

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 25
21ST OCTOBER 2018

SPIDERS FOR BREAKFAST

BY
STEPHANIE
MORCH
OVERBEY—
A HOWL OF
VICTORY...

CHANCE

BY DAVE
LUDFORD—
'BITCH!' HE
SCREAMED...

ROCKHOUND BY WALTER G ESSELMAN

SECOND COMING BY JORDAN SMITH

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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Overbey, Walter G Esselman, Jordan Smith, Gregory KH Bryant, Rex Mundy, Sir Arthur Conan
Doyle, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

Vol. 13, Issue 25
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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *gothic-fantasy-dark-witch-warrior* by [darksouls1](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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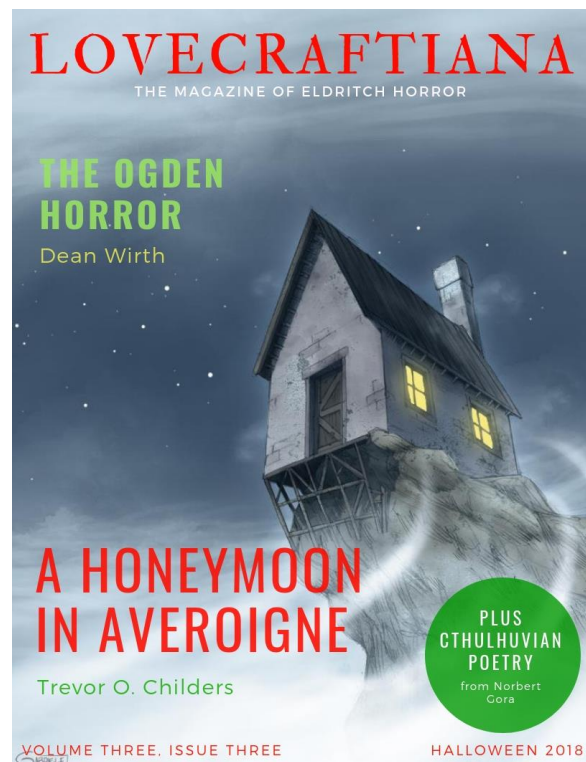
EDITORIAL

This week, Ian discovers a tasty new post-apocalyptic diet. Cain plans a killing, but what part will be played by Chance? Things get hard for Blaze when Riktor experiments with wormholes. And Brother Sebastian takes a vagrant for a ride.

Kursaal sets out in pursuit of the Deathcaps. Carter Ward awakens to find himself a prisoner of the Scroungers. Professor Challenger's expedition finds itself in a prehistoric pickle upon the lost plateau. And Goodwin encounters a green dwarf.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Halloween Eve 2018*](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"NOW DON'T BE ALARMED, I FORGOT MY SCYTHE SO I'M JUST LEAVING YOU A CASE OF SCABIES."

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that

year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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SPIDERS FOR BREAKFAST by Stephanie Morch Overbey

“I’m headed to the grocery store, Ian, and I’m dropping your brother off at his meeting. Back in a couple hours,” called his mom from downstairs.

“Okay! Oh, would you pick up some more beef sticks? I’m almost out,” Ian yelled down from his room.

“Sure, kid. You got it,” she replied cheerfully, closing the door with a thud behind her.

Ian sat back down in front of his three computers. He stretched back dangerously in his chair to almost its tipping point, rejoicing in the idea of two hours without interruptions from his Mom or creepy little brother. He pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk and grabbed a couple spicy pepperoni sticks.

“Ah, and now back to writing the killer code. Yeah, I’m a nerd, I admit. And I’m talking to myself, which makes it that much better,” he mumbled. “Okay, got to get this finished.”

His phone buzzed loudly next to him. It was his best friend, Allen.

“How’s the game going? Done yet???” read the text.

Ian grabbed his phone, scowling as he punched in a reply. “NO! And it won’t be if you keep bugging me!” he wrote.

“LOL GOT IT TTYL”

“Great, now I’m distracted and thirsty,” he thought, whistling as he skipped down the stairs to the kitchen. “Time for the hard stuff,” he laughed as he grabbed a Mountain Dew and bounded back upstairs. He was in a good mood. Life was excellent—he was at the top of his class, president of the robotics club, and he had finally talked to the cute girl who had the locker next to his.

As he got to the top of the stairs, he peered into his brother’s room. The warm glow from the terrariums inside cast an eerie shadow on the wall. Fear gripped Ian as he moved closer to the open door. One of the tarantulas was moving slowly across the cage in search of a new spot to hide in. The knot in Ian’s stomach loosened up a little, and he was thankful that the large arachnid was inside the tank. His brother’s spiders had a talent for getting out, something that Jake seemed to rejoice in since it gave him the upper hand over his older brother.

Ian wondered how he and Jake were related, and furthermore why his parents gave in to his weird desire to keep tarantulas as pets. The two brothers couldn’t be more different: Ian was reserved, well mannered, brilliant with anything that had to do with coding or computers but most of all, he hated the outdoors. Jake belonged to the Young Entomologists Club at school, was loud, outgoing, and loved fart jokes. Ian hated to admit it, but Jake had terrorized him on

many occasions with those damned creatures. He couldn't wait to go to college where he could live a bug-free life on his own.

As Ian turned quickly away from the nightmare in his brother's room, he heard an explosion in the distance. Suddenly, the power went out, and there was a loud buzzing sound in the air. The house filled with a sour smell that he couldn't put his finger on.

"Whoa, what the hell was that?" he said, forgetting this time that he was the only one in the house. He stumbled into his room and grabbed his phone. Whatever it was had knocked out his network too. As he pulled his shades open, he noticed a haze over the streets that seemed to block the sunlight. There was no movement on the roads, but the buzzing had stopped.

His heart was starting to race. He remembered something about the different stages of panic in an emergency, and he did not want to become immobilized with fear. After taking some deep breaths, he grabbed a flashlight and his old transistor radio and headed out of his room, coming back in a few seconds later to put a bandana over his mouth just in case there was something in the air. Ian went to the third floor where his parents' bedroom was. There would be better radio reception up there, hopefully.

As he entered the master bedroom, he looked around slowly. A chill ran down his spine as he thought of the spiders, one floor below him. He moved carefully to the window and raised the old radio's antenna towards the sky. As soon as he turned it on, he heard the disembodied voice of the announcer telling everyone to shelter in place and that there would be updates every hour, but there was no mention of what had happened.

"Okay, shelter in place. I can do that," Ian said to himself.

He scurried from room to room, checking windows and closing vents. He stuffed towels under doors and brought his sleeping bag, radio, flashlight, and cell phone downstairs to the living room where he would lock himself down until his parents and brother got home. It didn't occur to him that they might not come back. Exhausted from his work and the excitement of the impending apocalypse, Ian fell asleep on the couch.

Waking at dawn, he listened for the sounds of his family but was met with dead silence. Ian pulled the flowered curtains back slowly, hoping to see something that would give him a clue about what was happening, but the only sound was his stomach growling. It wasn't often that he missed dinner and Ian was starving.

"Got to feed the beast," he said to no one in particular, as he rubbed his stomach.

He took two steps forward and stopped in his tracks. It struck him that he was alone, in a disaster with no power and no clue about where the rest of his family was. There were still no emergency vehicles on his street and no neighbours showing any signs of life. His stomach lurched in a mixture of hunger and panic. He needed to find something to eat.

It took some time to move the chairs and coffee table away from the living room door. He had done a fine job of securing the room, but it was a lot of work to get out. He may need to rethink his living situation, but now something to eat was way more important. Ian shuffled into the kitchen and scrunched his nose up in disgust, remembering that the power had been out overnight. He guessed the food in the fridge was already going bad.

Finding the cabinets empty of the food that he considered palatable, he recalled that his Mom had been on her way to the grocery store when she left. His family didn't do much in the way of home cooking, favouring pizza deliveries and dinners at the Chinese place around the corner instead. The shelves were bare, except for some old canned peaches and cranberry sauce! There were no potato chips or sugary cereal. Not a hint of teriyaki jerky or cheese balls. Even if there was food, there was no way to cook it.

"Pepperoni sticks!" he exclaimed, not caring anymore that he was talking to himself.

He took the stairs two by two, thankful as he opened his desk drawer. He had five salty, greasy beef sticks left, plus he still had a six-pack of Mountain Dew downstairs. Life was good again, at least momentarily. Back in his parents' room, he sat and listened to the emergency broadcast on the radio. The beef sticks had not been enough to satiate his teenage hunger, and he only had one left.

"What to do? Think Ian, think!" he mumbled as he paced the floor.

Discouraged he went back to his safe room downstairs. The sky had a yellowish green hue as if there had been a chemical attack, but it looked as though it was breaking up. He thought he saw someone running from a house a few doors down. Without thinking, he ran downstairs and out the front door and shouted for help. As he inhaled, his lungs burned with searing toxins. Coughing and choking, he staggered back inside, stuffing towels and sheets under the seal of the door as he took panicked breaths.

Another three days passed, and his anxiety began to go into the red zone. Not knowing if his family was dead or alive was one thing but having nothing to eat or drink was all he could think about. The leftover sweet and sour chicken in the refrigerator had already gone bad, and he wasn't going to risk food poisoning no matter how hungry he was. His head was pounding, and the clenching pain in his belly reminded him that he was starving with each passing hour. Despondent, he climbed the stairs to search for food in his brother's room. He was just too hungry at this point to worry about the spiders.

Upon entering his brother's room, he did a quick check and could only spot one of the hairy beasts in its tank.

"Well, that'll have to do," he thought as he proceeded his hunt for candy or anything else that Jake might be hoarding.

He gobbled down an old candy bar that was on the bookshelf, and carefully chewed a piece of gum that he found on the bedside table. Frustrated, he sat down on Jake's unmade bed. Staring at

nothing, his body instinctively froze as he realized that Bonzo was casually sitting at the end of the bed. Bonzo was his brother's very large Mexican Redknee.

As Ian's arachnophobia began to rise like a wave over his body, something more primitive pushed it aside. Flashbacks from a documentary he'd watched at school about food delicacies flooded his brain, and as he looked at his brother's pet spider, his fear was overtaken by his inner caveman's need to survive. Making his way carefully to the closet, he grabbed a wire hanger and quickly converted it into a spiky weapon. Without hesitation, he drove the makeshift spear through Bonzo's midsection.

Feeling giddy now with a sort of tribal power, he waved his prize around the room, letting out a short howl of victory. As he considered his catch, he realized he had no way to cook it and to eat it raw was out of the question.

"The camp stove! Yes, why didn't I think of that before!" he thought as he headed quickly to the garage.

After not eating for several days it felt like Christmas. While digging for the gas stove, he had found his Dad's secret stash of beer and grabbed that to accompany his exotic meal. Either he would get very sick or enjoy a mouth-watering delicacy—at this point, he really didn't care.

Grabbing a pan, salt, and some olive oil, he threw the tarantula in the pan to fry. It sizzled and pops, emitting a meaty smell that excited the teen's senses. It was all he could do to keep himself from picking it up like fried chicken and devouring it one big bite, but he wanted to savour this protein-packed arachnid.

The nourishment from several mouthfuls and a few swigs of warm beer relieved Ian's headache and feelings of fatigue. For a fleeting moment, disgust swarmed his psyche, but he beat it down as he licked his fingers clean. There was still one more spider to be eaten, but he would save it for later.

Ian tried to sleep but awoke fitfully with a gnawing desire in his belly. He ran upstairs and threw back the lid of the spider habitat. Ian found Harry next to the rock and speared him the same way that he had done to Bonzo. He cooked Harry quickly, enjoying the flavour of the freshly fried meat, even more, this time.

This small amount of nourishment gave him the energy he needed to get out of the house and search for his family. He was acutely aware of sounds and movements now. As he peered outside, he was ecstatic to see a brown sparrow flitting in the branches of the tree outside.

"It's alive! It's alive! There's life out there!" he yelled as he jumped in the air.

He threw his gear and the last of the beer in his backpack. Thinking for a moment, he stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a sharp knife. His stomach let out a loud growl; he was hungry for more of those crispy critters! With no real plan in mind, he walked out of his front door as he put the bandana over his mouth and nose. Suddenly, it struck him... he would head to the pet store.

It was just a couple of blocks away and the owner kept lots of tarantulas in stock there. It would be like an all you can eat buffet!

He picked up his pace and headed to Main Street, but as he rounded the corner, a white van blocked his way. Two men in white protective suits hopped out of the back and pulled him inside.

“What’s your name, son?” asked one of them in a gruff voice that was distorted by his mask.

“Uhh…Ian, sir. I’m Ian Chambers,” he stuttered.

The other man looked at his clipboard as he nodded his head, responding loudly “Yes, your mother and brother are at Jay’s Pet Store, and your dad is at his office downtown. Your family is alive and kicking.”

With a sigh of relief, Jay said “I’m relieved. Thanks for that. What happened anyway? Was it terrorists? How many people are dead?”

“Chemical attack on the town, that’s all we know so far,” the man with the clipboard said calmly. “The government hasn’t said who yet. The main thing is reuniting you with your family and getting you all to a safe zone. We’re heading to the pet store now.”

The two men escorted Ian inside Jay’s Pet Store where his brother, mom, and all his Young Entomologist Club friends had been taking shelter.

His little brother ran to him and nearly knocked him down when he saw him.

“Oh, holy hell! You smell like terrible!” Jake bellowed as he grabbed Ian by the arms.

“Oh, well, it’s nice to see you too, little bro,” he grinned.

“We’ve been having a great time here, Ian! I’m sorry you had to miss it. Jay keeps cases of junk food in his storeroom. We’ve been amped on sugar and talking about insects for days, just like at camp!”

As Jake babbled, Jay waved at Ian, as his mother came rushing over with tears running down her face.

“Ian! I was so worried about you!” she cried as she crushed his ribs with her maternal hugs.

“Ma, I can’t breathe! You’re crushing me!” he winced, secretly not wanting her to let go.

“Dad should be here any minute now, and we’ll all be going to safe zone, whatever that means. Looks like you could do with a shower and hot meal, sweetie,” she said as she pushed his hair out of his face.

“Yeah, I am pretty much starving,” he said as he put his hands on his shrinking belly.

As he talked to his Mom and Jay about the chemical attack, his brother and his best friend ran up to him, each holding a hairy tarantula in their palms.

“Hey, do you want to hold this pretty little girl? She’s from South America, and she’s nice!” his freckled faced buddy squealed.

“Yes, I absolutely want to hold her,” Ian replied as he held his cupped hands to receive the spider.

Jake and his Mom looked at Ian with wide eyes.

“Are you feeling okay, Ian?” his mom asked. “Last time I checked you had a deadly fear of them.”

“Yeah, what the heck? Did you get body snatched or what?” Jake said.

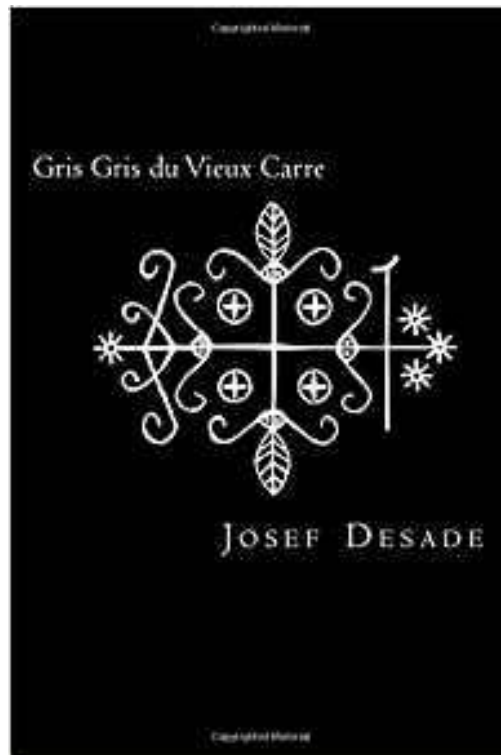
“I guess I just have a new appreciation for them,” he smiled. “This is a Chilean Rose, right?”

“Yeah, she is,” Jake answered, confused about his big brother’s calm demeanour.

As Ian surveyed the big, brown beauty, he imagined her sautéed in a lovely, butter sauce. His mouth watered as he pictured his next kill.

With a rabid gleam in his eye, he said thoughtfully, “Yes little brother, I really do love these spiders now. I really do.”

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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CHANCE by Dave Ludford

“Well look, as I said, if I’ve at all offended or upset you, then I apologize.”

Cain jabbed the button on his mobile which ended the call and turned from the balcony, deep lines of anxiety furrowing his brow. He stood, unmoving, lost in thought while staring into the middle distance, all the while going over the rather fractious conversation he’d just had with Chance. Surely she could see that murdering the old man was the only option? Any moral considerations were redundant. The old man had money, plenty of it, and Cain was determined to get his hands on it, would go to any lengths. And Chance was either with him or she wasn’t. That money would set them both up for life. She was too soft, that was her trouble; let her laughable morals win out every time.

“Chance, is my lunch ready yet?”

“Almost, Mr Dawson. Ten more minutes and then it will be chow time. Sorry for the delay; had to take an urgent call.”

“Very well, I suppose these things can’t be helped. Only please hurry, it’s been a long time since breakfast.”

“Yes, Mr Dawson, will do. Coming right up.”

Chance turned back to the kitchen table where she’d been preparing a tuna and pasta salad while Dawson manoeuvred his wheelchair out of the doorway and into the garden. It was such a warm, fine day he’d decided to eat outside, better there to enjoy the intoxicating scent of his beloved roses. Cain, his gardener, had done a fine job with them this summer. He’d been a real find, transforming the extensive garden into a paradise that was a sheer joy to behold; so different to the barren wilderness it had become since the death two years ago of his beloved wife, Melanie. She had been an enthusiastic gardener and Dawson had had no inclination or enthusiasm to do anything with it since she’d passed away. Too many painful memories. Until now, when guilt at how badly he’d let things go in general had motivated him into action. Melanie would be so pleased.

He sat, hands clasped in his lap, reminiscing over the high points of his fifty-year marriage to the girl he’d fallen in love with at university. Those were good, happy days, he thought, days I’ll never experience again. He sighed heavily then heard a sound behind him: Chance bringing out his lunch. Such a good, sensible girl, he thought, an excellent carer; she’s looked after me with absolute devotion since Melanie died. Having no children of his own to leave his vast fortune to (Melanie, unfortunately, having been unable to conceive), or any surviving family, he knew he’d made the right decision to bequeath his entire estate to Chance.

“Here you go, Mr Dawson,” Chance said, placing the old man’s lunch plate on the small patio table next to him. “Again, sorry for the delay. Enjoy!”

“Thank you, Chance. I’m sure I will. I was just thinking that I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Chance, embarrassed, looked down at her feet. “Thanks, Mr Dawson, for your kind words. They mean a lot to me. With my unstable family background things haven’t been easy. But this job has given me security and stability.”

As Dawson lifted his knife and fork, Chance took a few steps backward so that she was standing right behind the old man. She reached inside her jacket pocket and pulled out a large carving knife, and leaning forward, quickly jerked Dawson’s head backwards. She slit his throat swiftly with a long, deep stroke, wincing slightly as she did so. As the bewildered old man frantically clutched at his throat in a vain attempt to staunch the projectile blood spurt, gurgling horribly and spluttering for breath, Chance said:

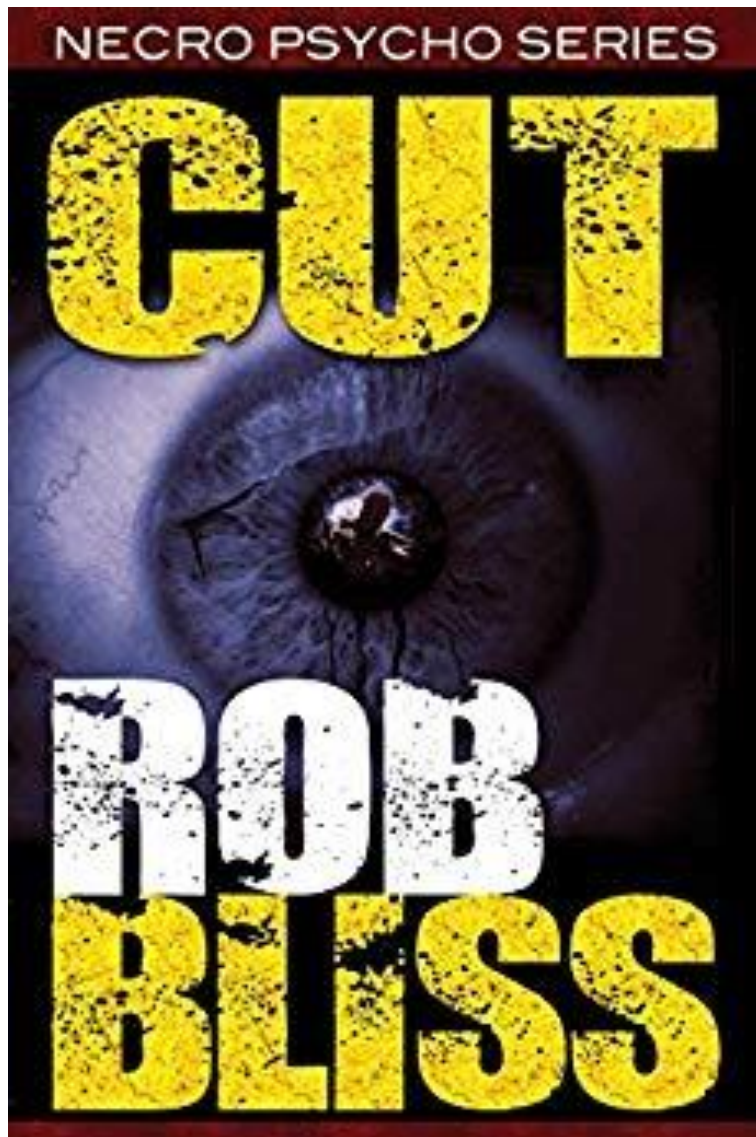
“Thanks for remembering me in your will, Mr D. Although you must understand, I can’t wait. I need that money now.”

Cain was pacing furiously, intermittently wiping sweat from his brow. What was it with that silly bitch Chance? She was as desperate as he was, how the hell else was she going to finance her crack habit? At least she didn’t have the £50,000 gambling debts that he had that kept him awake for large parts of the night. He’d outlined the most perfect plot to murder Dawson, so subtle and ingenious that no blame could ever be placed on either of them. It would be made to look like the work of a random, opportunist housebreaker who had been disturbed in his activities. If he didn’t come up with some cash soon, he was dead meat. Best do the old man in now, for fuck’s sake; he could live for years yet. He picked up his mobile and pressed Chance’s number again, but it went straight to voicemail. “Bitch!” he screamed, and threw the phone at the wall.

Three months later, Chance was sitting on a train heading towards Paris. She had just eaten a rather splendid breakfast, and was now perusing the English newspapers. She was reading about the murder of Roy Cain, gardener to the wealthy and respected (but also recently murdered) Sir Robert Dawson, millionaire industrialist. He had been heavily in debt, and it was suspected that Cain had been the victim of a shady syndicate to whom he owed a considerable amount of money. She threw the newspaper onto the empty seat opposite, and stared out of the window at the passing countryside, looking so beautiful bathed in early autumn sunshine.

Men were so gullible, she thought, and smiled.

THE END



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ROCKHOUND by Walter G Esselman

Present Day

Dr Richard Riktor walked sombrely through the government facility until he reached room 1961.

Stopping before it, he raised his hand to knock, but suddenly froze.

“Come on,” he chided himself. “You did this, now you have to face the music.”

He wondered—briefly—what kind of music would be suitable for this, and he decided that Barber’s ‘Adagio for Strings’ summed up the last few weeks perfectly.

Riktor knocked on the door, and there came a crash from inside, as if something big had fallen.

“Blaze?” he called out, but there was no answer. “I’m opening the door.”

Turning the doorknob, he let the door swing open. However, room was completely dark.

“I’m going to turn on the light,” called out Riktor.

When there was no reply, he reached in and hit the light switch, but nothing happened.

Something shot through the doorway, and past Riktor’s head. There was a metallic crash behind him. Swivelling, he looked down.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Go away,” came a heavy voice from the darkness.

“Blaze?” asked Riktor.

“Scram,” growled the voice of Blaze.

“Were you aiming for my head?” asked Riktor.

“If I was aiming for your head,” growled Blaze, “you’d be dead by now...Dumbass!”

Riktor knelt and examined a sizable ball of metal. He tried to guess its original shape, but was flummoxed.

“Where did you get a cannonball?” asked Riktor, and then he added. “Pretty sure we didn’t stock your room with cannonballs.”

“Why would the government put cannonballs in my room?” asked Blaze in exasperation.

“In case of pirates...I don’t know,” shrugged Riktor. “Seriously though, did you make that?”

“Uhhh...the bed sorta collapsed under my weight,” admitted Blaze.

“THAT was the bed frame!” exclaimed Riktor. He touched the smooth metal ball. “The strength that must have taken.”

“I had time,” growled Blaze.

Riktor looked up at that. “Yeah, I know. I...”

He did not know where to begin.

Or end.

And—honestly—he was a little fuzzy about the middle bit.

“You don’t know what happened to me yet, do you,” accused Blaze hotly. “You said it would only take a couple of days.”

“It shouldn’t...I don’t know why the wormhole...I mean, it shouldn’t...” sputtered Riktor.

“It shouldn’t have turned me into a freaking monster!” roared Blaze.

For a moment, Blaze came close enough to the door, and Riktor could a suggestion of his friend. A friend whose body had been altered when it had passed through the wormhole.

“We’re trying,” insisted Riktor. “I got friends at M.I.T., Caltech, and the University of Michigan poring over the data. They...”

“They’re probably just as stupid as you are,” snarled Blaze. “You know why we called you ‘Bamboo’ in college?”

Riktor sighed. “Not this again.”

“It wasn’t because you were tall and skinny—No!—it was because it would have taken a team of zoologists, and a country the size of China, to get you laid,” spat Blaze.

“Blaze...” started Riktor.

“Next time, I won’t miss,” growled Blaze, and he slammed the door shut.

Riktor sighed long and hard. After the moment, he turned and went back the way he had come. He soon found himself outside the doctor’s office. He stepped inside and a strawberry-blonde woman looked up at him.

“Went that good?” asked Connie sympathetically.

Riktor shrugged. “I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. And his strength is...well, it’s incredible. He’s only in that room because he wants to be.”

“So, he’s sulking?” asked Connie.

Riktor blinked in surprise.

“Actually...yes,” he said. “That...that’s exactly what he’s doing.” He turned quickly, back towards the door.

“What’re you going to do?” asked Connie.

“It might be time for some tough love,” said Riktor, and he marched out of the room.

Connie clicked her tongue thoughtfully, and then she took out her cell phone.

Two Weeks Ago

“Bamboo!” cried Blaze in joy.

Dr Riktor was engulfed in a bone-crunching hug that nearly squooze the life out of him.

“Hrng,” he muttered.

Blaze let him go. He was not a huge guy, but he was solid, as if he were made of teak. “Look at you—with a big old tie—acting like you’re an adult.”

“And look at you, Captain Blaze Carlyle,” replied Riktor.

“Aww, you know?” asked Blaze in disappointment. “That was supposed to be my big surprise.”

“Little bird told me,” grinned Riktor unrepentantly.

“And I’m gonna pull out every one of its feathers if I find out who did it,” growled Blaze with mock anger.

“Well, congratulations nonetheless,” said Riktor. “I know how hard you worked for that.”

“Ah, it was easy,” scoffed Blaze. “Now, why does a doofus like you need the Navy’s best pilot?”

“So humble,” chuckled Riktor. “Right! So, I have a project which deals with wormholes.”

“Oh God,” moaned Blaze. “Are you still on that wormhole kick?”

“You remember?” asked Riktor.

“You hardly talked about anything else for three years,” moaned Blaze. “Morning eggs, wormholes. Big party with cute girls, wormholes. I figure you probably talked about it while you were in the shower, but I didn’t want to test that theory.”

“I do some great thinking in the shower,” agreed Riktor.

“Ick!” cringed Blaze. “That’s T.M.I., Bamboo. That’s it, I’m invoking ‘Subject Change’!”

Riktor laughed. “All right, all right. You brought it up.”

“So what am I really doing here, other than entertaining you?” asked Blaze.

“I’ve got a stable wormhole,” said Riktor.

“No shit,” exclaimed Blaze. “You really got it to work? Wait! Please tell me that I’m not going to be the first thing that goes through it.”

“No, no,” said Riktor quickly. “We put plants in first, then mice, and then monkeys.”

“Show me the monkeys,” said Blaze.

“You need to see that the monkeys are okay, is that it?” asked Riktor.

“No, I just like monkeys,” shrugged Blaze. “But yeah, I’d also like to see that they weren’t turned inside out.”

“This way,” said Riktor. He led his friend through the government building to another section.

“You keep the monkeys in a doctor’s office?” asked Blaze. “That is not reassuring.”

“Dr Turner likes animals, and she wanted to keep them under observation for at least a month,” explained Riktor. “Mind you, that was over two months ago.”

“This wouldn’t be Dr Connie Turner, would it?” asked Blaze, and he waggled his eyebrows.

Riktor’s face set like concrete. “How do you know about her?”

“Oh, a little bird told me,” singsonged Blaze.

“What little bird?” asked Dr Connie Turner as she walked into the room.

“Dr Turner,” said Blaze in a big, happy voice, and he introduced himself. “I’ve been dying to

meet you.”

“I admit, I’ve been curious to meet you too,” admitted Connie. “I had to wonder, which of the stories were true, but then—it’s not like Richard to make up stories.”

“I apologize for that,” said Blaze with mock sincerity. “I tried to make him a more interesting person.”

“Hey!” said Riktor.

“Oh, it’s okay,” said Connie as she feigned suffering. “I just have to put up with the honest boyfriend.” And then she gave a laugh. “Now, are you here to help Richard?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m your new pet monkey,” said Blaze. “But, I am a little curious about what happened to the other primates that came before me.”

“I can show you to your brothers, and sisters, in arms,” said Connie. “But they all appear pretty normal.”

“No change at all?” asked Blaze.

“Well, Harvest did have a liking for cheese, which she didn’t have before,” shrugged Connie. “Do you want to see them?”

“You know what, we don’t have to,” shrugged Blaze. “I just really wanted to meet you.” He turned to Riktor. “She’s too good for you.”

“You’ve said that about everyone,” huffed Riktor. “Even Phoebe, and she was nuts.”

“She was, wasn’t she,” agreed Blaze. “But my statement still stands.”

“You’re impossible,” growled Riktor.

“I am,” agreed Blaze happily. “Well—enough fun!—let’s send an idiot through a wormhole.”

Present Day

Riktor stomped through the halls, now armed with a metal paint can. He came to room 1961 and practically kicked open the door.

“Knock, knock,” he called out. “I’m here for the pity party.”

Riktor swung the can underhanded and splashed paint across the floor.

“What the...” sputtered Blaze from the dark.

And suddenly, there was light. The paint hit the floor and sent off a luminescent glow, which began to quickly spread across the room.

Riktor’s eyes grew wide in amazement. “Wow. They’re going to freak when they see how well this paint is working, and also, because I kinda took it without asking.”

“Are you crazy?” demanded Blaze from deep in the room. “You’re babbling like an idiot.”

The pool of paint spread, and the light finally reached every corner of the room. As the last bit of shadow fell, Riktor could finally see Captain Blaze Carlyle pressed into a corner. Stepping forward from his last refuge, Blaze—clad only in blue jeans—bunched up his fists in rage.

Covering every inch of skin was a dusty compact siliceous rock. Even Blaze’s teeth appeared to be made of it. Only his blue eyes were still human.

“Are you happy?” demanded Blaze. “IS this what you wanted to see?”

“You can’t sit in the dark your whole life,” said Riktor.

“I liked it in here,” snapped Blaze.

“No, you were hiding in here,” replied Riktor forcefully.

“What would you know about hiding?” asked Blaze.

“Because that’s what I did my whole freshman year,” snapped Riktor. “I hid in the library, on my computer. Anywhere which stopped me from having to actually talk to another human IRL. And I probably wouldn’t have talked to anyone in college, except that in my second year I got a new roommate. He was a bit more gregarious than the last one.”

“I don’t know that last word was,” said Blaze. He suddenly leapt over the paint and dropped in front of Riktor. “But you can’t compare your sorry life to what you did to me!”

In anger, Blaze grabbed Riktor’s arm, and they both heard the bone break.

Riktor went as white as a sheet.

“What were you thinking?” demanded Connie. In the doctor’s office, she used a pair of surgical scissors to cut open the right sleeve of Riktor’s shirt.

“He was trying to provoke me, I think,” said Blaze in a surprisingly soft voice. He now stood a little ways from the bed that Riktor lay on.

“You know, Richard’s not slept more than two or three hours since the Wormhole Test.”

“I...I didn’t know that,” admitted Blaze.

“Well, he hasn’t,” said Connie, but then she looked at Blaze. “And I know you’re having a horrible time too. We—well, really me—I thought if we gave you more time, it would help.”

“Help me what?” asked Blaze.

“Adjust,” said Connie. “Adjust, just in case there isn’t a quick fix. Richard though, he hasn’t stopped for a moment. Once a day, I go to his office and shove some food down his throat to make sure he’s eating.”

“You know, I’m not unconscious,” said Riktor testily from the bed. “I’m wide awake.”

“Who could tell?” teased Blaze, and both he and Riktor were caught off-guard by the old time repartee.

“Right,” said Connie as she was looking at Riktor’s arm. “This—at least—seems to be a clean break.” She looked up at them. “Now, you two need to find a path forward. Not today, but...”

A young woman bustled into the room with her water bottle speaking tartly. “You know, it’s not like I’m really, very busy, or anything. Show me this thing so that I can get back to...”

And then she froze when she saw Blaze.

For his part, Blaze shrunk into himself. The young woman could not tear her eyes away from him.

“Licia,” said Connie to the young woman. “This is Captain Blaze.”

“Oh! Um...er...” stammered Licia, like a kid at a middle school dance.

Riktor saw that Blaze was uncomfortable, and he started to rise to defend his friend.

“Miss...” he began stridently, but Connie put a quelling hand on his shoulder. He looked at her questioningly.

“Take a picture, lady, it’ll last longer,” grumbled Blaze, but the words were from pain, not belligerence.

Licia took a step towards Blaze who shrunk back.

“Can I see your hand?” asked Licia.

“Why?” asked Blaze.

“I won’t hurt you,” said Licia earnestly. “I promise.”

“I doubt she could with that skin,” muttered Riktor.

“Shhh,” said Connie to him.

Slowly, Blaze extended his hand, palm up.

Licia looked at his palm, and then she turned her water bottle over it.

“What the hell?” asked Blaze, but even as he tried to move his hand back, she followed.

Licia grasped two of his fingers to hold him steady.

“You’re beautiful,” she gasped.

“What?” asked Blaze.

“Everyone’s been talking about how something went wrong with the wormhole test,” said Licia, almost to herself. “But I never thought that something like that could produce such...I don’t know, beauty.”

“Were you dropped on your head as a kid?” asked Blaze, but his voice was more curious than angry.

“Many times,” smirked Licia flippantly. “But that’s not why we’re here. It’s like jaspilite.”

“Jasper Light?” asked Blaze.

“Jaspilite,” said Licia. I mean, look at this. It’s like your skin is now rock. And the rock looks like jaspilite, which is a banded ironstone.”

“Of course,” said Blaze. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“Well, you were looking at your hand when it was dull,” said Licia. “Now look at it.”

Lightly, Licia traced her fingers over the wet stone.

“That...that is pretty neat,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Jaspilite has that red, with bands of other colours, like the black you see,” explained Licia. “Is all your skin like this?”

“Pretty much,” admitted Blaze.

“Can you come down to my lab?” asked Licia.

“You’re not going to experiment on me, are you?” replied Blaze uncertainly.

“Yes, but the experiment will only involve wet paper towels,” said Licia.

“Wet with water?”

“Yes.”

“Um, I guess.”

“Excellent!” grinned Licia. Still holding onto Blaze’s hand, she started to tow him towards the door, but then she stopped.

Licia fixed Connie with a hard look. “You are a sneaky little kitten.” Then she turned to Blaze and gave him a mischievous smile. “I guess I should buy you dinner first. Eh, captain?”

“Well...” started Blaze, and his rocky face scrunched up. “Actually, I am kinda hungry.”

“First food, and then paper towels,” said Licia, and she led a bewildered—but interested—Blaze out of the office.

After a moment, Dr Riktor spoke up. “Er, what just happened?”

“I thought we might need some help,” said Connie.

“Who did he just leave with?” asked Riktor protectively, and Connie was pretty sure he did not even notice concern in his voice.

“Licia, who—along with being brilliant, and cute—is a rockhound,” said Connie.

“A what?”

“It means she really loves rocks,” said Connie, a little smugly.

Riktor opened his mouth, and then he closed it. “That’s...that’s brilliant.”

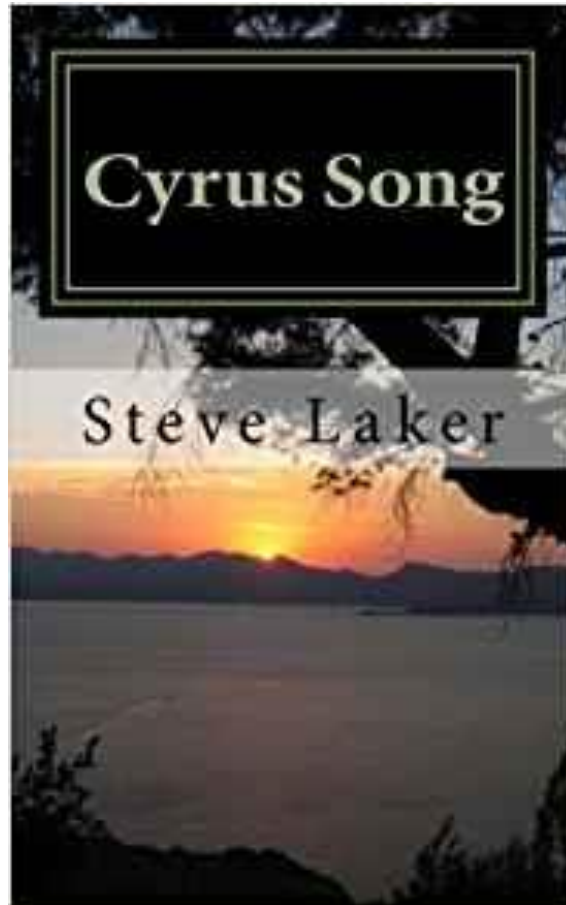
Connie grinned. Riktor used his unbroken arm to pull her down and kiss her hard.

“Mmmm, that’s good,” she murmured. “But first, I still need to put a cast on that arm.”

Riktor settled back on the hospital bed with a smile.

THE END

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SECOND COMING by Jordan Smith

Part One

The Jeep Wrangler pulled into the dirt driveway that ended at the door of a small utility shed that once housed farming equipment. The building was off State Highway 140 and across the road was a large alfalfa field. There was also a large area of uninhabited scrubland that led off into some hills behind it. The area was quiet and almost desolate.

Once the vehicle stopped about ten feet in front of the shed Brother Sebastian exited the driver side. He slicked his long black hair back with his hands then took off his sun glasses and surveyed the area. Once he was satisfied nothing was amiss he put the glasses inside his trench coat pocket and grabbed the pentagram on his necklace. He fumbled at the six sided star and muttered to himself then looked back at the Jeep and nodded.

From the back right passenger side of the jeep emerged a man wearing a black ski mask, holding a shotgun. He reached in and pulled out another man. This man was unkempt and wore tattered, ripped and stained clothing and his face had a smear of blood on it near his mouth. He also had cable ties cuffing his hands together which he held out in front of him.

The man with the shotgun pushed the unkempt man forward and he stumbled a bit but righted himself and walked toward Brother Sebastian.

“The time is now. You will await your fate and help with the resurrection of our master,” said Brother Sebastian to the unkempt man.

“I... I didn’ do nuthin’. Why you gonna do this ta me?” muttered the man.

Brother Sebastian motioned for the man to follow him and led him up to the door of the utility shed. The man with the shotgun didn’t move and simply pointed the gun at the man in rags.

Brother Sebastian pulled out a key ring full of keys then proceeded to unlock two padlocks that kept the door of the shed shut. He slid the door open just enough so that the vagrant could go into the building. Brother Sebastian motioned for the man to enter and when he reluctantly started for the opening Brother Sebastian then pushed him into the shed with so much force that the man stumbled and fell to the floor. The door was then immediately slid shut and locked back up as quickly as possible.

The vagrant pushed himself up and realized he was almost in complete darkness. The sounds of feet walking on gravel could be heard outside the building then followed by the vehicle doors being slammed shut. A moment later and the Jeep could be heard driving away.

The vagrant turned his back to the shed door and used his cuffed hands to wipe sweat from his brow as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Only a few places in the small building let sunlight stream in through cracks in the walls or small gaps in the corrugated metal roof. Once his eyes got used to the gloom a scene emerged that sent him into mental shock.

Throughout the room were dead bodies. A quick mental count noted at least seven of them. Mostly men and a couple of women. Some seemed fresher than others and the ones that were had pools of dried blood on the floorboards around them.

When the vagrant realized that he would never get out of this building alive he started to scream as loud as he could, but the shed muffled his yells to the outside world.

Three days later and Brother Sebastian drove back to the abandoned utility shed. He was alone this time and he had a canteen of water with him.

He parked the Jeep near the door to the shed on the dirt driveway and got out. He stood for a moment and then muttered something under his breath while gently caressing his pentagram like he did a few days before. Feeling satisfied, he then reached back into the Jeep and pulled out the canteen and a small plastic cup then walked over to the door of the shed.

The door had a small slot that was covered with a small rectangular makeshift corrugated metal cover. It was locked with a small padlock and rested about eye level. Sebastian placed the canteen and cup on the ground then reached into his pant pocket for a small key and unlocked the metal cover. He slid it back and waited.

A few seconds later and movement could be heard in the shed. It came closer to the slot and then a voice said, "Mister I ain' done nuthin' to ya."

"I know you didn't," replied Sebastian. "But you are integral to what we must do. You must be thirsty and hungry."

Sebastian then reached down and picked up the canteen and cup. He unscrewed the canteen lid and poured water from it into the cup. He then held the cup near the slot in the shed door. A dirty pair of hands tied together with plastic cables gropingly felt for the cup and eventually pulled it inside while spilling some of its contents on the door.

Sebastian waited a few seconds then said, "That water must have really hit the spot after three days of not drinking, didn't it?"

"Mister, please lemme go. I ain' done nuthin to ya!" came a reply from the slot in the door.

"You must be hungry. Eat this and I'll think about letting you go," said Sebastian as he dropped the canteen to the ground. He then pulled out a silvery object from his pant pocket and presented it to the slot in the door.

The cuffed hands at once reached for it and grabbed the object, pulling it into the shed. Once it was safely inside his hands the vagrant took a look at it in the dim light of the building. It was a candy bar but it didn't have any corporate logo on it or nutritional facts or anything one would

normally see on a wrapper. That was kind of strange but that didn't stop the vagrant from haphazardly tearing it open with his teeth while he held it. The chocolate morsel seemed so inviting after three days with no food so he plopped it in his mouth once the wrapper was free and began to chew. He then noticed that it tasted of blood but he swallowed it anyways.

Outside the door Sebastian slid back the metal cover of the slot but didn't lock it. He then looked at his watch and noted the time. A second later and he nonchalantly walked back to the Jeep and got inside.

It wouldn't be long now, he thought to himself. It will only be a few minutes wait.

Inside the utility shed the vagrant fell to the floor with his back against the door. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and a moment later he started going into epileptic fits. His spasmodic bodily contractions were so violent that Sebastian could see the door jiggle every time the vagrant slammed against it. A few minutes later and it was over. Then there was three subtle bangs on the utility shed door.

Sebastian smiled then got out of the Jeep and walked to the shed.

"Let me out of here!" said the voice of the vagrant from behind the shed's door.

Sebastian pulled out his key ring and proceeded to unlock the two padlocks that kept the door shut then stepped backwards a few paces in eager anticipation for the inevitable.

The shed door swung open and sunlight basked the vagrant in its warm glow. The vagrant stepped out of the shed and stared at Sebastian for a moment. Sebastian smiled when he noticed that the vagrant's eyes were completely red and shimmered with a brilliant hue.

"It's been over a month, Sebastian. Have you any new news for me this time? Or have you wasted yet another opportunity?" said the vagrant.

"No my lord. I think I have found a lead that will help us in your quest for bodily manifestation. I know you grow tired of inhabiting these mortals."

"Indeed I do," said the vagrant.

"Master... er, I mean Lucifer. We must go into town at once. Time is of the essence."

They both walked back to the Jeep and got in. Sebastian reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his sunglasses and handed it to his master. The vagrant smiled and then put them on. The dark opaqueness of the lenses immediately blocked out the glow of his eyes. Sebastian nodded in satisfaction then started the Jeep, pulled out of the dirt driveway and headed back to town on the highway.

Pathetic fool, thought the vagrant that Sebastian ignorantly thought was Satan himself. You know nothing about your fate or those you have duped into following you. For I am Saklas and you will help in my return.

Saklas looked over at Sebastian as he drove. Sebastian seemed content. Gratification then crossed Saklas' mind as he pondered a delicious death for the man after he would gain his power and glory again.

The drive back to town was uneventful and Sebastian took them both to the section of town near the train station. This area of town was mostly composed of run-down and abandoned industrial buildings. Very few people could be seen driving around this area and numerous weeds and plants sprouted out of cracks in the concrete structures and pavement. The location reminded Sebastian of what Hiroshima looked like after it was destroyed by an atom bomb. However the desolation looked it was a nice quite place for Sebastian's coven to meet and perform rituals.

Sebastian's Jeep stopped on the side of the street next to a large brick building that lacked windows. The building used to be part of a small lumber mill that was torn down years prior. It used to house most of the mill's equipment and the part that opened up into the rest of the mill was boarded up when the rest of the mill was torn down. Sebastian was able to rent it cheaply since the government took over the property when the company liquidated and sold it off via a realtor firm. Nobody in Sebastian's coven ever bothered to ask him where he had the money for the property and building. Many thought Sebastian had some kind of inheritance since the man never seemed to have a job. Sebastian would never say; he believed secrets were useful to upholding the mystique of a person's identity.

Saklas noticed that there was at least six other cars parked on both sides of the street.

"The others have arrived, master. I have assembled the entire coven for tonight," said Sebastian as he saw Saklas enquiring look.

"Then you have found a person capable of transforming me back?" asked Saklas.

"Yes but he's not here. We will have to get him. Hence the reason the entire coven has arrived tonight. I'll explain once we get inside."

Saklas nodded and they both exited the Jeep and walked to the building.

The entrance was a large double door with two large square windows in each half but those windows were covered from the inside with tinfoil. No light emanated from the crack at the door threshold and no noise could be heard. It was as if the building was abandoned. Sebastian walked up to the door and wrapped on it a few times. Saklas stood behind him.

A few seconds later and the doors swung inward to reveal a long dark hallway with black sheets and black blankets hanging downwards on the walls. The effect was almost like looking into a

bottomless pit. There was a rather rotund male with a thick beard and black hair dressed all in black that stepped aside after the doors were open. Sebastian entered the building and Saklas followed him.

“Thanks Jimmy,” said Sebastian. The bearded male nodded then closed both doors once then two men were inside. Saklas noticed Jimmy had a red pentagram pinned on his shirt above his left breast.

Both men walked down the hallway. It was still quiet and Saklas almost felt like he was trapped in the Abyss again as the darkness of the unlit corridor enveloped him. They both stopped once the hallway ended about eighty feet from the entrance. A windowless door was on their right and Sebastian rapped on it a few times. The door opened inward and revealed a very large room.

A skinny woman dressed in a black shirt and pants stood just outside the door threshold into the large room. She bowed slightly then stepped aside and motioned for the two men to enter. Saklas noticed that she also had a red pentagram pinned on her shirt as well. Both of the men then entered.

The room must have been at least two stories high and multiple concrete columns stretched from the concrete floor to the ceiling. Black rugs were interspersed on the floor and a few black or brown coffee tables were spread around the area with candle holders or candelabras resting on them with freshly lit candles. A few of the walls had black blankets draping down and one of the walls had a large black sheet with a large red pentagram embossed on it hanging from some makeshift fasteners. A few black couches were also set against the walls and black bean bags and pillows were strewn about the place. Throughout this rather macabre scene were over a dozen people all dressed in black sitting, standing and meandering back and forth. Many of them were talking to one another and they each had a red pentagram pinned on their shirts right above their left breast.

As the men went deeper into the room, Saklas suppressed a chuckle to himself. Every time he took over another host and was brought here the coven added more and more decor to the room and more people eventually joined the group. All Saklas had to do to maintain the loyalty of these gullible buffoons was to perform a few paltry tricks to enamour them. Tricks that he would once again do this night.

The group of people noticed the two men enter the room and their murmuring and gentle talking ground to a halt. They all stopped what they were doing to look upon Sebastian and their obvious master that has taken on a new host. Sebastian stopped in the middle of the room and Saklas took a step behind him in anticipation of the obligatory speech that was done each time Saklas came into the coven building.

“Brothers and sisters,” started Sebastian as he spread his arms out with his palms up. “The time has come for our master’s return. He has been stripped of his power and cast down. Then he has been imprisoned in our world by the meddling of youth that were too naive to understand the implications of their tampering with powers they did not understand. It is a prison that keeps him here in this form.”

Sebastian stepped aside and Saklas took a step forward then took off his sunglasses. A radiant red hue emanated from his pupilless crimson eyes. Everyone in the coven looked upon Saklas with reverence and awe. Some of the new recruits even gasped when they saw the supernatural wonder of the blood coloured lustre of his eyes.

Sebastian lowered his arms and said to the group, "Tomas, approach our Lord as it is time we filled him in."

An older man parted through the coven and then stood in front of Sebastian. His hair was brown except for gentle grey streaks in his sideburns and he wore a goatee that was mostly grey with age. He was, like the rest of the coven, dressed all in black.

"My lord," said Tomas to Saklas. "We have infiltrated another group here in town. One of our members is in their midst even as we speak."

"Indeed," said Sebastian. "It's some kind of New Age cult. The group is interested in mumbo jumbo nonsense like UFOs and they sit around trying to master astral projection in order to reach some form of enlightenment."

"Their leader, however, does practice some form of black magick," said Tomas. "He also used to be a Franciscan monk and was apparently kicked out of the Franciscan Spiritual Centre here in Milwaukie. Uh... here in Oregon. The town is just outside of Portland."

"You're confident this ex-Franciscan monk has the capability and knowledge to revert me?" asked Saklas.

"Yes master. I am confident he does," said Sebastian. "Our inside man has been getting to know the ex-monk for the last month. He says the monk has many esoteric books and scrolls with magick formulae. Says the monk even participated in a successful exorcism once. Says he even saw some of the old VHS recordings of the ritual."

This pleased Saklas. "Well... When do we get this monk?" he asked.

"The group is assembling this very moment for one of their meetings. Tonight they are supposed to be meditating in attempt to astral project," said Sebastian.

"It should be a small matter to sneak upon them en masse with our entire coven. The plan is to kidnap the monk and hold the rest at gun point," said Tomas.

"The police will arrive you know," pointed out Saklas. "How do you expect us to get away from the local law enforcement?"

"Provided they do call the police somehow, we won't need to hold the rest of the group hostage. We will simply take off for as many locations as we can. The police, if they manage to get to the New Ager building, will be forced to chase every vehicle we have. They don't have the resources

to follow everyone. It will be a wild goose chase!” said Sebastian. “Besides, you and I will take the monk leader and head out first. We will bring him back here. I have a room set up for the process. It may take a few days of starvation before the monk becomes cooperative.”

“Some of you may get caught,” mused Saklas.

“Even if we do we are ready to sacrifice ourselves so that you may return to glory!” Tomas almost shouted.

Saklas smiled.

“Now then,” Sebastian said and turned to the assembled coven. “It is now time to prepare.” The group of people dispersed to different parts of the room. Tomas gently bowed to Saklas and walked out of sight behind one of the immense concrete columns.

Sebastian motioned for Saklas to walk with him to which Saklas obliged and they started moving towards the wall with the large black sheet with the embossed red pentagram on it.

“We have done some research into your current manifestation after your state of possession,” said Sebastian. “We have learned that whatever ritual was done on you was originally used by medieval groups to contain uncooperative demons so they could be devoured. It was a guaranteed way to ensure possession. You might say it was a form of unholy Eucharist.”

I guess I was stripped of so much of my power I could be affected like a demon in some ways. But why not other ways? Saklas thought to himself.

“Then why do I take the shape of a candy bar?”

“Well, the way we figure, the ritual would force the demon to manifest itself in corporeal form,” said Sebastian. “The medieval cults would obviously want something they were familiar with so the ritual would force the demon into the form of some kind of wafer, like consecrated bread the churches use for their Holy Communion. Since this took place in modern day I guess the shape was a candy bar. This begs the question of why a candy bar, though?”

Both of the men stopped walking when they were only a few feet from the wall with the sheet on it. “I told you before,” said Saklas, “I don’t think the kid knew what he was doing. I’m sure the ritual was done out of desperation to contain me.”

“Then the incantation must have drawn upon his unconsciousness. That’s why you were not forced into the shape of a communion wafer,” said Sebastian. “The spell took on a sort of modern day vibe to it. The kid must have enjoyed chocolates.”

“And every time I possess one of these meat suits I only have about a single day before-”

“—before you’re forcefully ejected from the body,” interrupted Sebastian.

“No, not forcefully ejected. I am shit out!” almost shouted Saklas.

Sebastian nodded then looked behind him and saw that Tomas came back into the middle of the room holding a plastic container in both arms. Some other coven members saw this then one moved a lit candle off the nearest coffee table. Tomas then set the container on the table then opened it up. There were an assortment of handguns in the container and he started pulling them out one at a time and handed each one to members of the coven that were all now gathering around him.

Sebastian smiled at Saklas then gently bowed and then walked over to Tomas. Tomas handed him a pistol after giving one to a female coven member. A minute later and each of the coven gripped a pistol except Tomas. Tomas nodded after mentally surveying that each member was armed then reached into the container and pulled out two remaining guns. He put one pistol between the small of his back and his pant waistband then gripped the muzzle of the other pistol and held it out as he walked to Saklas with the obvious intention of giving it to him.

Saklas smiled. Then he concentrated on the gun in Tomas’ hand. The gun gyrated a bit and Tomas looked at it in confusion. The pistol then jerked itself out of his hand and flipped end over end in the air at Saklas who now had his right hand open in the direction of the gun. A second later and the gun was now in Saklas firm grip. The assembled coven all looked at the supernatural feat with wide eyes. Tomas stopped in his tracks and lowered his hand.

Sebastian looked at the coven and said, “For you new recruits that even had a single doubt in your heart, now you know. Satan is amongst us and we are here help give him back his glory!”

This is too rich, though Saklas. After I’m through with them they’ll wish I actually was the devil.

Tomas smiled at Saklas and bowed and the rest of the coven started to whisper amongst themselves. Sebastian only nodded.

Two hours later and Sebastian heard a chiming noise on his smart phone. He pulled it out of his pant pocket and looked it over. It was a text message from Brandon, his coven infiltrator, and he was confirming that the New Age group was now assembling to start their astral projection training.

Without further ado Sebastian informed the coven that the time to move on the New Age group has arrived. Every one of the members then filtered out of the building and into the street then entered into one of the many vehicles parked outside the building. Sebastian led Saklas back to the Jeep Wrangler and they both got inside. Sebastian’s vehicle was the first to pull into the street and he took the lead. The rest of the cars followed Sebastian as he drove out of the area and onto South Sixth Street leading deeper into town.

Saklas put on Sebastian’s sun glasses. He enjoyed the way the red glow reflected off the passenger side window but remembered the glasses in time so that when they drove by traffic

they would cover his eyes and not bring any unwanted attention from any passing vehicles or wandering pedestrians that may look at the Jeep.

“We’ll make this quick, master,” said Sebastian as he reached over and pulled out a walkie-talkie from the Jeep’s glove compartment. “Tomas, check in please,” he said into the radio speaker.

A slightly static voice responded, “This is Tomas. I’m third car behind you. Janice is right behind your Jeep.”

“Good. Stay alert and follow single file in one lane only. I will maintain the lead,” replied Sebastian.

Saklas looked at Sebastian. The man seemed so content and focused on his task. He wondered at what the man thinks he would gain by Satan’s supposed resurrection. Power? Supernatural abilities? Saklas could only view him as just another self-deluded fool that had a longing for some point, purpose or meaning to his pathetic existence. It was amusing to him.

The drive out to the cult was exhilarating and Saklas could only gaze in wonderment at what the human race had accomplished in only a few thousand years. Indeed, even the vehicle he was in seemed no small a miracle of technology to allow one faster travel than a person would on horseback. He then remembered his followers and how they grovelled before him and remembered what life was like for humans when people could die of the common cold and people thought unclean spirits caused illnesses. Then his mind drifted to earlier times, back to the very beginning.

Saklas remembered being birthed. It wasn’t a birth in a conventional sense. It was more like awakening one day with all of your cognitive faculties in full order. He could remember the sense of being stretched into being as part of a divine emanation from the totality of God along with his six other brothers. The only thing analogous was a bacteria reproducing through fission but instead of coming from another bacteria his maker was God himself. Because of that he and his brothers would always be divine, but not all-powerful.

He instantly knew the names given him and his brothers at the moment of conscious lucidity when he became self-aware: Yaldabaoth, Elilaios, Eloiein, David, Seth, Iao and Saklas. Each one was tasked with part of creation and given certain innate abilities. For Saklas it was dominion over matter itself as well as its creation. He needed no instruction and his powers were as much a part of his essence as his newfound knowledge of reality without the need to learn. Oh how the angels in Heaven praised their creation. Even the angels Lucifer and Michael revered their magnificence.

As Saklas daydreamed of the past the Jeep slowed down and drove onto the overpass that crossed the railway lines.

“The building is just over on 11th Street,” said Sebastian. “Brandon just texted me. Says he left the door unlocked for us after making an excuse to go use the bathroom. Clever. They won’t know what hit them.”

Ten minutes later and the convoy of vehicles all drove down 11th Street towards their destination. Sebastian pointed the building out to Saklas when it drew near and then found a parking spot on the other side of the street behind a minivan when they arrived. After checking in with Sebastian over the walkie-talkie the other coven members found spots to park on either side of the street as well.

Saklas quickly got out of the Jeep and walked over to Sebastian who was just now stepping out of the vehicle, closing the door behind him.

“So this is the building?” asked Saklas.

Sebastian nodded. “Yes. This is it. This is where the cult is,” he said.

Saklas looked up and down the street. The only people he saw were members of the coven who were now all merging toward Sebastian after exiting their vehicles. If anyone saw this gaggle of people all dressed in black wearing pentagram pins they would definitely be suspicious that something was up. Most of the houses and the one apartment complex down the street seemed quiet and nobody else was currently driving down the street. The area seemed noiseless. To Saklas that was a good thing.

Once the coven members gathered around Sebastian he took out his pistol from his coat pocket then chambered a round into it. The other members pulled out their guns and did the same. Saklas then remembered the gun he took from Tomas and pulled it out of his pant waist band from behind the small of his back. He cocked back the action then lowered the gun to his side.

“Now we are ready. This should go smooth and simple,” said Sebastian to the coven. “I’ll take the lead and our master will follow me. Once inside point your guns at anyone close by.”

Tomas then turned to the group and said, “Janice, you and I will do crowd control. The rest of us forcefully stop the monk if he tries to run. Just don’t harm him.”

Sebastian nodded then started to cross the street to the building. Saklas adjusted the sunglasses on his face then followed Sebastian. The coven members momentarily stared at Saklas then they began to follow him a few steps behind.

The building was two stories tall and the lower floor lacked the multiple windows that the second story had. The roof was flat and the entire building was coloured a light blue. Saklas thought the structure must have been some kind of office building at one time perhaps for something medical like dentistry. There was a small parking lot in front of the building and it was full of different vehicles. All the members of the coven passed through and around the parked cars there on the way to the single door facing the street in the buildings face. Sebastian kept lead.

When Sebastian got to the door he stopped and faced the coven that now gathered around. He put his forefinger of his free hand to his lips to remind them all to keep quiet. He then turned and gently twisted the door knob and slowly pushed it open. He peered inside then, satisfied that

nobody was there, looked back to the group and nodded. Tightly gripping his pistol he was the first to enter the building. Saklas followed him and then the others filtered in as well.

They were all in a long hallway. Toward one end was a windowless door and the other end opened up into a new room. Sebastian motioned for everyone to follow him and he led them all to the end of the hallway that opened into another room. That room had another door facing them. The room looked like it was a waiting room and even had an unused counter that was flush against the wall farthest from them. Gentle, but unintelligible words, could be heard from the other side of the door here. Sebastian hushed anyone's urge to speak by putting his forefinger to his lips as he walked over to the door and pressed his ear against it.

Sebastian heard some more muffled speech then looked back to the others.

"Okay. This is it," Sebastian whispered. "You're up Tomas and Janice."

Tomas parted through the group with a dark haired woman in tow then stood before Sebastian. Saklas recognized the woman but she was a newish member and he only saw her the last time he possessed a person's body and previously never got close and personal with her.

"We're ready," whispered Tomas. Sebastian nodded then raised his pistol and reached his free hand to grab the door handle. He then gently twisted the knob and pulled it open.

Tomas was the first to dart through the door. He brought up his pistol and shouted for everybody in the other room to freeze and not to move. Janice followed behind and moved into another part of the room and out of sight. Sebastian motioned to the remaining group and each coven member slowly walked into the room single file with their guns gripped at thigh level. It was very nonchalant the way each one walked into the room; like they were simply moving from one store to another inside a mall. When the last coven member passed the door threshold Sebastian said, "After you," to Saklas. Saklas nodded then walked inside.

The room was about forty feet wide and sixty feet long. There were no windows and a small podium stood off centre on the farthest wall away from the door. On the floor was about twenty people sitting cross-legged on yoga mats. Some of them gasped and looked around the room in confusion. They all looked terrified. Facing the group was an older silver-haired man wearing a blue robe just starting to stand up.

"What the devil is this?" said the silver-haired man. Tomas pointed his gun at him and the man took a step back then raised his hands. Janice walked around the circumference of the group of people on the mats and pointed her gun at each one of them as she moved.

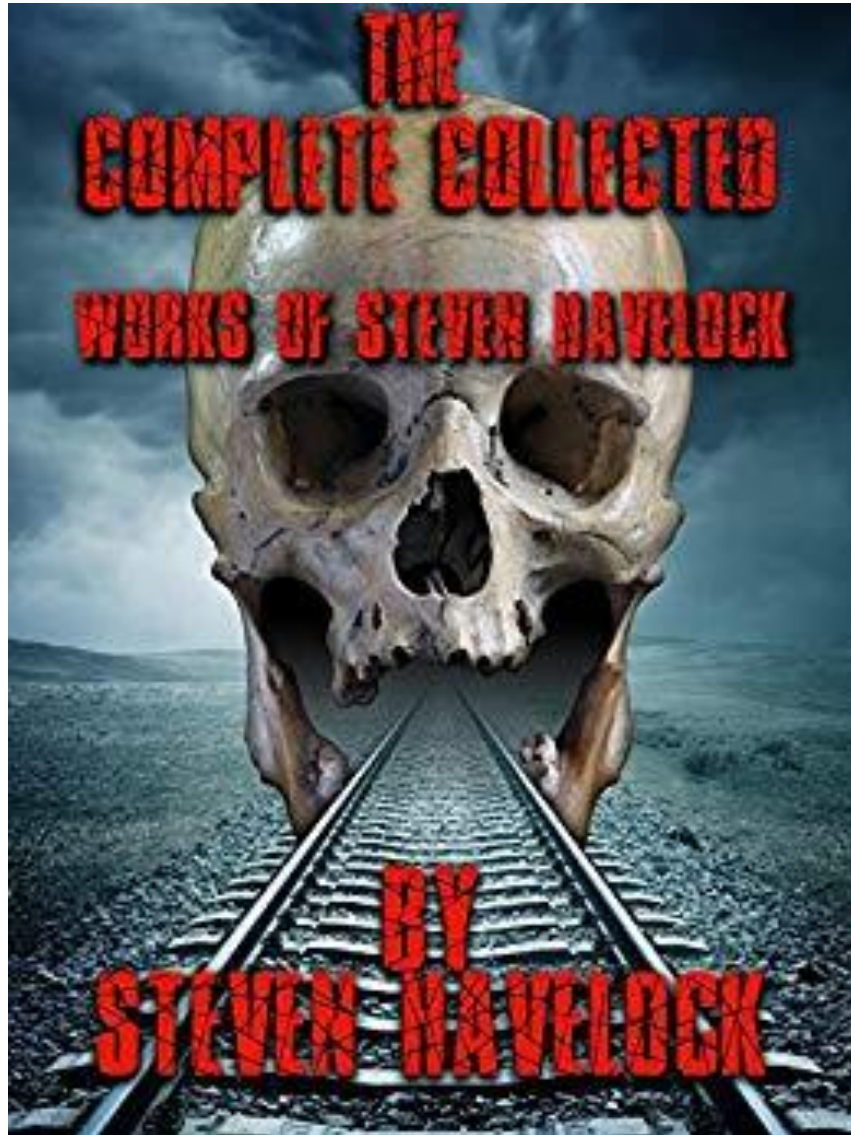
Sebastian finally entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"We're here for you, old man," said Sebastian. "You have something we need."

The silver-haired man squinted then stepped forward and said, "I am Brother Bartholomew and I am in charge here. We don't want any trouble. Just tell us what we can do for you."

“You can come with me, monk. I already know who you are,” said Sebastian as he walked toward Bartholomew with his gun raised.

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Kursaal crouched down beside one charred, fallen form, recognising it from his very brief acquaintance it as Aajika's mother. Her hide was charred and blistered, sightless eyes gazed up at the sky. Two men brushed past him to investigate the fire, dragging the corpses away from it.

'Only the adults,' muttered Kursaal's father. 'Where are the cubs?'

Kursaal looked up and went to examine the corpses from the fire. His gorge rose when he saw what had been done before death.

The other warriors watched from the mouth of the cave. Kursaal turned round. 'You're right,' he said excitedly. 'Aajika is not here. Nor her brothers and sisters.'

'They were taken....'

The voice was weak, almost a breath of wind. It filtered from deeper in the cave. Kursaal sprang forward. He returned shortly after, carrying into the light the battered form of Aarau, Aajika's father.

A broken arrow jutted from the man's chest, and he was bruised and bloody, but somehow he had escaped being flung onto the pyre with the rest of his kin. The warriors gathered round, shouting questions at the weak old man, until Tolkaan pushed them away.

'Give him light,' he urged, 'Give him air. Let him tell his tale.'

Kursaal propped Aarau against the cave wall. The man's eyes flickered open; he gazed blindly at the sky.

'Where is my daughter?' he rambled. 'Where is Aajika?'

It was just what Kursaal wanted to ask. He shook the man gently. 'She is not here,' he said. 'What happened? Was it...the Deathcaps?'

Tolkaan crouched down and peered into Aarau's face. The man was having trouble seeing and his breathing was erratic. He did not have long, that much was clear. But he must know what had happened here.

'The slavers...' Aarau wheezed suddenly, and a muttering went through the assembled warriors. 'The Deathcaps, aye... they came from the jungle on their reptiles. We didn't stand a chance! I tried to fight but was flung aside. They took the young, raped and killed the old. They took my daughter!'

Kursaal gripped his forearms. 'Where did they take her?' he said urgently. 'Do you know

where?’

Aarau tried to speak, but instead of words his last breath wheezed from his lips. His head fell to one side and he lay still.

‘Fool,’ growled Tolkaan. ‘You should not have shaken him like that.’ Rising, he looked around at the other warriors. ‘So they have taken the cubs as slaves,’ he said. ‘We must pursue them beyond the jivnik swamps, fight them and bring them back, or else their blood price. The trail is clear through the fungus forest. It will only be hard going when we reach the swamp.’

He shrugged with resignation. Kursaal laid Aarau’s body on the ground beside the others. The surrounding mushrooms were already lined with perching scavengers.

‘We must bury them,’ he told the rest.

His father rounded on him. ‘Would you waste time?’ he hissed. ‘Are you a coward as well as a deviant?’

Another elder joined them. ‘Your cub is right,’ he said. ‘We cannot leave them to be picked over by the winged reptiles. He must stay behind and inter the corpses.’

‘No cub of mine,’ said Tolkaan hotly, ‘will stay behind when there is fighting to be done.’

‘Kursaal fought well against their leader,’ said another warrior. ‘We will need him. I and two others will bury the corpses. We will join the rest of you on the trail when we can. It is plain enough.’

He took two others and began to dig graves in the blue mould beneath a great mushroom.

‘It is indeed plain enough,’ Kursaal said thoughtfully. ‘Surely our victory was too easy.’

‘What do you say now, cub?’ his father demanded. ‘More coward-talk?’

The other warriors were already walking down the trail of broken stems that led into the mushroom forest. ‘We fought for only a short while,’ Kursaal said, as he and his father followed, ‘and then the Deathcaps retreated.’

Tolkaan shrugged expressively. ‘We routed them!’ He pounded his chest. ‘We are the mightiest of tribes.’

‘Meanwhile,’ Kursaal added, ‘they were raiding our outlying settlements.’ The territory of the Tribe was not fertile enough to sustain a large population in one area, so it was thinly spread, with the Crag as the largest settlement due to the number of caves. Otherwise the Tribe had settled wherever there was shelter from the sulphurous rain.

‘Don’t you see, it was to distract the main body of warriors that they attacked?’ he added.

‘Meanwhile, more of them were raiding the settlements.’ Smoke still rose in pillars in the distance on every side. ‘Then they rode off together, making no attempt to conceal their path.’

‘They are fools,’ said Tolkaan uneasily. ‘Here is what will happen: we will pursue, fight them, then a truce will be called when enough are wounded or dead on either side. Then we will bargain for our kin. Depending on many things, we may win them back, or we may receive a payment in kind. That is the way it has always been.’

He scowled at Kursaal. ‘Do not think to win Aajika as your mate,’ he said. ‘That is not our custom. When you are a mighty enough warrior, you may win your own mate in a raid on another tribe such as this.’

They strode on down the trail. Kursaal was right: the Deathcaps had made no attempt to conceal their progress. It was almost as if they wanted to be pursued. Their reptiles had smashed their way through the avenues of mushrooms and toadstools, no doubt driving the slaves before them. The trail was clear for all to see.

The Tribesfolk chanted a death song, of the sort they recited on all such expeditions. Tolkaan told him tales about raids and reprisals in his youth and they marched onwards through the forest. The mushrooms grew in the fertile loamy area that stretched between the foot of the mountains and the jivnik swamps that infested the shore. The Deathcaps themselves were said to live aboard a floating island out in the swamp.

Tolkaan had seen it in the past, although only from the tangled woods of the shore; he had never set foot upon the Deathcaps’ island. The enemy tribe had an ideal position for raiding, able to strike inland and then retreat to their watery fastness, then to bargain for the lives of the slaves, or were they hostages?

It had not been the Deathcaps who Kursaal’s father had raided in his youth, not their people from whom Kursaal’s mother had come. She had been a woman of the Hive-folk, who dwelt in the plains along the coast, in great towering nests of dried clay, from which they went forth to gather food or to hunt. Tolkaan and some others of the Tribe had surprised a foraging party, slain the men, and brought back the women and girls as mates.

It had always been so, Tolkaan insisted. Kursaal acknowledged this. He knew it was wrong to desire a she of his own people. But when they rested later on, sheltering from the rain beneath a large mushroom after the burial party joined them, he couldn’t stop his thoughts trending towards Aajika, her honey-sweet face, her slender, clever paws.

‘What’s that?’ a warrior said suddenly, pointing.

The rain still hissed down, bouncing off the cap of the mushroom and cascading down onto the mould. It hung like a curtain, obscuring the jungle beyond. But hovering over them in the rain was a huge shape.

Kursaal glimpsed it only for a second, and then it was gone beyond sight, vanished behind the

cap of the mushroom. He rose to his feet excitedly from where he had sat leaning against the mushroom stem.

‘That is the thing I saw,’ he told the warriors, most of whom had also seen it. ‘That is what stampeded the face-horns!’

‘That,’ said the warrior said scathingly, ‘was what scattered the face-horns?’

Tolkaan awoke. ‘I saw nothing last time,’ he said, ‘but I heard the noise. The roar. I heard nothing now.’

‘There was no noise this time,’ said Kursaal. ‘The rain must have drowned it out. But nevertheless it was the fish that flies.’

‘Out in the rain?’ asked another warrior. ‘Nothing flies in the rain. Everything seeks shelter. Only the mushrooms and the trees are tough enough to withstand the rain.’

The vegetation was tough, and had developed an ability to filter out the caustic element in the rain, and absorb sweet water. Even the youngest of cubs knew that drinking water could be found in the stems of any mushroom or the trees that grew closer to the coast. But it seemed that the flying fish could also survive in the rain.

‘That is fitting,’ said Kursaal, ‘if it is indeed a fish. Fish can live in water.’ And yet the streams in which fish dwelt came for the most part from the vegetation, where the sulphurous element was diluted. The rain as it fell from the clouds was lethal to all but thick hided mushrooms and plants.

‘I saw the men in its mouth,’ said one feather bedecked warrior pensively. ‘What fish flies in the air with men in its mouth?’ It was a riddle.

‘I heard that there are big fish in the great ocean,’ ventured another man, a grizzled elder. ‘Sometimes they eat men foolish to venture out in great canoes. My mate told me, and she came from one of the shore tribes.’

The rain began to ease off then, and after a while the warriors ventured out. The liquid was absorbed into the mushrooms for the most part, some into the mould. Soon it was dry. Kursaal looked to the skies, but he saw no sign of what he had seen before.

‘Did your mate tell you of any fish that flew?’ he asked the elder, Enzi his name, walking alongside him as the warriors returned to the trail.

Enzi shrugged. ‘She told many tales,’ he said. ‘Aye, she spoke of flying fish, but they were the same fish that swim in our streams and pools. They flew from the water and then back again when the shore folk ventured out in the morning to harvest them. Sometimes they flew straight into the canoes and lay there helpless. Out of their element at last.’

‘But this was no fish a man could eat,’ Tolkaan objected, walking on Kursaal’s other side. ‘I glimpsed it during the hunt when my son was trampled. I saw it better this time, despite the rain. It was bigger than the biggest mastodon, the hugest thunder lizard. Some say that flying reptiles that size have been seen up in the mountains, but people tell lies. Besides, that flying thing had no wings. What kept it afloat?’

Enzi shivered. ‘What can a warrior accomplish against witchcraft? For that is what it is. We must find the witches who have conjured up this evil spirit and smother them. Then it will depart to the underworld from which it came.’

Tolkaan nodded wisely. Enzi’s plan was a good one. But Kursaal wondered where they would find the witches responsible. He wondered if they dwelt in the island of the Deathcaps.

After two more sleeps, the trail led them down to the edge of the jivnik swamps. The swamps announced themselves by their stink long before Kursaal first glimpsed them through the increasingly sparse fungi. A foul, earthy stench met his twitching nostrils, and he knew that they were now far from anywhere they could count their own territory. A cold wind blew through the mushrooms and toadstools, and glimpses of red water were visible in the distance, then the dark, twisted trunks of trees. The trail led straight down the slope to the edge of the forest. To the banks of the swamp.

Miles of orange woodland stretched ahead of them, but beneath the trees lay nothing but red water. Water in which hardy fish and reptiles might swim, and tough trees might grow, but which would burn and blister the flesh of any human foolish enough to swim in it.

The warriors gathered on the bank in perturbed silence. The trail vanished into the water. All knew that the floating island of the Deathcaps lay somewhere beyond the orange trees. But how to reach them? The Deathcaps’ reptiles possessed hide thick enough to be able to swim, but the Crag Folk did not.

‘We will cut down trees,’ said Enzi. ‘Make canoes. That is what the shore folk do. My mate told me.’

Their attempts to make canoes went badly at first. While some warriors kept watch from the bank, spears and spear casters at the ready should any Deathcaps or other hostile tribesfolk make an appearance, others used their stone axes to cut down orange jivnik trees.

Kursaal was one of these. His arms soon ached and sweat poured down his dark hide and yet his axe blows seemed to have made little or no impression on the hardy bark. These trees grew in the very water itself, he reminded himself, peering uncertainly into the steaming liquid. No wonder they were so hardy. But canoes were the only way they could reach the floating island. They were the only means at his disposal of finding and freeing Aajika.

He brushed the sweat from his eyes and forced his weary limbs to work. At last several tree trunks floated in the water by the bank.

‘What now?’ Tolkaan asked Enzi curtly. ‘How will we sail in these? What did your mate say?’

The grizzled elder shrugged his shoulders. ‘We must sit upon them, it seems to me,’ he said.

Kursaal could see that he had very little idea. Were the matter not so urgent, he would have thrown up the notion there and then. But they had to find the floating island where the slavers had taken their kin. He looked at the others. Mighty warriors all, blooded and hardened fighters and hunters, they looked down at the canoes with hesitation on their faces.

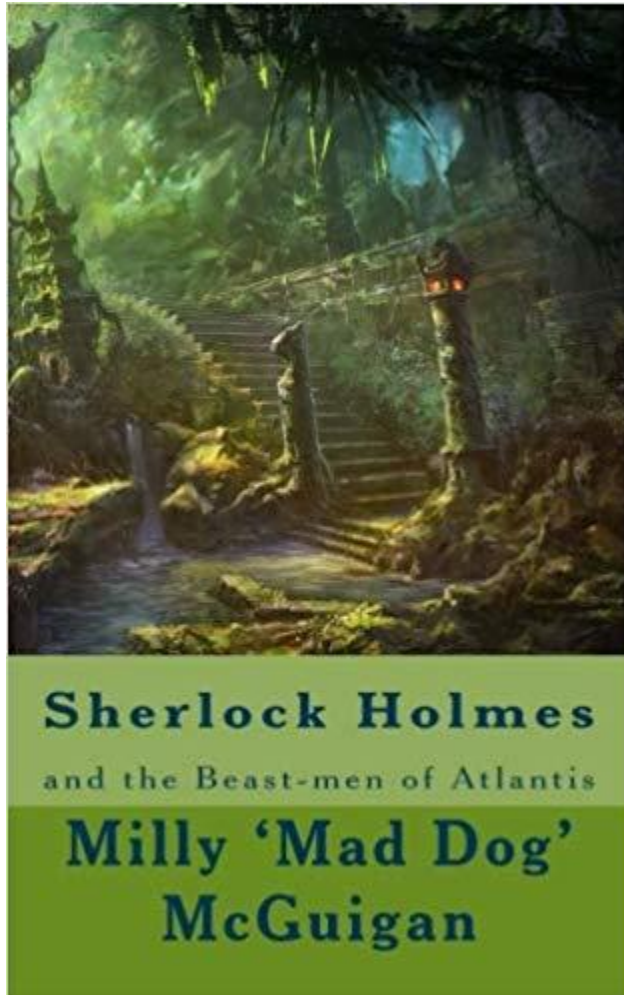
‘We must make haste,’ Kursaal said, and climbed aboard the first.

Using his spear caster, he pushed off from the side, gripping either side with his legs as he had seen the Deathcaps do with their riding reptiles. Cautiously, he poled himself out into the tree shadowed swamp water.

Hearing a splash from behind him, he turned his head. Enzi had climbed aboard another log and was poling it out behind him. The rest of the warriors still stood fearfully on the banks, looking away from each other in shame. Then Tolkaan clambered aboard another trunk and set out. Soon the other warriors were punting after them, across the swamp.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty-Three

Ward opened his eyes. It made no difference. The world was just as dark as it had been before he opened them. Ward patted himself down. All his clothes were gone. His weapons, his boots... everything. He had been strip-searched. He felt a touch upon his forehead. It was gentle. A feminine touch.

“Are you awake?”

Ward recognized the voice. It was Lacey’s.

“Yeah. Seems like it,” Ward said.

“So what’s the deal?” he asked.

“The deal?” Lacey asked in return.

“Yeah... Deal. Where are we? Where’re we goin’?”

“Oh... they caught us. The one with the purple lips, who calls himself ‘Turhan Mot’. And that other guy. The ugly one...”

“Missing teeth? Big gash in his face, cut through his nose?”

“Yeah,” Lacey answered.

“Yeah. Got it. That one’s called Mokem Bet.”

“Yes, that’s the name I heard,” Lacey said.

“So... where’re we goin’ now? And while I’m asking questions, what all happened? Last I think I remember is bein’ on the bridge of that prison ship...”

“I didn’t see what happened,” Lacey said. “They just brought you in and dumped you here. Then they searched you and stripped everything...”

“‘They’?” Ward asked. “Who are these ‘they’ you’re talking about? Turhan Mot and that Mokem Bet asshole?”

“No... nu-uh,” Lacey answered. They were just the guys in charge. They had maybe a dozen guys pinning you down, even though you weren’t even awake. Then that Turhan Mot guy said to the other one...”

“That would have been Mokem Bet,” Ward put in.

“Yeah, him,” Lacey replied. “He was standing with Turhan Mot while the others were searching you and stripping away all your clothes. And Turhan Mot was saying to that Mokem Bet that it was lucky for him that he didn’t kill you when you were up on the bridge. I guess that means they want to keep you alive.”

Ward grinned to himself.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess that’s what it means.”

“Are you, like, important or something?”

“Important? Nah.”

“You got a bounty on you?”

“A couple, maybe...” Ward said. “Look, am I gonna find any clothes here?”

“No,” Lacey answered. “They took everything you were wearing.”

“Yeah, prob’ly pretty smart of them. I had a few surprises tucked up my sleeves. They wouldn’ta liked ‘em very much.”

“Oh?” Lacey asked.

“Nah. Don’ worry about it. Just don’t like wandering around, flashing the family jewels.”

“All I have are is the thong they let me keep. I’d share it with ya,” Lacey helpfully offered, “But I don’t think there’s enough room in there for both of us.”

“Nah, I expect not,” Ward, ever the realist, agreed.

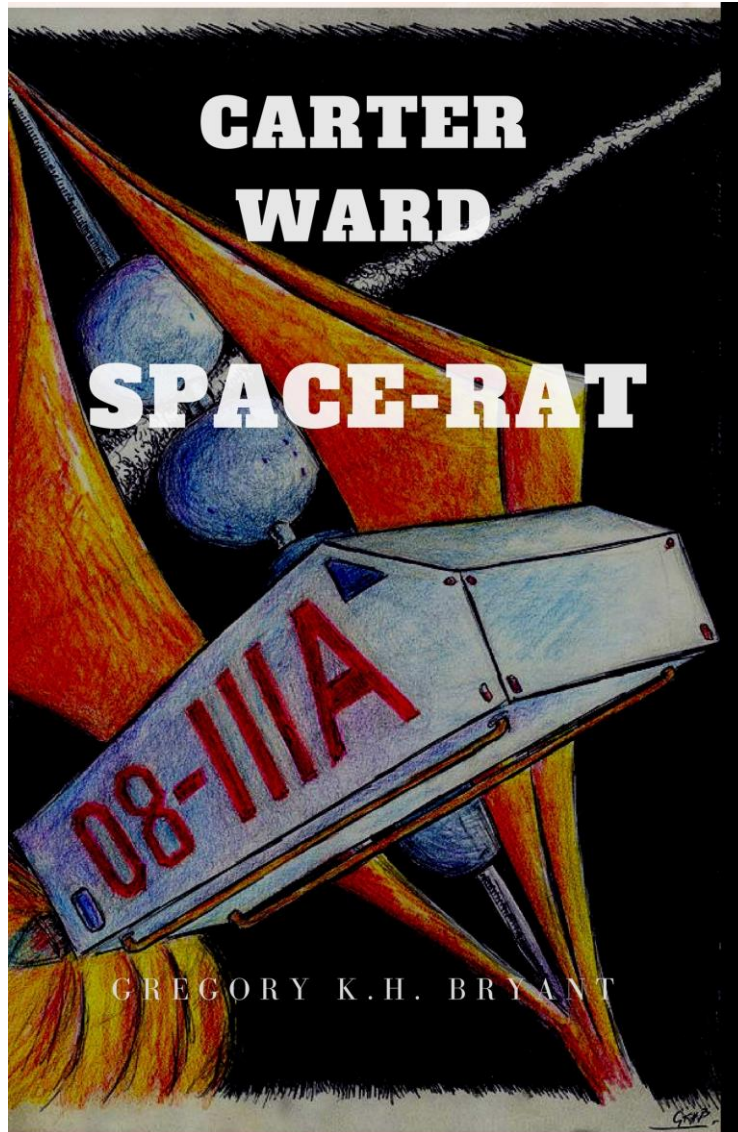
“So, these happy joy boys wanna keep us alive. Why? Whadda they got planned? Where they takin’ us? You got any idea?”

Lacey said nothing for a long moment. The two of them sat in the darkened cell, as Ward patiently waited for an answer to his question.

In a very hushed and quiet voice that insinuated itself through the darkness, she said, at last, “They’re taking us to Astra Palace.”

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Now available from Schlock! Publications: [Carter Ward—Space Rat](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter IX: "Who could have foreseen it?"

A dreadful thing has happened to us. Who could have foreseen it? I cannot foresee any end to our troubles. It may be that we are condemned to spend our whole lives in this strange, inaccessible place. I am still so confused that I can hardly think clearly of the facts of the present or of the chances of the future. To my astounded senses the one seems most terrible and the other as black as night.

No men have ever found themselves in a worse position; nor is there any use in disclosing to you our exact geographical situation and asking our friends for a relief party. Even if they could send one, our fate will in all human probability be decided long before it could arrive in South America.

We are, in truth, as far from any human aid as if we were in the moon. If we are to win through, it is only our own qualities which can save us. I have as companions three remarkable men, men of great brain-power and of unshaken courage. There lies our one and only hope. It is only when I look upon the untroubled faces of my comrades that I see some glimmer through the darkness. Outwardly I trust that I appear as unconcerned as they. Inwardly I am filled with apprehension.

Let me give you, with as much detail as I can, the sequence of events which have led us to this catastrophe.

When I finished my last letter I stated that we were within seven miles from an enormous line of ruddy cliffs, which encircled, beyond all doubt, the plateau of which Professor Challenger spoke. Their height, as we approached them, seemed to me in some places to be greater than he had stated—running up in parts to at least a thousand feet—and they were curiously striated, in a manner which is, I believe, characteristic of basaltic upheavals. Something of the sort is to be seen in Salisbury Crags at Edinburgh. The summit showed every sign of a luxuriant vegetation, with bushes near the edge, and farther back many high trees. There was no indication of any life that we could see.

That night we pitched our camp immediately under the cliff—a most wild and desolate spot. The crags above us were not merely perpendicular, but curved outwards at the top, so that ascent was out of the question. Close to us was the high thin pinnacle of rock which I believe I mentioned earlier in this narrative. It is like a broad red church spire, the top of it being level with the plateau, but a great chasm gaping between. On the summit of it there grew one high tree. Both pinnacle and cliff were comparatively low—some five or six hundred feet, I should think.

"It was on that," said Professor Challenger, pointing to this tree, "that the pterodactyl was perched. I climbed half-way up the rock before I shot him. I am inclined to think that a good mountaineer like myself could ascend the rock to the top, though he would, of course, be no nearer to the plateau when he had done so."

As Challenger spoke of his pterodactyl I glanced at Professor Summerlee, and for the first time I

seemed to see some signs of a dawning credulity and repentance. There was no sneer upon his thin lips, but, on the contrary, a grey, drawn look of excitement and amazement. Challenger saw it, too, and revelled in the first taste of victory.

“Of course,” said he, with his clumsy and ponderous sarcasm, “Professor Summerlee will understand that when I speak of a pterodactyl I mean a stork—only it is the kind of stork which has no feathers, a leathery skin, membranous wings, and teeth in its jaws.” He grinned and blinked and bowed until his colleague turned and walked away.

In the morning, after a frugal breakfast of coffee and manioc—we had to be economical of our stores—we held a council of war as to the best method of ascending to the plateau above us.

Challenger presided with a solemnity as if he were the Lord Chief Justice on the Bench. Picture him seated upon a rock, his absurd boyish straw hat tilted on the back of his head, his supercilious eyes dominating us from under his drooping lids, his great black beard wagging as he slowly defined our present situation and our future movements.

Beneath him you might have seen the three of us—myself, sunburnt, young, and vigorous after our open-air tramp; Summerlee, solemn but still critical, behind his eternal pipe; Lord John, as keen as a razor-edge, with his supple, alert figure leaning upon his rifle, and his eager eyes fixed eagerly upon the speaker. Behind us were grouped the two swarthy half-breeds and the little knot of Indians, while in front and above us towered those huge, ruddy ribs of rocks which kept us from our goal.

“I need not say,” said our leader, “that on the occasion of my last visit I exhausted every means of climbing the cliff, and where I failed I do not think that anyone else is likely to succeed, for I am something of a mountaineer. I had none of the appliances of a rock-climber with me, but I have taken the precaution to bring them now. With their aid I am positive I could climb that detached pinnacle to the summit; but so long as the main cliff overhangs, it is vain to attempt ascending that. I was hurried upon my last visit by the approach of the rainy season and by the exhaustion of my supplies. These considerations limited my time, and I can only claim that I have surveyed about six miles of the cliff to the east of us, finding no possible way up. What, then, shall we now do?”

“There seems to be only one reasonable course,” said Professor Summerlee. “If you have explored the east, we should travel along the base of the cliff to the west, and seek for a practicable point for our ascent.”

“That’s it,” said Lord John. “The odds are that this plateau is of no great size, and we shall travel round it until we either find an easy way up it, or come back to the point from which we started.”

“I have already explained to our young friend here,” said Challenger (he has a way of alluding to me as if I were a school child ten years old), “that it is quite impossible that there should be an easy way up anywhere, for the simple reason that if there were the summit would not be isolated, and those conditions would not obtain which have effected so singular an interference with the general laws of survival. Yet I admit that there may very well be places where an expert human

climber may reach the summit, and yet a cumbrous and heavy animal be unable to descend. It is certain that there is a point where an ascent is possible.”

“How do you know that, sir?” asked Summerlee, sharply.

“Because my predecessor, the American Maple White, actually made such an ascent. How otherwise could he have seen the monster which he sketched in his notebook?”

“There you reason somewhat ahead of the proved facts,” said the stubborn Summerlee. “I admit your plateau, because I have seen it; but I have not as yet satisfied myself that it contains any form of life whatever.”

“What you admit, sir, or what you do not admit, is really of inconceivably small importance. I am glad to perceive that the plateau itself has actually obtruded itself upon your intelligence.” He glanced up at it, and then, to our amazement, he sprang from his rock, and, seizing Summerlee by the neck, he tilted his face into the air. “Now sir!” he shouted, hoarse with excitement. “Do I help you to realize that the plateau contains some animal life?”

I have said that a thick fringe of green overhung the edge of the cliff. Out of this there had emerged a black, glistening object. As it came slowly forth and overhung the chasm, we saw that it was a very large snake with a peculiar flat, spade-like head. It wavered and quivered above us for a minute, the morning sun gleaming upon its sleek, sinuous coils. Then it slowly drew inwards and disappeared.

Summerlee had been so interested that he had stood unresisting while Challenger tilted his head into the air. Now he shook his colleague off and came back to his dignity.

“I should be glad, Professor Challenger,” said he, “if you could see your way to make any remarks which may occur to you without seizing me by the chin. Even the appearance of a very ordinary rock python does not appear to justify such a liberty.”

“But there is life upon the plateau all the same,” his colleague replied in triumph. “And now, having demonstrated this important conclusion so that it is clear to anyone, however prejudiced or obtuse, I am of opinion that we cannot do better than break up our camp and travel to westward until we find some means of ascent.”

The ground at the foot of the cliff was rocky and broken so that the going was slow and difficult. Suddenly we came, however, upon something which cheered our hearts. It was the site of an old encampment, with several empty Chicago meat tins, a bottle labelled “Brandy,” a broken tin-opener, and a quantity of other travellers’ debris. A crumpled, disintegrated newspaper revealed itself as the Chicago Democrat, though the date had been obliterated.

“Not mine,” said Challenger. “It must be Maple White’s.”

Lord John had been gazing curiously at a great tree-fern which overshadowed the encampment. “I say, look at this,” said he. “I believe it is meant for a sign-post.”

A slip of hard wood had been nailed to the tree in such a way as to point to the westward.

“Most certainly a sign-post,” said Challenger. “What else? Finding himself upon a dangerous errand, our pioneer has left this sign so that any party which follows him may know the way he has taken. Perhaps we shall come upon some other indications as we proceed.”

We did indeed, but they were of a terrible and most unexpected nature. Immediately beneath the cliff there grew a considerable patch of high bamboo, like that which we had traversed in our journey. Many of these stems were twenty feet high, with sharp, strong tops, so that even as they stood they made formidable spears. We were passing along the edge of this cover when my eye was caught by the gleam of something white within it. Thrusting in my head between the stems, I found myself gazing at a fleshless skull. The whole skeleton was there, but the skull had detached itself and lay some feet nearer to the open.

With a few blows from the machetes of our Indians we cleared the spot and were able to study the details of this old tragedy. Only a few shreds of clothes could still be distinguished, but there were the remains of boots upon the bony feet, and it was very clear that the dead man was a European. A gold watch by Hudson, of New York, and a chain which held a stylographic pen, lay among the bones. There was also a silver cigarette-case, with “J. C., from A. E. S.,” upon the lid. The state of the metal seemed to show that the catastrophe had occurred no great time before.

“Who can he be?” asked Lord John. “Poor devil! every bone in his body seems to be broken.”

“And the bamboo grows through his smashed ribs,” said Summerlee. “It is a fast-growing plant, but it is surely inconceivable that this body could have been here while the canes grew to be twenty feet in length.”

“As to the man’s identity,” said Professor Challenger, “I have no doubt whatever upon that point. As I made my way up the river before I reached you at the fazenda I instituted very particular inquiries about Maple White. At Para they knew nothing. Fortunately, I had a definite clew, for there was a particular picture in his sketch-book which showed him taking lunch with a certain ecclesiastic at Rosario. This priest I was able to find, and though he proved a very argumentative fellow, who took it absurdly amiss that I should point out to him the corrosive effect which modern science must have upon his beliefs, he none the less gave me some positive information. Maple White passed Rosario four years ago, or two years before I saw his dead body. He was not alone at the time, but there was a friend, an American named James Colver, who remained in the boat and did not meet this ecclesiastic. I think, therefore, that there can be no doubt that we are now looking upon the remains of this James Colver.”

“Nor,” said Lord John, “is there much doubt as to how he met his death. He has fallen or been chucked from the top, and so been impaled. How else could he come by his broken bones, and how could he have been stuck through by these canes with their points so high above our heads?”

A hush came over us as we stood round these shattered remains and realized the truth of Lord

John Roxton's words. The beetling head of the cliff projected over the cane-brake. Undoubtedly he had fallen from above. But had he fallen? Had it been an accident? Or—already ominous and terrible possibilities began to form round that unknown land.

We moved off in silence, and continued to coast round the line of cliffs, which were as even and unbroken as some of those monstrous Antarctic ice-fields which I have seen depicted as stretching from horizon to horizon and towering high above the mast-heads of the exploring vessel.

In five miles we saw no rift or break. And then suddenly we perceived something which filled us with new hope. In a hollow of the rock, protected from rain, there was drawn a rough arrow in chalk, pointing still to the westwards.

"Maple White again," said Professor Challenger. "He had some presentiment that worthy footsteps would follow close behind him."

"He had chalk, then?"

"A box of coloured chalks was among the effects I found in his knapsack. I remember that the white one was worn to a stump."

"That is certainly good evidence," said Summerlee. "We can only accept his guidance and follow on to the westward."

We had proceeded some five more miles when again we saw a white arrow upon the rocks. It was at a point where the face of the cliff was for the first time split into a narrow cleft. Inside the cleft was a second guidance mark, which pointed right up it with the tip somewhat elevated, as if the spot indicated were above the level of the ground.

It was a solemn place, for the walls were so gigantic and the slit of blue sky so narrow and so obscured by a double fringe of verdure, that only a dim and shadowy light penetrated to the bottom. We had had no food for many hours, and were very weary with the stony and irregular journey, but our nerves were too strung to allow us to halt. We ordered the camp to be pitched, however, and, leaving the Indians to arrange it, we four, with the two half-breeds, proceeded up the narrow gorge.

It was not more than forty feet across at the mouth, but it rapidly closed until it ended in an acute angle, too straight and smooth for an ascent. Certainly it was not this which our pioneer had attempted to indicate. We made our way back—the whole gorge was not more than a quarter of a mile deep—and then suddenly the quick eyes of Lord John fell upon what we were seeking. High up above our heads, amid the dark shadows, there was one circle of deeper gloom. Surely it could only be the opening of a cave.

The base of the cliff was heaped with loose stones at the spot, and it was not difficult to clamber up. When we reached it, all doubt was removed. Not only was it an opening into the rock, but on the side of it there was marked once again the sign of the arrow. Here was the point, and this the

means by which Maple White and his ill-fated comrade had made their ascent.

We were too excited to return to the camp, but must make our first exploration at once. Lord John had an electric torch in his knapsack, and this had to serve us as light. He advanced, throwing his little clear circlet of yellow radiance before him, while in single file we followed at his heels.

The cave had evidently been water-worn, the sides being smooth and the floor covered with rounded stones. It was of such a size that a single man could just fit through by stooping. For fifty yards it ran almost straight into the rock, and then it ascended at an angle of forty-five. Presently this incline became even steeper, and we found ourselves climbing upon hands and knees among loose rubble which slid from beneath us. Suddenly an exclamation broke from Lord Roxton.

“It’s blocked!” said he.

Clustering behind him we saw in the yellow field of light a wall of broken basalt which extended to the ceiling.

“The roof has fallen in!”

In vain we dragged out some of the pieces. The only effect was that the larger ones became detached and threatened to roll down the gradient and crush us. It was evident that the obstacle was far beyond any efforts which we could make to remove it. The road by which Maple White had ascended was no longer available.

Too much cast down to speak, we stumbled down the dark tunnel and made our way back to the camp.

One incident occurred, however, before we left the gorge, which is of importance in view of what came afterwards.

We had gathered in a little group at the bottom of the chasm, some forty feet beneath the mouth of the cave, when a huge rock rolled suddenly downwards—and shot past us with tremendous force. It was the narrowest escape for one or all of us. We could not ourselves see whence the rock had come, but our half-breed servants, who were still at the opening of the cave, said that it had flown past them, and must therefore have fallen from the summit. Looking upwards, we could see no sign of movement above us amidst the green jungle which topped the cliff. There could be little doubt, however, that the stone was aimed at us, so the incident surely pointed to humanity—and malevolent humanity—upon the plateau.

We withdrew hurriedly from the chasm, our minds full of this new development and its bearing upon our plans. The situation was difficult enough before, but if the obstructions of Nature were increased by the deliberate opposition of man, then our case was indeed a hopeless one. And yet, as we looked up at that beautiful fringe of verdure only a few hundreds of feet above our heads, there was not one of us who could conceive the idea of returning to London until we had

explored it to its depths.

On discussing the situation, we determined that our best course was to continue to coast round the plateau in the hope of finding some other means of reaching the top. The line of cliffs, which had decreased considerably in height, had already begun to trend from west to north, and if we could take this as representing the arc of a circle, the whole circumference could not be very great. At the worst, then, we should be back in a few days at our starting-point.

We made a march that day which totalled some two-and-twenty miles, without any change in our prospects. I may mention that our aneroid shows us that in the continual incline which we have ascended since we abandoned our canoes we have risen to no less than three thousand feet above sea-level. Hence there is a considerable change both in the temperature and in the vegetation. We have shaken off some of that horrible insect life which is the bane of tropical travel. A few palms still survive, and many tree-ferns, but the Amazonian trees have been all left behind. It was pleasant to see the convolvulus, the passion-flower, and the begonia, all reminding me of home, here among these inhospitable rocks. There was a red begonia just the same colour as one that is kept in a pot in the window of a certain villa in Streatham—but I am drifting into private reminiscence.

That night—I am still speaking of the first day of our circumnavigation of the plateau—a great experience awaited us, and one which for ever set at rest any doubt which we could have had as to the wonders so near us.

You will realize as you read it, my dear Mr. McArdle, and possibly for the first time that the paper has not sent me on a wild-goose chase, and that there is inconceivably fine copy waiting for the world whenever we have the Professor's leave to make use of it. I shall not dare to publish these articles unless I can bring back my proofs to England, or I shall be hailed as the journalistic Munchausen of all time. I have no doubt that you feel the same way yourself, and that you would not care to stake the whole credit of the Gazette upon this adventure until we can meet the chorus of criticism and scepticism which such articles must of necessity elicit. So this wonderful incident, which would make such a headline for the old paper, must still wait its turn in the editorial drawer.

And yet it was all over in a flash, and there was no sequel to it, save in our own convictions.

What occurred was this. Lord John had shot an ajouti—which is a small, pig-like animal—and, half of it having been given to the Indians, we were cooking the other half upon our fire. There is a chill in the air after dark, and we had all drawn close to the blaze. The night was moonless, but there were some stars, and one could see for a little distance across the plain. Well, suddenly out of the darkness, out of the night, there swooped something with a swish like an aeroplane. The whole group of us were covered for an instant by a canopy of leathery wings, and I had a momentary vision of a long, snake-like neck, a fierce, red, greedy eye, and a great snapping beak, filled, to my amazement, with little, gleaming teeth. The next instant it was gone—and so was our dinner. A huge black shadow, twenty feet across, skimmed up into the air; for an instant the monster wings blotted out the stars, and then it vanished over the brow of the cliff above us. We all sat in amazed silence round the fire, like the heroes of Virgil when the Harpies came

down upon them. It was Summerlee who was the first to speak.

“Professor Challenger,” said he, in a solemn voice, which quavered with emotion, “I owe you an apology. Sir, I am very much in the wrong, and I beg that you will forget what is past.”

It was handsomely said, and the two men for the first time shook hands. So much we have gained by this clear vision of our first pterodactyl. It was worth a stolen supper to bring two such men together.

But if prehistoric life existed upon the plateau it was not superabundant, for we had no further glimpse of it during the next three days. During this time we traversed a barren and forbidding country, which alternated between stony desert and desolate marshes full of many wild-fowl, upon the north and east of the cliffs. From that direction the place is really inaccessible, and, were it not for a hardish ledge which runs at the very base of the precipice, we should have had to turn back. Many times we were up to our waists in the slime and blubber of an old, semi-tropical swamp. To make matters worse, the place seemed to be a favourite breeding-place of the Jaracaca snake, the most venomous and aggressive in South America. Again and again these horrible creatures came writhing and springing towards us across the surface of this putrid bog, and it was only by keeping our shot-guns for ever ready that we could feel safe from them. One funnel-shaped depression in the morass, of a livid green in colour from some lichen which festered in it, will always remain as a nightmare memory in my mind. It seems to have been a special nest of these vermins, and the slopes were alive with them, all writhing in our direction, for it is a peculiarity of the Jaracaca that he will always attack man at first sight. There were too many for us to shoot, so we fairly took to our heels and ran until we were exhausted. I shall always remember as we looked back how far behind we could see the heads and necks of our horrible pursuers rising and falling amid the reeds. Jaracaca Swamp we named it in the map which we are constructing.

The cliffs upon the farther side had lost their ruddy tint, being chocolate-brown in colour; the vegetation was more scattered along the top of them, and they had sunk to three or four hundred feet in height, but in no place did we find any point where they could be ascended. If anything, they were more impossible than at the first point where we had met them. Their absolute steepness is indicated in the photograph which I took over the stony desert.

“Surely,” said I, as we discussed the situation, “the rain must find its way down somehow. There are bound to be water-channels in the rocks.”

“Our young friend has glimpses of lucidity,” said Professor Challenger, patting me upon the shoulder.

“The rain must go somewhere,” I repeated.

“He keeps a firm grip upon actuality. The only drawback is that we have conclusively proved by ocular demonstration that there are no water channels down the rocks.”

“Where, then, does it go?” I persisted.

“I think it may be fairly assumed that if it does not come outwards it must run inwards.”

“Then there is a lake in the centre.”

“So I should suppose.”

“It is more than likely that the lake may be an old crater,” said Summerlee. “The whole formation is, of course, highly volcanic. But, however that may be, I should expect to find the surface of the plateau slope inwards with a considerable sheet of water in the centre, which may drain off, by some subterranean channel, into the marshes of the Jaracaca Swamp.”

“Or evaporation might preserve an equilibrium,” remarked Challenger, and the two learned men wandered off into one of their usual scientific arguments, which were as comprehensible as Chinese to the layman.

On the sixth day we completed our first circuit of the cliffs, and found ourselves back at the first camp, beside the isolated pinnacle of rock. We were a disconsolate party, for nothing could have been more minute than our investigation, and it was absolutely certain that there was no single point where the most active human being could possibly hope to scale the cliff. The place which Maple White’s chalk-marks had indicated as his own means of access was now entirely impassable.

What were we to do now? Our stores of provisions, supplemented by our guns, were holding out well, but the day must come when they would need replenishment. In a couple of months the rains might be expected, and we should be washed out of our camp. The rock was harder than marble, and any attempt at cutting a path for so great a height was more than our time or resources would admit. No wonder that we looked gloomily at each other that night, and sought our blankets with hardly a word exchanged. I remember that as I dropped off to sleep my last recollection was that Challenger was squatting, like a monstrous bull-frog, by the fire, his huge head in his hands, sunk apparently in the deepest thought, and entirely oblivious to the good-night which I wished him.

But it was a very different Challenger who greeted us in the morning—a Challenger with contentment and self-congratulation shining from his whole person. He faced us as we assembled for breakfast with a deprecating false modesty in his eyes, as who should say, “I know that I deserve all that you can say, but I pray you to spare my blushes by not saying it.” His beard bristled exultantly, his chest was thrown out, and his hand was thrust into the front of his jacket. So, in his fancy, may he see himself sometimes, gracing the vacant pedestal in Trafalgar Square, and adding one more to the horrors of the London streets.

“Eureka!” he cried, his teeth shining through his beard. “Gentlemen, you may congratulate me and we may congratulate each other. The problem is solved.”

“You have found a way up?”

“I venture to think so.”

“And where?”

For answer he pointed to the spire-like pinnacle upon our right.

Our faces—or mine, at least—fell as we surveyed it. That it could be climbed we had our companion’s assurance. But a horrible abyss lay between it and the plateau.

“We can never get across,” I gasped.

“We can at least all reach the summit,” said he. “When we are up I may be able to show you that the resources of an inventive mind are not yet exhausted.”

After breakfast we unpacked the bundle in which our leader had brought his climbing accessories. From it he took a coil of the strongest and lightest rope, a hundred and fifty feet in length, with climbing irons, clamps, and other devices. Lord John was an experienced mountaineer, and Summerlee had done some rough climbing at various times, so that I was really the novice at rock-work of the party; but my strength and activity may have made up for my want of experience.

It was not in reality a very stiff task, though there were moments which made my hair bristle upon my head. The first half was perfectly easy, but from there upwards it became continually steeper until, for the last fifty feet, we were literally clinging with our fingers and toes to tiny ledges and crevices in the rock. I could not have accomplished it, nor could Summerlee, if Challenger had not gained the summit (it was extraordinary to see such activity in so unwieldy a creature) and there fixed the rope round the trunk of the considerable tree which grew there. With this as our support, we were soon able to scramble up the jagged wall until we found ourselves upon the small grassy platform, some twenty-five feet each way, which formed the summit.

The first impression which I received when I had recovered my breath was of the extraordinary view over the country which we had traversed. The whole Brazilian plain seemed to lie beneath us, extending away and away until it ended in dim blue mists upon the farthest sky-line. In the foreground was the long slope, strewn with rocks and dotted with tree-ferns; farther off in the middle distance, looking over the saddle-back hill, I could just see the yellow and green mass of bamboos through which we had passed; and then, gradually, the vegetation increased until it formed the huge forest which extended as far as the eyes could reach, and for a good two thousand miles beyond.

I was still drinking in this wonderful panorama when the heavy hand of the Professor fell upon my shoulder.

“This way, my young friend,” said he; “*vestigia nulla retrorsum*. Never look rearwards, but always to our glorious goal.”

The level of the plateau, when I turned, was exactly that on which we stood, and the green bank of bushes, with occasional trees, was so near that it was difficult to realize how inaccessible it remained. At a rough guess the gulf was forty feet across, but, so far as I could see, it might as well have been forty miles. I placed one arm round the trunk of the tree and leaned over the abyss. Far down were the small dark figures of our servants, looking up at us. The wall was absolutely precipitous, as was that which faced me.

“This is indeed curious,” said the creaking voice of Professor Summerlee.

I turned, and found that he was examining with great interest the tree to which I clung. That smooth bark and those small, ribbed leaves seemed familiar to my eyes. “Why,” I cried, “it’s a beech!”

“Exactly,” said Summerlee. “A fellow-countryman in a far land.”

“Not only a fellow-countryman, my good sir,” said Challenger, “but also, if I may be allowed to enlarge your simile, an ally of the first value. This beech tree will be our saviour.”

“By George!” cried Lord John, “a bridge!”

“Exactly, my friends, a bridge! It is not for nothing that I expended an hour last night in focusing my mind upon the situation. I have some recollection of once remarking to our young friend here that G. E. C. is at his best when his back is to the wall. Last night you will admit that all our backs were to the wall. But where will-power and intellect go together, there is always a way out. A drawbridge had to be found which could be dropped across the abyss. Behold it!”

It was certainly a brilliant idea. The tree was a good sixty feet in height, and if it only fell the right way it would easily cross the chasm. Challenger had slung the camp axe over his shoulder when he ascended. Now he handed it to me.

“Our young friend has the thews and sinews,” said he. “I think he will be the most useful at this task. I must beg, however, that you will kindly refrain from thinking for yourself, and that you will do exactly what you are told.”

Under his direction I cut such gashes in the sides of the trees as would ensure that it should fall as we desired. It had already a strong, natural tilt in the direction of the plateau, so that the matter was not difficult. Finally I set to work in earnest upon the trunk, taking turn and turn with Lord John. In a little over an hour there was a loud crack, the tree swayed forward, and then crashed over, burying its branches among the bushes on the farther side. The severed trunk rolled to the very edge of our platform, and for one terrible second we all thought it was over. It balanced itself, however, a few inches from the edge, and there was our bridge to the unknown.

All of us, without a word, shook hands with Professor Challenger, who raised his straw hat and bowed deeply to each in turn.

“I claim the honour,” said he, “to be the first to cross to the unknown land—a fitting subject, no

doubt, for some future historical painting.”

He had approached the bridge when Lord John laid his hand upon his coat.

“My dear chap,” said he, “I really cannot allow it.”

“Cannot allow it, sir!” The head went back and the beard forward.

“When it is a matter of science, don’t you know, I follow your lead because you are by way of bein’ a man of science. But it’s up to you to follow me when you come into my department.”

“Your department, sir?”

“We all have our professions, and soldierin’ is mine. We are, accordin’ to my ideas, invadin’ a new country, which may or may not be chock-full of enemies of sorts. To barge blindly into it for want of a little common sense and patience isn’t my notion of management.”

The remonstrance was too reasonable to be disregarded. Challenger tossed his head and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“Well, sir, what do you propose?”

“For all I know there may be a tribe of cannibals waitin’ for lunch-time among those very bushes,” said Lord John, looking across the bridge. “It’s better to learn wisdom before you get into a cookin’-pot; so we will content ourselves with hopin’ that there is no trouble waitin’ for us, and at the same time we will act as if there were. Malone and I will go down again, therefore, and we will fetch up the four rifles, together with Gomez and the other. One man can then go across and the rest will cover him with guns, until he sees that it is safe for the whole crowd to come along.”

Challenger sat down upon the cut stump and groaned his impatience; but Summerlee and I were of one mind that Lord John was our leader when such practical details were in question. The climb was a more simple thing now that the rope dangled down the face of the worst part of the ascent. Within an hour we had brought up the rifles and a shot-gun. The half-breeds had ascended also, and under Lord John’s orders they had carried up a bale of provisions in case our first exploration should be a long one. We had each bandoliers of cartridges.

“Now, Challenger, if you really insist upon being the first man in,” said Lord John, when every preparation was complete.

“I am much indebted to you for your gracious permission,” said the angry Professor; for never was a man so intolerant of every form of authority. “Since you are good enough to allow it, I shall most certainly take it upon myself to act as pioneer upon this occasion.”

Seating himself with a leg overhanging the abyss on each side, and his hatchet slung upon his back, Challenger hopped his way across the trunk and was soon at the other side. He clambered

up and waved his arms in the air.

“At last!” he cried; “at last!”

I gazed anxiously at him, with a vague expectation that some terrible fate would dart at him from the curtain of green behind him. But all was quiet, save that a strange, many-colored bird flew up from under his feet and vanished among the trees.

Summerlee was the second. His wiry energy is wonderful in so frail a frame. He insisted upon having two rifles slung upon his back, so that both Professors were armed when he had made his transit. I came next, and tried hard not to look down into the horrible gulf over which I was passing. Summerlee held out the butt-end of his rifle, and an instant later I was able to grasp his hand. As to Lord John, he walked across—actually walked without support! He must have nerves of iron.

And there we were, the four of us, upon the dreamland, the lost world, of Maple White. To all of us it seemed the moment of our supreme triumph. Who could have guessed that it was the prelude to our supreme disaster? Let me say in a few words how the crushing blow fell upon us.

We had turned away from the edge, and had penetrated about fifty yards of close brushwood, when there came a frightful rending crash from behind us. With one impulse we rushed back the way that we had come. The bridge was gone!

Far down at the base of the cliff I saw, as I looked over, a tangled mass of branches and splintered trunk. It was our beech tree. Had the edge of the platform crumbled and let it through? For a moment this explanation was in all our minds. The next, from the farther side of the rocky pinnacle before us a swarthy face, the face of Gomez the half-breed, was slowly protruded. Yes, it was Gomez, but no longer the Gomez of the demure smile and the mask-like expression. Here was a face with flashing eyes and distorted features, a face convulsed with hatred and with the mad joy of gratified revenge.

“Lord Roxton!” he shouted. “Lord John Roxton!”

“Well,” said our companion, “here I am.”

A shriek of laughter came across the abyss.

“Yes, there you are, you English dog, and there you will remain! I have waited and waited, and now has come my chance. You found it hard to get up; you will find it harder to get down. You cursed fools, you are trapped, every one of you!”

We were too astounded to speak. We could only stand there staring in amazement. A great broken bough upon the grass showed whence he had gained his leverage to tilt over our bridge. The face had vanished, but presently it was up again, more frantic than before.

“We nearly killed you with a stone at the cave,” he cried; “but this is better. It is slower and more

terrible. Your bones will whiten up there, and none will know where you lie or come to cover them. As you lie dying, think of Lopez, whom you shot five years ago on the Putomayo River. I am his brother, and, come what will I will die happy now, for his memory has been avenged." A furious hand was shaken at us, and then all was quiet.

Had the half-breed simply wrought his vengeance and then escaped, all might have been well with him. It was that foolish, irresistible Latin impulse to be dramatic which brought his own downfall. Roxton, the man who had earned himself the name of the Flail of the Lord through three countries, was not one who could be safely taunted. The half-breed was descending on the farther side of the pinnacle; but before he could reach the ground Lord John had run along the edge of the plateau and gained a point from which he could see his man. There was a single crack of his rifle, and, though we saw nothing, we heard the scream and then the distant thud of the falling body. Roxton came back to us with a face of granite.

"I have been a blind simpleton," said he, bitterly, "It's my folly that has brought you all into this trouble. I should have remembered that these people have long memories for blood-feuds, and have been more upon my guard."

"What about the other one? It took two of them to lever that tree over the edge."

"I could have shot him, but I let him go. He may have had no part in it. Perhaps it would have been better if I had killed him, for he must, as you say, have lent a hand."

Now that we had the clue to his action, each of us could cast back and remember some sinister act upon the part of the half-breed—his constant desire to know our plans, his arrest outside our tent when he was over-hearing them, the furtive looks of hatred which from time to time one or other of us had surprised. We were still discussing it, endeavouring to adjust our minds to these new conditions, when a singular scene in the plain below arrested our attention.

A man in white clothes, who could only be the surviving half-breed, was running as one does run when Death is the pacemaker. Behind him, only a few yards in his rear, bounded the huge ebony figure of Zambo, our devoted negro. Even as we looked, he sprang upon the back of the fugitive and flung his arms round his neck. They rolled on the ground together. An instant afterwards Zambo rose, looked at the prostrate man, and then, waving his hand joyously to us, came running in our direction. The white figure lay motionless in the middle of the great plain.

Our two traitors had been destroyed, but the mischief that they had done lived after them. By no possible means could we get back to the pinnacle. We had been natives of the world; now we were natives of the plateau. The two things were separate and apart. There was the plain which led to the canoes. Yonder, beyond the violet, hazy horizon, was the stream which led back to civilization. But the link between was missing. No human ingenuity could suggest a means of bridging the chasm which yawned between ourselves and our past lives. One instant had altered the whole conditions of our existence.

It was at such a moment that I learned the stuff of which my three comrades were composed. They were grave, it is true, and thoughtful, but of an invincible serenity. For the moment we

could only sit among the bushes in patience and wait the coming of Zambo. Presently his honest black face topped the rocks and his Herculean figure emerged upon the top of the pinnacle.

“What I do now?” he cried. “You tell me and I do it.”

It was a question which it was easier to ask than to answer. One thing only was clear. He was our one trusty link with the outside world. On no account must he leave us.

“No no!” he cried. “I not leave you. Whatever come, you always find me here. But no able to keep Indians. Already they say too much Curupuri live on this place, and they go home. Now you leave them me no able to keep them.”

It was a fact that our Indians had shown in many ways of late that they were weary of their journey and anxious to return. We realized that Zambo spoke the truth, and that it would be impossible for him to keep them.

“Make them wait till to-morrow, Zambo,” I shouted; “then I can send letter back by them.”

“Very good, sarr! I promise they wait till to-morrow,” said the negro. “But what I do for you now?”

There was plenty for him to do, and admirably the faithful fellow did it. First of all, under our directions, he undid the rope from the tree-stump and threw one end of it across to us. It was not thicker than a clothes-line, but it was of great strength, and though we could not make a bridge of it, we might well find it invaluable if we had any climbing to do. He then fastened his end of the rope to the package of supplies which had been carried up, and we were able to drag it across. This gave us the means of life for at least a week, even if we found nothing else. Finally he descended and carried up two other packets of mixed goods—a box of ammunition and a number of other things, all of which we got across by throwing our rope to him and hauling it back. It was evening when he at last climbed down, with a final assurance that he would keep the Indians till next morning.

And so it is that I have spent nearly the whole of this our first night upon the plateau writing up our experiences by the light of a single candle-lantern.

We supped and camped at the very edge of the cliff, quenching our thirst with two bottles of Apollinaris which were in one of the cases. It is vital to us to find water, but I think even Lord John himself had had adventures enough for one day, and none of us felt inclined to make the first push into the unknown. We forbore to light a fire or to make any unnecessary sound.

To-morrow (or to-day, rather, for it is already dawn as I write) we shall make our first venture into this strange land. When I shall be able to write again—or if I ever shall write again—I know not. Meanwhile, I can see that the Indians are still in their place, and I am sure that the faithful Zambo will be here presently to get my letter. I only trust that it will come to hand.

P.S.—The more I think the more desperate does our position seem. I see no possible hope of our return. If there were a high tree near the edge of the plateau we might drop a return bridge across, but there is none within fifty yards. Our united strength could not carry a trunk which would serve our purpose. The rope, of course, is far too short that we could descend by it. No, our position is hopeless—hopeless!

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XIII: Yolara, Priestess of the Shining One

“You’d better have this handy, Doc.” O’Keefe paused at the head of the stairway and handed me one of the automatics he had taken from Marakinoff.

“Shall I not have one also?” rather anxiously asked the latter.

“When you need it you’ll get it,” answered O’Keefe. “I’ll tell you frankly, though, Professor, that you’ll have to show me before I trust you with a gun. You shoot too straight—from cover.”

The flash of anger in the Russian’s eyes turned to a cold consideration.

“You say always just what is in your mind, Lieutenant O’Keefe,” he mused. “Da—that I shall remember!” Later I was to recall this odd observation—and Marakinoff was to remember indeed.

In single file, O’Keefe at the head and Olaf bringing up the rear, we passed through the portal. Before us dropped a circular shaft, into which the light from the chamber of the oval streamed liquidly; set in its sides the steps spiralled, and down them we went, cautiously. The stairway ended in a circular well; silent—with no trace of exit! The rounded stones joined each other evenly—hermetically. Carved on one of the slabs was one of the five flowered vines. I pressed my fingers upon the calyxes, even as Larry had within the Moon Chamber.

A crack—horizontal, four feet wide—appeared on the wall; widened, and as the sinking slab that made it dropped to the level of our eyes, we looked through a hundred-feet-long rift in the living rock! The stone fell steadily—and we saw that it was a Cyclopean wedge set within the slit of the passageway. It reached the level of our feet and stopped. At the far end of this tunnel, whose floor was the polished rock that had, a moment before, fitted hermetically into its roof, was a low, narrow triangular opening through which light streamed.

“Nowhere to go but out!” grinned Larry. “And I’ll bet Golden Eyes is waiting for us with a taxi!” He stepped forward. We followed, slipping, sliding along the glassy surface; and I, for one, had a lively apprehension of what our fate would be should that enormous mass rise before we had emerged! We reached the end; crept out of the narrow triangle that was its exit.

We stood upon a wide ledge carpeted with a thick yellow moss. I looked behind—and clutched O’Keefe’s arm. The door through which we had come had vanished! There was only a precipice of pale rock, on whose surfaces great patches of the amber moss hung; around whose base our ledge ran, and whose summits, if summits it had, were hidden, like the luminous cliffs, in the radiance above us.

“Nowhere to go but ahead—and Golden Eyes hasn’t kept her date!” laughed O’Keefe—but somewhat grimly.

We walked a few yards along the ledge and, rounding a corner, faced the end of one of the

slender bridges. From this vantage point the oddly shaped vehicles were plain, and we could see they were, indeed, like the shell of the Nautilus and elfinly beautiful. Their drivers sat high upon the forward whorl. Their bodies were piled high with cushions, upon which lay women half-swathed in gay silken webs. From the pavilioned gardens smaller channels of glistening green ran into the broad way, much as automobile runways do on earth; and in and out of them flashed the fairy shells.

There came a shout from one. Its occupants had glimpsed us. They pointed; others stopped and stared; one shell turned and sped up a runway—and quickly over the other side of the bridge came a score of men. They were dwarfed—none of them more than five feet high, prodigiously broad of shoulder, clearly enormously powerful.

“Trolde!” muttered Olaf, stepping beside O’Keefe, pistol swinging free in his hand.

But at the middle of the bridge the leader stopped, waved back his men, and came toward us alone, palms outstretched in the immemorial, universal gesture of truce. He paused, scanning us with manifest wonder; we returned the scrutiny with interest. The dwarf’s face was as white as Olaf’s—far whiter than those of the other three of us; the features clean-cut and noble, almost classical; the wide set eyes of a curious greenish grey and the black hair curling over his head like that on some old Greek statue.

Dwarfed though he was, there was no suggestion of deformity about him. The gigantic shoulders were covered with a loose green tunic that looked like fine linen. It was caught in at the waist by a broad girdle studded with what seemed to be amazonites. In it was thrust a long curved poniard resembling the Malaysian kris. His legs were swathed in the same green cloth as the upper garment. His feet were sandalled.

My gaze returned to his face, and in it I found something subtly disturbing; an expression of half-malicious gaiety that underlay the wholly prepossessing features like a vague threat; a mocking deviltry that hinted at entire callousness to suffering or sorrow; something of the spirit that was vaguely alien and disquieting.

He spoke—and, to my surprise, enough of the words were familiar to enable me clearly to catch the meaning of the whole. They were Polynesian, the Polynesian of the Samoans which is its most ancient form, but in some indefinable way—archaic. Later I was to know that the tongue bore the same relation to the Polynesian of today as does not that of Chaucer, but of the Venerable Bede, to modern English. Nor was this to be so astonishing, when with the knowledge came the certainty that it was from it the language we call Polynesian sprang.

“From whence do you come, strangers—and how found you your way here?” said the green dwarf.

I waved my hand toward the cliff behind us. His eyes narrowed incredulously; he glanced at its drop, upon which even a mountain goat could not have made its way, and laughed.

“We came through the rock,” I answered his thought. “And we come in peace,” I added.

“And may peace walk with you,” he said half-derisively—“if the Shining One wills it!”

He considered us again.

“Show me, strangers, where you came through the rock,” he commanded. We led the way to where we had emerged from the well of the stairway.

“It was here,” I said, tapping the cliff.

“But I see no opening,” he said suavely.

“It closed behind us,” I answered; and then, for the first time, realized how incredible the explanation sounded. The derisive gleam passed through his eyes again. But he drew his poniard and gravely sounded the rock.

“You give a strange turn to our speech,” he said. “It sounds strangely, indeed—as strange as your answers.” He looked at us quizzically. “I wonder where you learned it! Well, all that you can explain to the Afyo Maie.” His head bowed and his arms swept out in a wide salaam. “Be pleased to come with me!” he ended abruptly.

“In peace?” I asked.

“In peace,” he replied—then slowly—“with me at least.”

“Oh, come on, Doc!” cried Larry. “As long as we’re here let’s see the sights. Allons mon vieux!” he called gaily to the green dwarf. The latter, understanding the spirit, if not the words, looked at O’Keefe with a twinkle of approval; turned then to the great Norseman and scanned him with admiration; reached out and squeezed one of the immense biceps.

“Lugur will welcome you, at least,” he murmured as though to himself. He stood aside and waved a hand courteously, inviting us to pass. We crossed. At the base of the span one of the elfin shells was waiting.

Beyond, scores had gathered, their occupants evidently discussing us in much excitement. The green dwarf waved us to the piles of cushions and then threw himself beside us. The vehicle started off smoothly, the now silent throng making way, and swept down the green roadway at a terrific pace and wholly without vibration, toward the seven-terraced tower.

As we flew along I tried to discover the source of the power, but I could not—then. There was no sign of mechanism, but that the shell responded to some form of energy was certain—the driver grasping a small lever which seemed to control not only our speed, but our direction.

We turned abruptly and swept up a runway through one of the gardens, and stopped softly before a pillared pavilion. I saw now that these were much larger than I had thought. The structure to which we had been carried covered, I estimated, fully an acre. Oblong, with its slender, vari-

coloured columns spaced regularly, its walls were like the sliding screens of the Japanese—shoji.

The green dwarf hurried us up a flight of broad steps flanked by great carved serpents, winged and scaled. He stamped twice upon mosaicked stones between two of the pillars, and a screen rolled aside, revealing an immense hall scattered about with low divans on which lolled a dozen or more of the dwarfish men, dressed identically as he.

They sauntered up to us leisurely; the surprised interest in their faces tempered by the same inhumanly gay malice that seemed to be characteristic of all these people we had as yet seen.

“The Afyo Maie awaits them, Rador,” said one.

The green dwarf nodded, beckoned us, and led the way through the great hall and into a smaller chamber whose far side was covered with the opacity I had noted from the aerie of the cliff. I examined the—blackness—with lively interest.

It had neither substance nor texture; it was not matter—and yet it suggested solidity; an entire cessation, a complete absorption of light; an ebon veil at once immaterial and palpable. I stretched, involuntarily, my hand out toward it, and felt it quickly drawn back.

“Do you seek your end so soon?” whispered Rador. “But I forget—you do not know,” he added. “On your life touch not the blackness, ever. It—”

He stopped, for abruptly in the density a portal appeared; swinging out of the shadow like a picture thrown by a lantern upon a screen. Through it was revealed a chamber filled with a soft rosy glow. Rising from cushioned couches, a woman and a man regarded us, half leaning over a long, low table of what seemed polished jet, laden with flowers and unfamiliar fruits.

About the room—that part of it, at least, that I could see—were a few oddly shaped chairs of the same substance. On high, silvery tripods three immense globes stood, and it was from them that the rose glow emanated. At the side of the woman was a smaller globe whose roseate gleam was tempered by quivering waves of blue.

“Enter Rador with the strangers!” a clear, sweet voice called.

Rador bowed deeply and stood aside, motioning us to pass. We entered, the green dwarf behind us, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the doorway fade as abruptly as it had appeared and again the dense shadow fill its place.

“Come closer, strangers. Be not afraid!” commanded the bell-toned voice.

We approached.

The woman, sober scientist that I am, made the breath catch in my throat. Never had I seen a woman so beautiful as was Yolara of the Dweller’s city—and none of so perilous a beauty. Her hair was of the colour of the young tassels of the corn and coiled in a regal crown above her

broad, white brows; her wide eyes were of grey that could change to a cornflower blue and in anger deepen to purple; grey or blue, they had little laughing devils within them, but when the storm of anger darkened them—they were not laughing, no! The silken webs that half covered, half revealed her did not hide the ivory whiteness of her flesh nor the sweet curve of shoulders and breasts. But for all her amazing beauty, she was—sinister! There was cruelty about the curving mouth, and in the music of her voice—not conscious cruelty, but the more terrifying, careless cruelty of nature itself.

The girl of the rose wall had been beautiful, yes! But her beauty was human, understandable. You could imagine her with a babe in her arms—but you could not so imagine this woman. About her loveliness hovered something unearthly. A sweet feminine echo of the Dweller was Yolara, the Dweller's priestess—and as gloriously, terrifyingly evil!

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