with the memory; patches on his body were still tender from the blunder. He had no idea what he would be facing today and hoped the gun would be enough.

"Let's find out," he grumbled, ascending the stairs two at a time.

As he reached the second floor he spotted Kramer standing in a doorway at the end of the hall.

"Stop it, please!" he cried over the din of destruction from inside the room. "I told you I'd get the stone back...please!"

Hellboy held the pistol tight in his grip as he strode toward the room.

Kramer turned to see him coming and held out his hands. "Don't go in there," he pleaded. "They're angry enough as it is."

"Don't worry." He pushed the writer out of the way with ease. "I'm Mr. Personality. Everybody loves me."

The room had more bookshelves, a desk and a computer, and Hellboy figured it was Kramer's office. The place was also full of Graken Spriggin, at least fifty of them.

Leprechauns, Goblins, Brownies, Faerie Folk: he'd take any of them in twice the number over Graken Spriggin. These little bastards were the worst.

They had tipped over multiple file cabinets, torn artwork from the walls and pushed the computer off the desk to the floor, where it lay in broken pieces. The two windows in the room had been shattered as well and large, black crows with tiny saddles upon their backs perched on the glass-covered sills. In the center of the room, several of the six-inch Graken Spriggin wielded wooden matchsticks like torches, preparing to set fire to a pile of shredded paperback books.

"Knock it off," Hellboy roared, watching in amusement as the leathery-skinned forest folk retreated from the sound of his voice. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The Graken stood unified beneath the broken windows. The tiny creatures glowered, brandishing weaponry created from rubbish--an ax made from a disposable razor, a sword fashioned from one-half of a pair of scissors. Some were even wearing armor that had been cut from soda and beer cans.

Hellboy let them get a good look at the gun he was carrying. One well-placed shot could easily kill ten of them. "So which one of you little freaks is gonna tell me what the problem is?"

"She's gone, ya red bastard!" one of the creatures screamed in a high-pitched brogue, crazy with emotion. "She's gone, and we've nary a clue as to where she was taken!"

The Graken shook a nasty-looking spork over his head, and Hellboy could have sworn he saw tears in the tiny warrior's eyes.

The others started to become agitated; their escalating emotion riled up the crows perched on the windowsills above them. The cawing of the birds was starting to give him a headache.

"All right, all right!" He holstered his weapon. "Let's start over. Why don't you start by telling me who's gone?"

"The blessed mother of us all!" the Graken cried in unison, and before he could respond, they swarmed at him, fury and grief etched on their ugly little faces.

"Aw, crap," Hellboy grumbled as they leaped onto his coat, scaling his duster. He tried to swat them away, watching in awe as they hit the floor hard, shook themselves off and started toward him again.

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