

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 28
11TH NOVEMBER 2018

THE STRAW MAN COMETH

BY JESSE
ZIMMERMAN
THE
ADVENTURE
CONTINUES...

MAE JEMISON CHEEKS

BY JEFF H
THE GIRL AND
THE TYRANT...

FOREFATHERS BY ROB BLISS

THE CHILD OF THE OBJECT BY JW BAKER CONCLUDES...

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Zimmerman, 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 28
11th November 2018

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 *cool image* by [Sawan kumar pandey](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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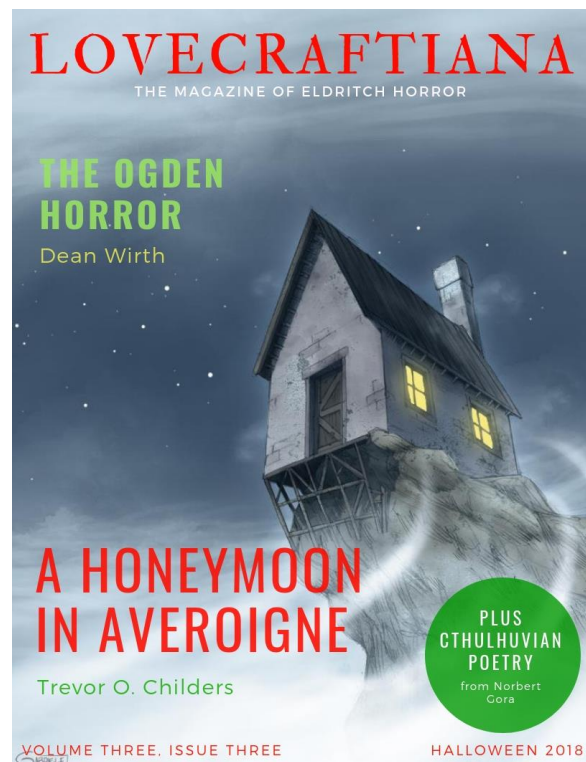
EDITORIAL

This week, founding fathers make a fatal amendment. The child of the Object brings a message. A girl from the jungle meets the tyrant who rules her land. Flora, Fauna and the Challenger return to encounter the Straw Man. Kursaal feels despair at tribal custom. And Rat visits Ed's place.

Malone goes for a rash stroll through the saurian haunted night but finds worse horrors on returning. And Larry and Goodwin are summoned by the Afyo Maie.

—Gavin Chappell

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

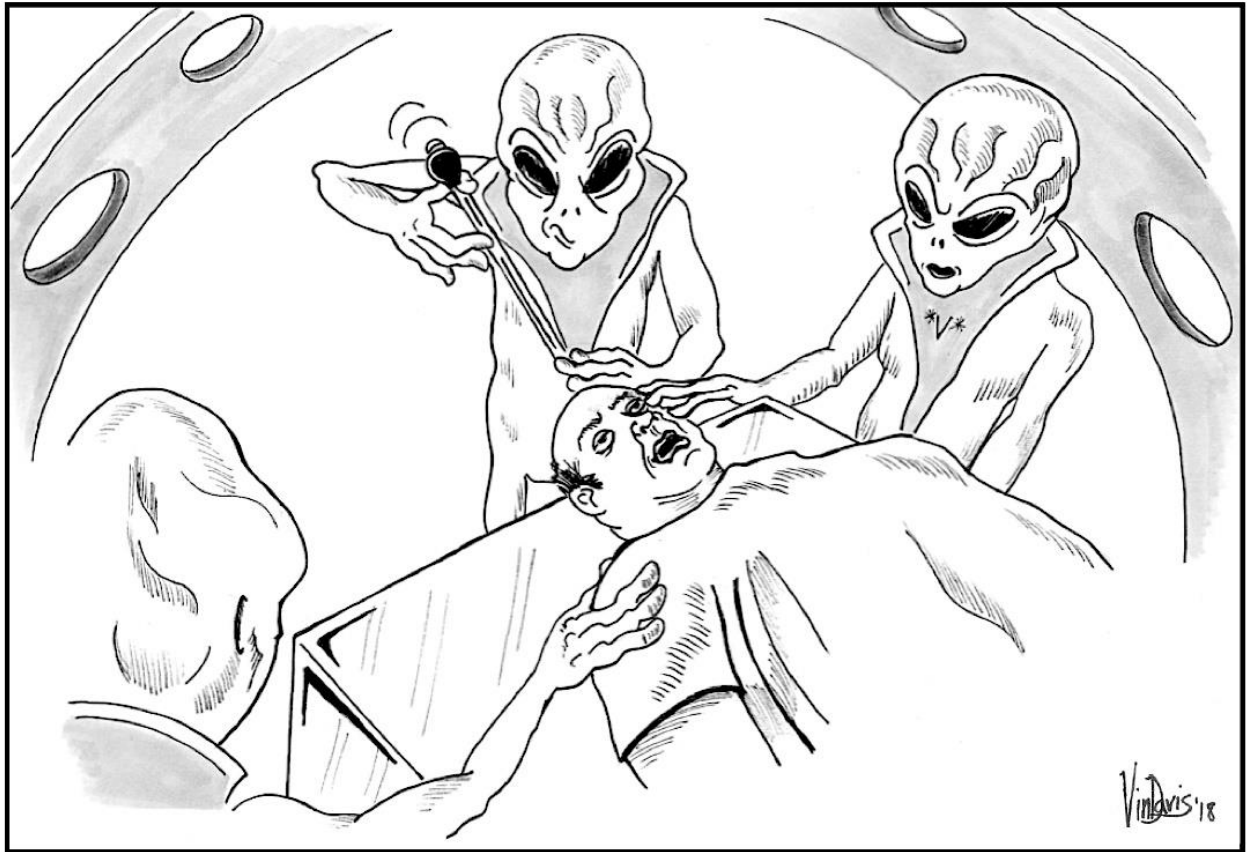


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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



DAYS LATER, DELUDED AND IRRITABLE, RICHARD WRITES A SCATHING REVIEW ON YELP ABOUT A DAY SPA IN IDAHO.

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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FOREFATHERS by Rob Bliss

The forefathers sat at midnight, candles burning to illuminate their old white faces, each man in a powdered wig, wearing pressed jackets covered in sewn-on symbols of their ancient covenant. These symbols were reflected on the walls of the circular house in the woods. Each man had been in Old Europe, but had done his part in the Great Rebellion to overthrow their overseers and became the leaders of the New Order. They sat at a round oak table that had been built with the beams of the ship that had brought their ancestors to new shores. All windows were boarded up, and a man in a uniform sewn with symbols stood guard with musket inside the door. He, too, was one of the New World Chosen and had the right to hear the forging of the future.

The fathers had papers spread across the table, wax dripping red and yellow on newly inked words. A constitution and amendments, some accepted, some rejected, words become laws to create a new world which would correct the chaos of the old.

But there was an amendment still being debated, this night set aside for just it. Sweat beaded faces in yellow candle glow, but the men were denied the right to remove their wigs until the debate was settled, and the amendment accepted or rejected.

“Can we change the wording?”

“It’s fine. It’s clear. Keep it simple. Let the future debate it.”

“But what if our armed citizens turn guns on each other? What if there are no more invaders?”

“Then it’ll be because an enemy sees our people as armed and dangerous. It will stop invasion before it occurs.”

“But women and children. My son is shorter than my musket, but he can still pull the trigger.”

“Then the parent is the criminal. This has been discussed. If we are strong, our people will multiply. They will kill each other or be made criminals. It’s mere population control.”

“But surely guns will develop, become bigger, fire more rounds, kill with speed and ease. What if such improvements are used to kill en masse?”

“The bigger the population, the mightier the gun to thin their numbers. The enemy is everywhere. The West has still to be opened. Many Indians to kill. If our people have someone to always kill, they’ll kill fewer of each other.”

“Then ours must be a nation perpetually at war?”

“So be it. God’s will. God gives life and takes it. We will be like God. A great nation pats the head of a child with one hand and kills the parent with the other.”

“So we write this knowing there will not always be a foreign enemy?”

“That will be the superficial justification which our government will tell people, and the people will repeat to each other. They’ll call it patriotism.”

“So it is meant to kill our own kind? We all admit that? And vow to keep it a secret?”

“Do we have to put it second? Right after the freedoms?”

“The freedom to kill is also a great freedom. It stays where it is.”

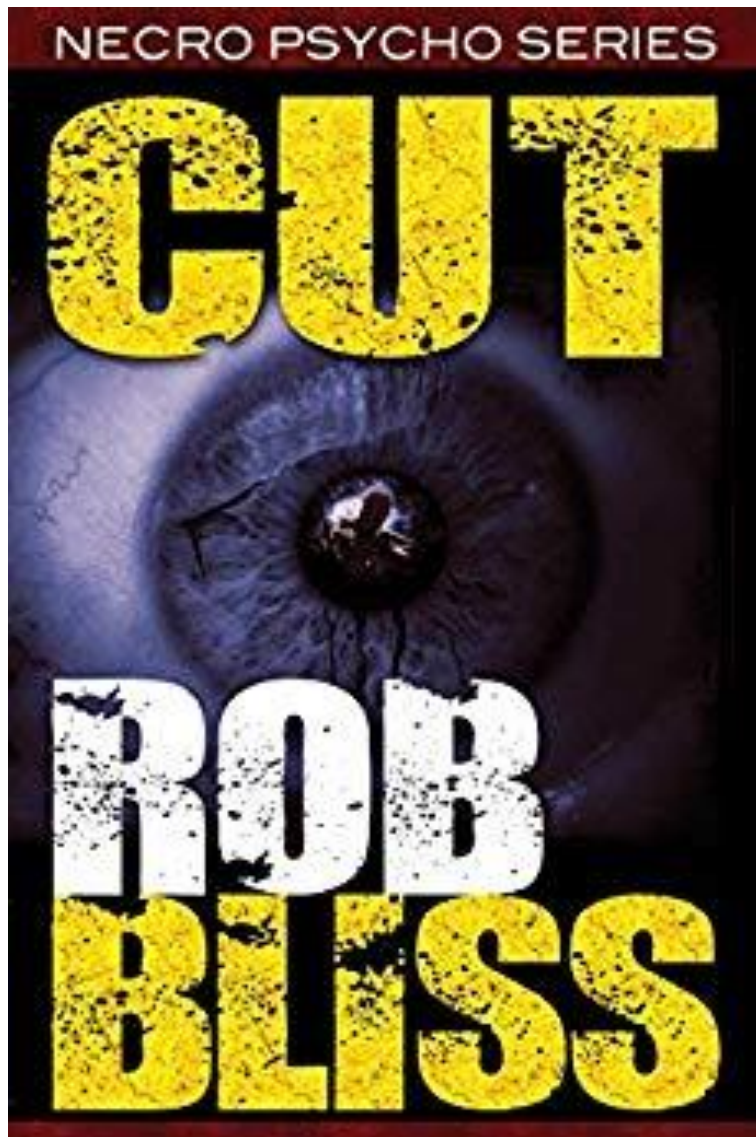
“This amendment—nay, law writ in stone—will be argued for eons to come. Let us congratulate ourselves on our first truly American paradox. The sphinx herself couldn’t do better. A nation without paradoxes cannot stand for long.”

“All who agree say ‘aye’.”

The ‘ayes’ were unanimous. Signatures were affixed, permanent as long as the nation existed. Powdered wigs were removed and the guard was told to open the door, let in the cool night forest air.

The guard did so. And at that moment, he had the guaranteed and protected right to kill everyone in the room. But he was Chosen, so he maintained the nation’s peace.

THE END



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THE CHILD OF THE OBJECT by JW Baker

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The drive back was certainly a lot quieter. Chren concentrated on the scenery, trying to see if he could detect signs of Kuela nests—a skill Xhaja had taught him. Look for what doesn't seem right in the forest, she'd said, at that moment, he didn't feel right in the forest.

"Puzzo's a cracker barrel activist," Steinbeck explained amicably. "Wanted independence but now he's got it he don't have the first clue on how this place should be runnin'."

He took a detour down a wider path. This one had a few Kuela hunters, beating away at the mushrooms, trying to disturb them from their nests. He had told Steiny everything He was perhaps most shocked about his sister's pregnancy.

"Colonial Union an' Earth are mighty clever, cuttin' us off an' callin' courtesy."

They took another detour.

"Bad news for radicals like Puzzo; realisin' that what they wanted was a big ol' pile a crap."

They were at the outskirts of the city now. It was a sudden cut off from the rural and rustic to the industrial and the corporate.

"An' yet, you are gonna sell your own son to him."

The engine cut out and Steinbeck leaned in close, an expression not too dissimilar from the one he wore when he'd made his kill.

"You must be really in the red or be a goddamn pussy,"

Chren fumbled for the palm lock but couldn't move it was like a scene out of one of those ancient horror flicks.

"It's hard for a Half—"

"Don't use that word."

Steinbeck's hand was on his shoulder now, half paternally half like he was about to twist his arm out of socket.

"You say Puzzo wants to open the Object and use your kid?"

He climbed out of the car and opened the passenger door, taking out his gun.

"Well, I say we see what an' how the boy does it before Puzzo gets a look in."

Steinbeck gestured his gun toward Chren. For the second time in as many days, he tasted vomit and felt his bowels turn to water. That was what it came down to in the end; people bigger than you with bigger guns telling you to do things. Steinbeck F Milton may have genetically altered musculature and more retrovirals than a state hospital swimming around his blood but in the end he just wanted to protect his family and hunt. You couldn't breed out those instincts, biologically advanced, genetically engineered 'Nu-Man' or not.

"We're going to find Xhaja and we're going open the Object."

From the highest viewpoint, the city wasn't a city at all but a circuit board with people and vehicles coursing through it instead of electricity. This was one of the corporate blocks, a sort of Ethernet 'switching station'; hundreds of floors of servers and hard-drives, fibre optic wire coiling around like a technological simulacra of the mushroom forest. Millions of peoples' thoughts were floating in the data around him, at meetings like the one he'd had with Puzzo, playing games or just hanging out. One of the oldest buildings in the city was built right underneath the Object; interesting, Chren supposed, that the first thing the early colonists had thought about was getting good Wi-Fi. Steinbeck's 'friends' were a strange collection of people, mostly Nu-Men of course, with a couple of off-worlders and one severely 'roided Cyber with a carapace of burnished steel and vein cables bulging out of tree trunk arms. Mostly successful corporate hipster types with fancy pinstripe robes and designer boots. The types who were permanently dissatisfied with everything and backed whatever political movement or ideology was 'in' at the time. The rest were mercenaries from elsewhere in the Gliese system, all bullet belts, bandoliers and bandanas, the Cyber could have been their leader but he couldn't be sure.

"Hellova' crowd," Chren observed grimly, fishing in his pocket for cigarettes and remembering he had smoked the last one on what felt like a very long time ago.

"Not to many people taken a likin' to the government," Steinbeck told him, elbows resting on the graphene-glass wall which skirted the tower at waist height—or, for Steinbeck, near knee height.

"An as you can imagine Puzzo ain't won over too many friends"

He'd changed from his farmer's work clothes into a rather funerary black one piece suit. Steinbeck wasn't as provincial as he projected himself to be and had money and connections in places Chren could only guess at.

"What the Object is," grunted the Cyber, his throat constricted by ropes of bio cabling, "will give this new Gov'ment the boot,"

He sounded as stupid as he looked. If Puzzo was a 'cracker barrel activist', Chren thought bitterly, then this motley collection were a lot less. Steinbeck had soon spirited him away into the corporate enclave of the city centre, to a luxury yacht night club on the lake where the group had materialized out of the throng of drunk, stoned patrons. Where the appropriate course of action

was quickly decided: Get Chren and Xhaja to the Object; hook her up to some new communications device and see what happened. What happened didn't seem to important just as long as they fucked over Puzzo, maybe selling him information on the object or letting him invest in a fool hardly venture. That had to know what Puzzo knew before he knew it.

"We've had probes 'n' every kinda of wave an' beam bouncin' round of there."

He chucked the bottle over the side. Chren briefly wondered if, due to the Coriolis Effect, it would smash a window and take out one of the servers.

"They all says there is somethin' goin' on in there that ain't a natural phenomenon. You know the old Astronomers of Earth used to look at Pulsars and think that they were alien radio programs."

Chren saw another police helicopter, its search light snooping lazily into the windows of the opposite slum spire, he could just make out the minute shapes of a couple in a barren living room, jacked in and unmoving.

"You've never been up close to it." Steinbeck gave a curious half smile which certainly betrayed that he wasn't just the corn-fed farmer who liked the occasional hunt and good Sunday roast.

Xhaja appeared at the door of the central elevator, flanked by two very well dressed thugs in tailed coats and gold braided shirt-tunics. He hadn't contacted her since before meeting up with Steinbeck. He couldn't think what to say: Tell her he'd sold her son off to a gangster and that he was a maudlin coward for not telling Puzzo where to shove it? She ran and embraced him. She felt just as warm and soft as when he'd left her, her hair still smelling of cherry mint.

"Chren, Jesus, I've been worried."

She lifted him off his feet and buried her face in his shoulder "You've been gone all day an—"

"Please, we're here about your son, Xhaja," Steinbeck interrupted.

Xhaja broke away from her hug and fixed him with an unreadable look.

"Steiny, an I thought you'd given up the activist game,"

Steinbeck laughed, it sounded surprisingly natural.

"Oh, this is strictly business."

Two of the brand-name dressed men began strapping a metal box around her belly with thick leather straps. The box was perhaps large enough for Chren to fit his head inside and had a glass window at the front, in which could be view a micro world of hair fine fibre optics and blinking diodes and circuitry, a cloth covered cable ran out of the box like an umbilical cord.

“Pull too tight an’ you’ll have it rested up your ass,” Xhaja told them curtly, her skin flushed a darker blue in anger.

“Steinbeck explained t—”

“Yeah, he explained, what the hell he hopes to get out of it I don’t know.”

The two men checked the box strapped next to their unborn son with complicated looking probes. From Chren’s angle they looked like people listening for the baby’s heartbeat. Mercifully Steinbeck had neglected to mention Puzzo but he supposed Xhaja had pieced it all together. She was a smart girl, brilliant in fact. The meeting, his sudden rush to meet with Steinbeck, her sudden summons, none of that could be glossed over as coincidence.

“This is a terrible baby shower,” she smirked as the guys finished playing with the box.

“You always indulged my scientific curiosity when we were little,” Steinbeck smiled wistfully.

“Let me do experiments on you.”

Chren wasn’t sure he liked the man’s tone. Xhaja shot him a filthy look.

“I want a cut,” she stated plainly,

“I know whatever’ll happen people will pay for recordin’s, market for everything these days.”

The technicians—Chren could only assume they were technicians, these people didn’t look like they had any official roles, jobs or title—finished their work.

“What do you hope will happen?” she asked, loosening the straps.

“Ideally nothing, so it really screws Puzzo over.”

Steinbeck flipped out a palmtop, it was see through and without any brand name—the ultimate status symbol.

“But if we’re right, an’ I make a livin’ outa guessin’ right,”

Steinbeck opened a program on his palmtop and popped out a Bluetooth from its side.

“The object’ll just be full t’brim with all sorts of technological goodies,”

He slipped the Bluetooth on, completing his transformation from farmer to yuppie.

“An’ it looks like its signallin’ for someone like what’s inside you.”

“Well I did want my boy to be special.”

She sounded bitter. He couldn't look her in the eye.

"At least Puzzo is paying you well."

"This could have sat for years," Chren felt defensive, "one day after soccer practice, hey let's go a look at the Obj-,"

Her look silenced him.

"Enough with the domestics."

Steinbeck waved them into the little jet car he'd brought up with them, it was modestly priced 3D print, just big enough for four with a thorium powered jet engine at its rear. Open-roofed so they could get as close as possible to the Objects underside. They climbed in, the seats un-upholstered.

"I've never liked heights."

Khaja put out her hand and Chren held, she normally just travelled by monorail. They rose a dozen or so feet. How odd they all looked, Chren thought as the vehicle rose above them, the light particularly catching the Cyber's chrome head. They were beneath the Object. Steinbeck was so tall his coppery mop of hair brushed against it. Gradually it began to stand on ends and separate out into a forest of golden wire, mad scientist spikes, styled by the static electricity. Chren felt his own hair tingle and the fine hairs of his hand and arm prickle; it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. The air was suddenly hot and dank like a warm summer's day in a glass room with no windows and Chren nearly gagged on the eye watering flavour of ammonia.

"Produces this stuff naturally," Steinbeck explained, connected his blue tooth ear piece to the Object—a doctor putting his stethoscope to an expecting mother. He connected it to his palmtop and the palmtop connected to the box on Khaja's belly. They were all neatly joined up by wires and software bridges, except Chren. Chren wasn't connected at all. The Object was totally unreflective, black and drinking in the light. It was so black, smooth and dense that it seemed unreal, cut from a richer swatch of reality. Even the lights of the city didn't shine upon it.

"Different waves at different intensities, so there is somethin' in there that produces 'lectricity and heat."

Steinbeck rapped the Object as though hoping for a response.

"Get on with it," Khaja snapped, hugging her body against the cold.

That was once my job, Chren thought sadly.

Without another word he took the cable that was strapped to Khaja and put its end—which resembled a tiny three-toed claw—and stuck it on the Object.

Light.

A noise which wasn't a noise.

Nothingness.

Chren was warm and comfortable. Thing where peaceful and relaxed, the world was smaller now and it moved fluidly around him. Though he couldn't see, he knew all was right. His thoughts were few but generally an aura of happiness pervaded him. Yes, happy, warm and safe.

Light.

A noise which could have been screaming.

"We have to get out of system," Chren concluded, sitting in the hospital corridor, trying to take in a news download. All he could get out of it was a general feeling of chaos and disorder, governor urging for calm.

"I'm not leaving because of him," Xhaja said flatly, she was trying to drink a cup of stale, bitter coffee.

"What will it be like when he's born?" Chren exclaimed, watching a muted video of a rioting crowd on a luxury nightclub yacht, bodies falling over the side, tear gas creating a new atmosphere.

"He'll be our son."

Xhaja threw her coffee to the floor and got up to stare out the window. It was a state-run hospital, white, sterile but not unwelcoming. Dr Fallow came out of the screening room, some print outs of X-rays and cat scans in his arm.

"If I may?" he smiled, a small bespectacled man with kind welcoming features and a neat fistful of beard. A Saudi immigrant all the way from Earth, whose glasses were an affectation, Chren suspected, used to make patients feel more at ease. He hustled them into his office and set down the CAT scans and X-rays on the grand Blackwood desk—another affectation he probably used to make himself feel more professional.

"Your son's brain has a deep neuro-electrical connection to the Object—"

"Spare me your medical gibber gabber doc," Xhaja sighed tiredly.

“For a single moment, he transmitted his thoughts across the entire continent, from where you were to Eastport and Fishtown in the east. We’re even getting reports of people hearing them on the polar cities.”

This clean cut professional, even he’d experienced it, Chren thought, with his designer leather and foreign made furniture, he too had been like an unborn baby for two minutes, unable to conceptualize of anything but utero life.

“I felt it, for a moment I thought I was him, inside of me.”

Xhaja still looked tired and pale from the ordeal, her skin the colour of unclouded sky. She touched where there son lay, sleeping in his warm gelatinous bed, of which they had all momentarily experienced.

“Matroyoshka,” she murmured faintly.

“The noosphere was suddenly swamped by the thoughts of an unborn child. He had some ability to interpret brainwaves; the enlarged cranium with a highly developed neuro-cortex. But this was something more, actually projecting brainwaves onto others, a sort of...second brain has developed.”

“Because of the Object.”

Chren didn’t need a medical answer or a scientific explanation, Steinbeck had attached the cable and for a few minutes he had been inside the womb.

“The oscillating of neural transference across an unthinkable distance, bouncing from person to person like Wi-Fi in a matter of seconds, it’s incredible.”

He sounded excited but Chren didn’t care about the science. He felt tired, drained and dried out. The city had once felt so homily and familiar to him was becoming an alien place of politicals, religious zealots and gangsters. He wanted out, Earth maybe, one of the frontier worlds looked more likely, Groombridge or Leonis, the further the better.

“And my son is unharmed?”

Xhaja looked calm but Chren could read her enough to know she was rotting inside from panic. For all his bedside manner Dr Fallow didn’t pick up on this and instead sifted through the X-rays and scans.

“His brain activity is beyond anything I’ve ever measured but yes, healthy and...well, not normal but healthy.”

The ‘second brain’ on the scan looked nothing more than white misty lines on a grey-black background, chiaroscuro post-modern photographs which represented existentialist dilemma or god or some such bullshit. These were not the baby photos he had hoped to see of his son.

“From what we understand, the Object has been waiting for someone with the right type of brainwave to come along”

Dr Fallow showed them another rendering of their son’s brain.

“Now it has planted the second brain, medically this all unheard of, but of great interest to myself and other...invested parties,”

Doctor Fallow didn’t noticed Xhaja’s cold stare. After some more medical bobbins and chat about ECC’S, neuro-electrical impulses and hyper-conductive neurons that Chren didn’t care about nor understand, they were transferred to a luxurious room in the Neonatal ward. They didn’t speak or even look at each other but still, in the plushy double bed they found themselves curled up against one another asleep, warm and safe.

Darkness. Not comfortable warm darkness like he’d experienced but black, stifling darkness. The smell of diesel fuel and sweat.

“Chren are we awake?”

The voice was familiar, plummy and confident and not entirely unkind.

“Puzzo...”

The bag was whipped off his head and he found himself staring into a pair of squinting albino eyes, blood red pupils in contrast with milky, blemish less skin. So close, the woman was nearly kissing him. She pulled away.

“Hope you enjoyed your little nap,” she crooned in Puzzo’s voice, “you’ve had such a busy time,”

Chren blinked away the rheum. He was in a small boxy room, sterile and beige, like a hospital. Steinbeck was lying in a corner, his hands secured behind his back and wearing a similar black sack over his head. Doctor Fallow was next to him, looking at the women nervously and fiddling with his glasses.

“So I hear the opening went well,” she remarked conversationally in her odd male voice.

“Where’s Puz—”

“Oh, this is one of my back up bodies,” she giggled and glided over to Steinbeck, giving him an energetic kick to the ribs.

“I like being a guy mostly but IRL this is the best body,” she dragged Steinbeck’s limp form over to a hermetically sealed door.

“Had the vocal chords tightened and everything, closest to the original me I like to get,”

She giggled again and the door hissed open. Nothing but sky and the cold rush of air.

“The Objects gone,” Chren heard himself say faintly. Good god where was Xhaja?

“It didn’t even open.”

He closed his eyes and hoped everything would vanish to darkness again, maybe even go back to the womb.

“It opened...in a sense,”

The Doctor suggested, blowing on his glasses and wiping them with his jacket. Chren was surprised to find he no longer felt ill or particularly scared. He stood up shakily, his hand restraints making the movement awkward.

“What the hell is going on?”

Puzzo, or at least the middle aged albino woman that was the real Puzzo laughed again and dangled Steinbeck’s body over the lip of the door, clutching his waist with strangely muscled arms.

“I’m sure you thought you’d get your money’s worth out of me,” Steinbeck was gone, body slipping from the woman’s arm. “Good thing I have some friends in the health department, eh, Doctor?”

The Doctor nodded enthusiastically, accidentally shattering the lens he had been cleaning.

“I felt it too,” she said severely, helping Chren over to the door. Chren wondered idly if he could push her out. The air was hard to breathe and Chren’s throat was red raw, each breath an effort; he wouldn’t have minded asphyxiation.

“I was inside Xhaja,” she laughed. It was definitely Puzzo’s laugh, deep, plummy and warm. Chren looked down. They were at the summit of the dome. Outside in the thin, oxygen poor atmosphere, the city was lost beneath a layer of feathery cloud, beyond that the mushroom forest

a yellowed sheet of parchment amongst the grey pumice of the mountain. Perhaps a service elevator for the dome, Chren thought, or a private car for Puzzo and company to chuck bodies out of? He found himself smiling at the idea.

“You see, now we know what the Object is.”

Chren felt a hand on his shoulder but shrugged it off. Steinbeck was a faint red streak along the surface of the dome. The throat was truly hurting now and breath was short and laborious.

“We have a little proposition for you,”

Chren was proud of his son, he took after Xhaja in looks, broad and with dark, luscious hair. He had some of his dad’s awkwardness too, he supposed, standing stiff and uncomfortable in his gold lame robes, leaning on his staff like an old man’s walking stick. He had something Chren knew he had never quite had, presence, he held up his hand and the crowd was silent. He smiled at the boy but his son didn’t even look at him.

“I am here to bring a message,” he said calmly, the sentence being transmitted across every network and frequency possible. The whole of Gliese, the whole civilization was listening.

“The Object would like certain things to be known.”

Chren felt a swelling in his chest and nodded at Puzzo whom sat beneath him, wearing his albino body. Puzzo raised her thumb. She was surrounded by a gaggle of Earth bureaucrats and was dressed almost as elaborately as Chren’s son. She sipped a glass of wine and straightened her mitre.

“The Object is indeed alive.”

He waited for his words to take effect. Xhaja sat beside him; ‘The Mother’ resplendent in silver and white, smiling up at her son.

“It is, in our base understanding, an egg; part of a much greater, more unknowable form of life.”

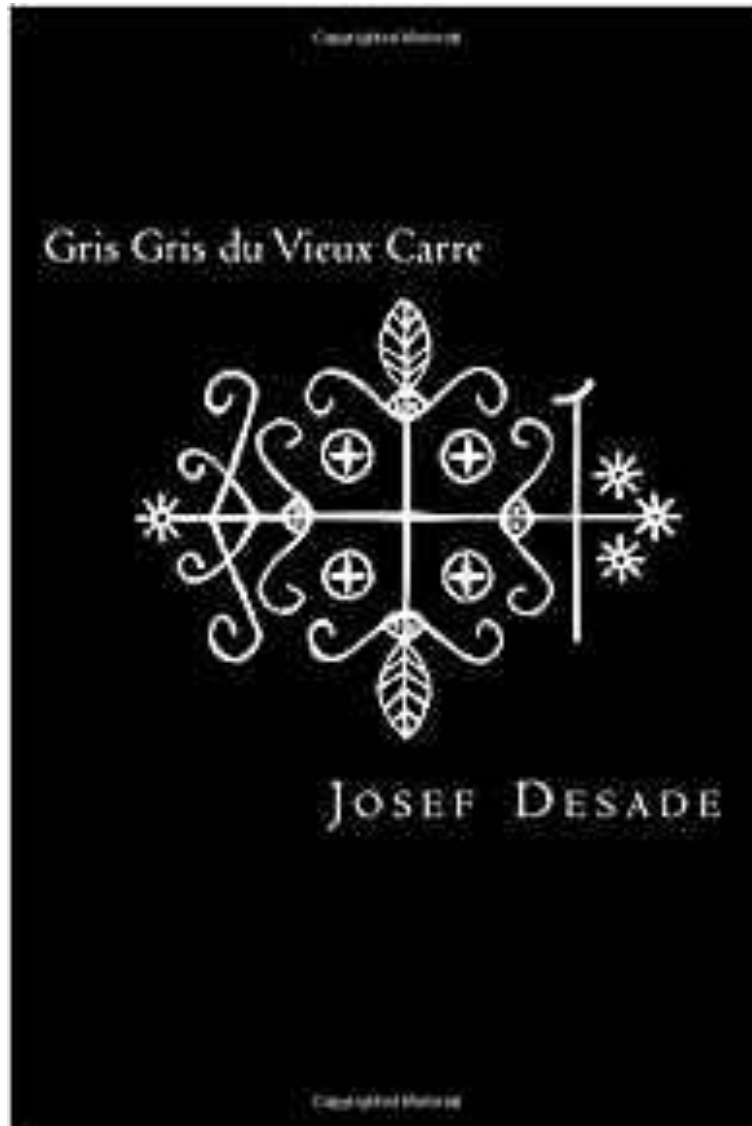
He clutched at the lectern; he had the crowd rapt. Earthmen, Numen, Oldmen, they were all there, all waiting to hear the mystery of the Object.

“We live in the shadows of beings greater than we could imagine, squabbling over this and that and who’s in charge of whom. We have forgotten how far we are from our original home. We are in an alien land, the intelligences that gave birth to the Object have allowed me this small insight. I am the first of a whole new kind of person, beyond the old man, beyond the Numan, I am the child of the Object and I wish to bring you a message of peace and understanding, the

possibility of a better tomorrow...”

Chren listened to the speech, thumbing his rosary beads and began to pray, though he knew nobody was going to answer.

THE END



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MAE JEMISON CHEEKS by Jeff H

She sits, head bent toward the carpet, as Pierre takes his seat. She can only think of him as Pierre—not as “president” or “general” or even “tyrant.” He is just Pierre; he does not deserve a title.

“Hello, little girl.” Pierre does not lift a hand, but he flashes Margaret a smile which shows off his straight, white teeth. Pierre is tall, and he carries his weight well. He has short-cropped hair with a little white around the temples. He wears a doubled breasted Zhongshan tunic, or Mao suit—perhaps a bit hot for this latitude, but it is his trademarked look. On three fingers Pierre sports gold rings. On the top of his head, gold sunglasses flash.

Margaret makes no reply. She is not a girl, but she is small. Her frame is both the result of small genetics and poor nutrition. Her skin is the same dark tone as Pierre’s, and her hair is also cropped short. When addressed Margaret places her hands into the pockets of her dress, which is a shapeless thing made of earth-toned, crosshatched cloth. This the traditional clothing of her people, except for the pockets. The pockets are a recent touch.

Pierre chuckles. “Not going to look at me, little girl?” he asks.

Margaret looks up at Pierre for several seconds, then returns her eyes to the carpet. The carpet is purple with a repeated yellow shield. Behind each shield are two spears, and below the spears a scroll, completing the seal of their country. Inside her pockets Margaret’s hands fidget.

“Oh good, good! Here I thought you were scared!”

Pierre’s chair is an arm’s length away. He does not quite face Margaret, but rather a television camera, just as Margaret does. To the left of the camera a technician stands adjusting a soundboard, and behind him another technician adjusts cables. To the right two soldiers stand with rifles in hand. Pierre, to the soldiers: “A Coca-Cola for me!”

A soldier leaves the room. Pierre slides his golden sunglasses down over his eyes. Margaret wears no jewellery, though she does draw the eye under the halogen lights; her Mae Jemison cheeks sparkle. Though she is not smiling, the shine give her a mischievous air.

The soldier returns and places a glass-bottled Coca-Cola in Pierre’s waiting hand. “I know you boycott foreign companies,” Pierre explains as he drinks through a bent straw, “otherwise I would have offered. I’m not a complete monster.”

An assistant puts lapel mics on both Pierre and Margaret.

The producer calls “Ready in two!”

The moderator glances at his notes and the camera operator adjusts the camera.

And slowly, Margaret sits up. Her face now shows its other notable feature: a thick scar, running

from one corner of her mouth, past her chin and down half her neck. In the halogens it too shines.

Pierre takes another gulp from his Coca-Cola and then sets it on the floor. He points to Margaret's chin. "Attacked by a dog," he states. "I do my homework."

Margaret's head dips slightly. In her pockets her hands go faster.

"When you were eight. And scared to death of them ever since!"

This time Margaret's head does not move. She thinks Pierre will talk about dogs now. He's often photographed around cars with his famous trio, all a cross between the African Boerboel and the Perro de Presa Canario, or Canary Island Mastiff. The results are three immense animals which Pierre likes to say are the first original dogs the continent has ever seen. "Our new national symbols!" As authentic to our country as sweet potato and honeyed goat!"

Never mind, thinks Margaret, that the ancestors of those dogs still came from Europe, as the Boerboel's name attests. Though lounging with dogs by Jeeps or in pools is authentic in a way; the only cars in the country are owned by foreigners, and clean water is a luxury even harder to come by. Pierre has profited handsomely at the hands of his people, but with reference to the game he loves so much, isn't he historically just par for the course?

Pierre drops the subject of dogs for now. "I always do my homework, and you know why?"

Margaret speaks. "Why?"

"One minute!" The producer shouts.

"Little girl, I have been ruling since before you were born, and that does not come from carelessness. And, with God's blessing, I will continue to rule long after you are gone. 'Ignore her!' my men told me. 'Do not talk to her! She is as stupid as her dog scar is ugly!' They said you were beneath me, and you are beneath me, but I know I can't ignore you and your protests much longer. Pests like you... little flies like you, they have a habit of getting bigger and bigger; I know this. It is the media and internet age, after all, no? So I do my homework, and so I invite you, little fly, here."

Margaret is silent. "Places!" comes the call.

"My men, they said, 'She only eats traditional food, and she only wears traditional clothes. She comes from the villages where they have no electricity. So just kill her, do not invite her onto television!' They do not understand what I understand though. Some people like those foods and clothes. And sometimes it is best to let a fool speak and demonstrate that they are a fool, rather than swat a fly and run a risk. I do not want a martyr, and one named after that horrible Ekpo woman at that. So instead we shall chat, and I will let you show the world the true jungle person that you are."

The overhead lights dim and the halogens brighten. Pierre's sunglasses throw the light in every direction. He is wearing jewels over his eyes.

Margaret's cheeks and scar gleam. There is sweat on her brow, and in her pockets her fingers twirl.

The camera operator and the man behind the soundboard give thumbs-up. The producer yells "Action!" A moderator introduces the two debaters. Pierre begins.

He starts by saying that he is a man "who needs no introduction," though still he rattles off his various titles. As he talks he looks directly at the camera and grins. He says that the country is better off now than before he took office--that is why he has won so many re-elections with near unanimous results! He talks about investments that are coming in from other countries, and how all of the wealth will spread. He talks about how reports that he made journalists "disappear" are not true. "I'm not a magician," he laughs, "and I have no rabbit or black hat!" Additionally, the rumours that the villagers in the jungle have died after eating government-provided food are not true either. "The land may have valuable hardwood, but I'm not a poisoner," Pierre explains. "Jungle people eat dirt, so we should not be surprised when they get sick from it!"

After a while it is Margaret's turn to speak, but the president has not finished. The moderator does not tell him to stop.

"You know me," Pierre continues, "and I know how to bring us prosperity. But do you know her? She is just a small girl. Her house does not have electricity and she's never been to school. Can she bring in business and money? She is foolish, and so are the people who follow her. Listen to her talk now, and see if she can say anything clearly at all!"

As Pierre finishes a soldier steps out of the room. The air is silent for a moment, and then the moderator turns towards Margaret. Now she can confront Pierre with the accusations that, for the last year, she has been making against him at rallies and through backroom newspapers. She clears her throat.

And the soldier who left returns.

He is leading three dogs. They are even more immense in person than in the pictures. When Pierre sees the trio he slaps his thigh and they come and sit at his feet. Margaret's lips tighten.

"Sorry for the interruption," Pierre says to the camera. "It is shameless, I know, to bring my pets out here, but they are as much a symbol of our nation as sweet potato and delicious honeyed goat! Everyone loves them, I am sure, including Margaret here, so I don't think anyone will mind!"

Pierre lowers his sunglasses and winks.

Margaret shoots one hand to the scar on her chin. Her eyes are glued to Pierre's dogs. They have huge heads--bigger than Margaret has ever seen. Their shoulder muscles ripple. Their tails are

long and they do not wag. Two dogs look up at Pierre, while one looks over at Margaret and yawns. The yawn reveals massive teeth and a throat that goes back forever.

Margaret is still silent. The camera rolls as she lowers her arm and sticks both of her hands further into her dress pockets.

And then she stands up.

“Hey!” Pierre says as he leans forward, “Are you leaving now? Did you forget what you came here to say?” And then, in a voice as sweet and as sticky as the glaze he likes to mention oh-so-much: “Perhaps, little girl, you should have stayed out of the city.”

Margaret clears her throat. “I will pet your dogs.”

“Oh?” Pierre adjusts his sunglasses.

She steps forward, then kneels. Margaret comes nose-to-nose with the first dog. It gives a low growl and looks up at Pierre, but he gives no signal so it returns to the small form in front of it. Its hair bristles. Margaret pulls her hands out of her dress to reveal dog treats shaped like wishbones. Margaret wastes no time in dropping the first wishbone towards the dog’s face. The treat is snapped out of the air and a series of quick bites is pulverized.

The dog’s hair falls flat.

Margaret drops it two more treats, and then tosses three treats each to the other two symbols of Pierre’s regime. As the pets lick their lips Margaret reaches out and touches the shaggy head closest to her. A pat for the next head, a pat for the third, and Margaret pulls her hand back. She has pet Pierre’s dogs.

Margaret returns to her seat. “I, too, do my homework.”

A beat passes, and then Pierre sweeps a long arm out. “Begin,” his hand seems to say, “and with my blessing.”

The tilted head and shining teeth, however, say something quite the opposite.

Margaret begins. “I do not have a lot to say. Many of you know what I stand for, and those of you who don’t will know soon enough. For now though I want to talk about flies. There are flies in the cities, and flies in the jungle. They are little creatures, like me. And to big people, little flies like me are hardly anything but a bother. But flies, like mosquitoes, can carry diseases which can be quite deadly.

Pierre laughs. Margaret takes a deep breath and continues.

“Someone once told me that swatting flies runs a risk. But flies are just little things, so when is this true? Well, a fly that gives speeches is hard to swat. And a fly that teaches is even harder to

swat. If a fly shows that a big man is still just a man--a human who cries like any other--then that fly can become a symbol. A symbol is an immortal idea, and so even if a fly is swatted other people can take up that idea, and—"

A dog coughs, and loudly. Margaret changes the topic, speaking quickly.

"We all know the jequirity plant. In the village I come from we sew its bright red bean into bracelets and necklaces, and we used it to decorate our drums. Those same beans also yield a dangerous poison. Historically it has been used on the ends of spears to make weapons for hunting and war. 'Abrin' is the name of the poison, and anyone from the jungle would recognize signs of abrin poisoning as much as they would recognize a tree or the face of their own mother."

All the dogs are coughing now. One starts to whimper.

"This poison was used against us in the villages. It was put into food, given as relief from starvation. People who had nothing were killed because why? Because of the land—"

Pierre shouts above his dogs' whining.

"Ha! What garbage! No one did any such thing, and how could they? To put jequirity toxin on sticks is one thing. But can it even be put into food? That I highly doubt!"

"It can be put into food," Margaret says quietly. She opens her mouth to say more, but as one of Pierre's dogs tries to stand its legs give out. An ear-splitting howl fills the room.

Pierre finally notices. He bolts out of his chair. "What have you done to my dogs?"

"Nothing you have not done to our people."

A second dog howls, and a third tries to, but something is caught in its throat. Red froth begins to pour out of its mouth.

The producer yells directions as soldiers scramble. Pierre's face begins to tremble. "I'll kill you for this," he hisses at Margaret. "Our national symbols!"

A shrug. "Symbols go and symbols come."

The camera continues to roll. Pierre rushes from dog to dog, all of which are seizing. A soldier knocks over Pierre's chair and nearby stand and the Coca-Cola bottle falls to floor, shattering. As the dogs cough up more and more blood the purple-and-gold carpet turns red. The room is loud with shouting. A soldier slips on the spilled soda and falls. While trying to still his dogs Pierre's right hand is bit. The dog's jaw locks, crushing Pierre's fingers, and he lets out a shrill yell.

And amid the chaos Margaret sits motionless, head bent upward. Her Mae Jemison cheeks sparkle. She looks extra mischievous, because for the first time in over a year she is smiling.

Her scar hardly shows at all.

THE END

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THE STRAW MAN COMETH by Jesse Zimmerman

Part One

There is a breeze that sends the grass blades fluttering in the field below us. We move downward on a rocky green mountain, through a pathway that twists, at times departing from its gradual descent. The meadow, at the times when I see it through the thick foliage, stretches on to a river. I know this place. I've seen it on maps in the library back home at Silver Coast. It's called the Spherion River. The river ultimately leads to Northsphere. This city was where the Challenger came from, where the vision we saw days before took place, back when we were in the plains beyond this range of green crags. The ranger's been silent mostly since then, volunteering watch each night, claiming he will be awake, but always asleep by the time me and Sis climb down the trees in the morning.

"He's thinking about her," Fauna tells me today, at a point past noon when we are finished a meal of crushed acorns and bread. The Challenger has gone up ahead of us. We see him periodically when we pass a turn and look down a treed cliff to see him further down the path.

"Obvious," I say, feeling a chill under my clothes.

"Do you think this explains why he's neutral, why he's chaotic?" my sister asks me, no jesting in her voice. "Maybe losing his love made him bitter about order, maybe feeling as if there is no true good worth fighting for?"

I give her a glare, unsure of how to answer. I hadn't thought about it. "Maybe," I say, about to explain how moral concepts are relative, but I hold back, feeling tired. I didn't get too much sleep up in the tree across last night. I woke up twice, one time hearing the Challenger mumbling things on the ground, unable to make the words out from my perch.

I now grab my bag on my back, bringing the two straps as far forward as I can, shifting the weight a bit. I haven't mentioned that we have new bags, us twins, and more stuff in them. Yesterday we found a general store out in the middle of some woods on the other side of these green mountains. It's a weird location there in that clearing, but the store manager, this short stubby man with a big droopy moustache, told us adventurers often come through this way. He also had inflated prices, but we had some coin left.

We have four loaves of bread, a jar of acorn paste, dried fritters, a few feet of hemp rope, three faux-skin flasks, two bottles of rabbit milk, and a booklet on the local plants and beasts so I can brush up on my studies and be able to tell what's what out here (there are different dangers since we are more northerly now). The stuff in my bag now makes clanging and shuffling noises. I stoop over a bit, hitting my raggedy shoes against hardening ground.

"I've been thinking," Fauna starts. "We've gone pretty far, haven't we? It's been what? Lost track of the days."

“Twenty-five only,” I tell her. “Remember? We left Silver Coast on the second day because the city’s so big; then on Day Four we stayed at Moof Village; then we met the Challenger on Day Seven at the tavern on the edge of the Grand Forest.”

“Right,” she says sharply, trying to cut me off.

I keep talking: “And then later we met Dick Bumpedop, had the whole adventure in Hair-Neck Valley, and then stayed with Barpar and Screech for a while, where we then proceeded to have our misadventure with Lobster-Man!”

“Yes, and then we ate the toad!” Fauna adds quickly, waving a downward hand. “It’s been a while, and we’ve had quests. Haven’t we had enough for a lifetime?”

I stop walking, feeling tension in my back and arms for a moment. “I don’t believe this,” I say to her after a tiny groan. She pauses a few steps ahead of me, looking over, turned partway.

“What?” she asks with her mouth hanging.

“You want to quit? You, whose whole idea was coming out here? You want to go home? You?”

I see her flush a bit, her face a lighter red than her clothes. She shakes her head with clear vehemence. “No! NO! I’m not saying that! I was more just bringing it up to see if you wanted to quit! That’s all. I was thinking of you, see? I always do!”

I groan again. Obviously I know she’s saving face like she always does.

“Well then never mind!” Fauna snaps, turning from me, bringing up her red cloak over the back of her head. “I’m going make water! Go catch up to Ranger-Boy!” She zips off the path, between two trunks, her feet crunching over leaves, her bag bouncing, the sounds becoming fainter as I see dabs of red blip between the trees further away.

I just keep walking, catching up to the Challenger. Here is a wide stretch of land, all treed with some rows of mossy stones here and there. He’s standing still, eye wide, gazing before him, sniffing the air.

“What?”

He stirs as he hears me. “I know this place,” he says, raising a hand, his longbow clutched firmly in it. “These trees, they’re thinner than the others.”

He steps forward. I follow. The narrow trees look like they are not as old as the rest of the forest. Some of them bend and twist, teenaged and rebellious, not stout and dignified like the old oaks and ashes further away. In a nearby distance I can hear the rushing of water, and my ranger friend veers his head towards it, simultaneously grabbing an arrow from his quiver, lining it upon his bow. I’ve only my dagger, so I grab it off my belt under my blue cloak.

We can see the river, the Spherion now, just where the thin trees stop and a muddy bank descends.

“We’re near your old city,” I say cautiously. “Do you want to avoid it?”

He looks to me sharply. “Yes please. I avoid all cities, but this one...”

I nod back, gazing about the place, trying to search my mind to remember the significance. “And this place? I think I know the lands outside of here. Killer...Killer Grass?”

“How do you know that?” he asks with his usual plain face. “Let me guess, you read it?”

“Yeah,” I say, remembering now. “It was in the booklet I just bought; Killer Grass is in the fields south and east of Northsphere. But there was something else, something nearby those fields, the place where the Killer Grass first came from.”

“Old Campus. The Killer Grass is more eastward so we’re safe,” the Challenger answers.

“Where’s your sister?”

As if she heard (she probably did), Fauna appears behind us, calling out: “Guys! I just saw an old weird statue!”

“Where?” the Challenger asks.

We are all now moving to where Fauna had come from. I ask the ranger if he’s been here before. He explains that this is first campus of Northsphere Academy back when the land was more savage and monsters and bandits and monstrous bandits roamed the land freely, when the civilized people walled themselves in great cities. This one campus south of Northsphere was safe though, at least for a few years, for they had walls and a grand weapon. I remember reading all about this place back in the Academy at Silver Coast, back in Mother’s Library. I suddenly recall a very vague memory of reading a list of words and chants that unleash powerful forces, but I don’t remember any details.

“When was this place abandoned?” Fauna asks him.

“It depends who you ask,” says the ranger. “Some say it was the moment that the new campus was constructed; others say it was when the Killer Grass experiment overwhelmed the nearby fields. Some say it was because of monsters that overran. All knowledge was lost, even in Northsphere’s new Academy, the one I went to. They have no data, no written accounts of details concerning the last days of Old Campus.”

“I remember reading things about it,” I tell him then.

“Where?” he asks, his bow still armed. Fauna has a bow, but she opts to take her sword out instead as she often does, hacking at some low branches while we ascend sloping ground.

Before I can answer she points her blade and shouts: “There!”

The Challenger runs ahead of us. We are out of the trees, now in a space paved with broken stones. For the first time in days I hear him laugh. “Yes, this place! Look!”

We’re standing in a decrepit outdoor rotunda, six thick stone columns surrounding us in a great circle. Vines and grasses have taken over, greenery wrapping itself around the columns, snaking through the cracked floor, and even some small trees have sprung up around the edge. What the Challenger points to stands in the middle of this place, a bronze-coloured statue that stands three times as tall as him.

“W-Wow!” my sister stammers, running around the sculpture.

“Talen,” I say the name of the God of Knowledge. It is man-like in shape, thin, garbed in a cloak that reaches the base. Two arms extend from the god’s side; in one hand he holds a beaker, in the other a quilled pen. His face is shrouded by a hood.

The Challenger and I circle the statue and I see upon Talen’s back a pair of folded wings. “Talen flies?” I ask.

“Yes,” says the ranger, placing the bow back on his chest, his free hand now on his sword’s hilt in the scabbard at his belts. “His symbol is a bird; with knowledge comes great vision, like that of a hawk or eagle.”

“Or an owl,” I add.

“Sure,” he continues, looking about. “I remember this place. We came here on a field trip.” I see him flash his teeth, a rare sight. “Let me show you something!”

“There better be tavern!” Fauna calls.

“Drink your rabbit milk,” I tell her, following the Challenger, this time through the other side of the rotunda opposite from whence we had just come.

The place is filled with juvenile trees and I still hear the Spherion babbling on unseen. We approach structures made of red brick, the nearest of them two stories tall, the next nearest five stories; all of them covered in a millennia’s growth of vines. There is a path that leads between the encrusted buildings. There is, not far off, at the end of this trail, a single tower. I count nine floors, the tall glass windows as my guide. For one moment I feel euphoria; smooth joy, a whiff of nostalgia. I can see beyond this ruin that’s been taken back by nature a place that was once a community. Pupils like me must have been here in the hundreds, and that tower at the end...

The others speed up. When I’m sprinting, my knapsack smacks against my back. Between the buildings I see trees, taller ones, and I see shadows about their trunks. We reach the walls of tower. It’s thick, twice as wide as the open rotunda we just left and there is a huge open doorway leading inside.

“What’s inside?” Fauna asks.

“Library,” says the Challenger.

“Library!” I shout, panting from the run. “Yes! I knew it!”

My sister slaps my shoulder from my side, putting her sword back at her belt.

“Why put your sword away?” I ask her, pulling the straps on my knapsack, leaning towards her.

“It’s a library,” she says, fitting her sword at her side. “What are there, mutated book lice?”

“Walking moulds maybe,” says the ranger, blade in hand. “But look, Flora, you’ll love this especially.”

“What about me?” asks my sister as we walk in together, stepping into a chamber, no—an atrium!

My gasp shoots all the way up to top of this hollow interior. This atrium takes up the whole tower! There are overlooking interior balconies on every floor leading up and immense leafy plants growing from the sides of the bannisters. At the pinnacle I see a glass ceiling. Additional light comes from windows, streaming in from what must be a soon-to-be setting sun because the glow against the backdrop of the top three levels is pink-orange. This place is so big. This circular floor is thirty paces in circumference. There is a staircase at the far point, the only part of the chamber untouched by vegetation. It winds upward, writhing towards the ninth floor; reminding me of a corkscrew.

“I come in around this time, done with lectures. I’m ready to read, study, overview the lesson, conduct arguments, make conclusions. I’d want to take a spot on high up, way above in my peaceful niche,” I say, nearly cooing.

“You need an owl’s perch,” Fauna says. “Look at the vines!”

These vines look like ropes. They’re hanging from all the balconies, some of them intersecting and turning into hydra-like formations, some bulging and overtaking the wall. There are thinner ones too, all of the vines pouring inward, all reaching for the floor.

“Let’s climb!” says sister.

The Challenger grins, looking excited. He crosses his arms, tilts his torso, his uncovered eye moving a full semi-circle. “We can do that.”

“Not me!” I tell them. “

“Ah,” says the Challenger. “Keep going, the stairs are made of stone-wood, the hardest wood of them all. Only fire can destroy it.”

“Good luck with the climb!” I say to them, running to the stairs. I can tell the steps are old, yet when I take my first steps the staircase neither creaks or sways. The wood is a dark brown. “Stone-wood,” I say, remembering reading about it. I look over to see both of my companions grabbing at the lower vines, Fauna jetting up to the second level, the Challenger following close behind, their two figures bounding upward like spiders climbing webs.

I sigh, knowing they’ll reach the top first. I decide to take a leisurely stroll (at a fast pace). There are bookshelves, long rows going in every direction to the far exterior walls where the tall windows are, the light from them illuminating the spines of every book, all the thousands of them. I wonder, and hope, if we can spend some time here. There must be tons of new knowledge, things I haven’t read back home. Third, fourth, fifth, and sixth floor are more of the same; more books, and I see desks further towards the windows.

“I could spend the rest of my life here, learning new things to take back to Silver Coast,” I say to myself at floor seven. This one is different. There are some bookshelves, but there is, instead of open aisles leading to windows and desks, an open archway a few paces from the stairs. At the top of the archway are some carved words, an ancient script, an older version of common language. Fortunately I know the letters; Experimentation it reads.

I go in. It’s a fairly large chamber. There are columns that reach only a third of the way to the ceiling of this floor, and on the top of these columns, at about my height, are glass boxes. I see some kind of green mask in one; in another I see a silver cup. There are a dozen or so of these displays. Farthest from the archway is a glass cube with no roof, only an open space at the top. I see this last. Inside is a patch of dried out grasses, yellow and brown, only a finger height each. They appear dead, all strewn over, lying on top of one another.

“Could this be?” I ask. Ever the knowledge-seeker, I reach for my knapsack and pull out a tiny piece of bread. Taking it in my hands, I drop it on top of the grass.

I hear a rustling, and then a high-pitched growl and a series of inhuman shrieks. All the blades begin flinging about, little teeth barely visible on their ends, the frantic grass consuming the bread in seconds. Once the piece is gone the grasses all wave about, the blades nearest the end where I stand all flinging against the glass wall as if they are trying to reach me.

“Killer Grass,” I say with a half-smile. I cannot wait to show the Challenger. I think for a moment about the vision we saw, his story, his tragedy, a few days prior, about Bumbly and his admiring pupil, Rand and how their actions caused the Challenger to lose his wife. I also remember how the Challenger (before he was called the Challenger) slew Bumbly and tossed the little man known as Straw Man into the antidote cauldron in his rage.

I move back to the stairs. Floor eight is next. Here I see a similar chamber and a similar archway, the inscriptions in ancient common reading: Delipha.

“Goddess of the Sea,” I whisper, remembering that name. Inside I peer briefly, able to see inscriptions reading: Delipha’s Artefacts.

Finally I make my way to Floor Nine. As expected both my sister and the Challenger are already there. We gaze down at the floor level from here, looking down the many levels of the circular balconies that wrap around the tower’s interior. On the floor itself there are some doors, small ones, and one big one towards the centre of the space. We make our way to the big door and the Challenger sighs loudly:

He smacks his forehead with his palm, punching the door with his other hand. “It’s locked! How could I forget that?”

“What’s in there?” Fauna asks, barely winded by her climb, her knapsack still firmly on her back. “Another vision-inducing toad?”

“No, but it is something we’ve seen before,” says the ranger. “It leads to an open roof. There are flying ships!”

“Wow!” gasps Fauna. That would be really useful, for us to have one of those ships like Lobster-Man had escaped from us on. “Can we just break the door? I mean, look at how strong you were made because of the antidote.”

The Challenger shakes his head, running a hand up the surface of the door. “This is stone-wood, won’t break.”

“It would be useful for a tight spot!” I comment.

My words were so badly chosen, or so aptly chosen because what happens next is indeed just that. We hear the sound of doors slamming shut from way down at the bottom of the tower. Fauna and I rush to the side rail of the balcony, peering down over the vines. The light that had been coming in through the front door is gone.

“Orphan!” we hear a monstrous voice roar. It comes from an unseen place far below. “He who is called Challenger! Your time is over!”

Fauna curses. We see small figures emerge. Some are on the lower balconies, others on the main floor. They scramble about. I can only make out that they are bulky and green-skinned. The Challenger emerges at my side, grabbing his bow.

“Prepare to fight,” he hisses. “This is bad.”

“What is it?” Fauna asks in panic, also grabbing both her bow and arrows.

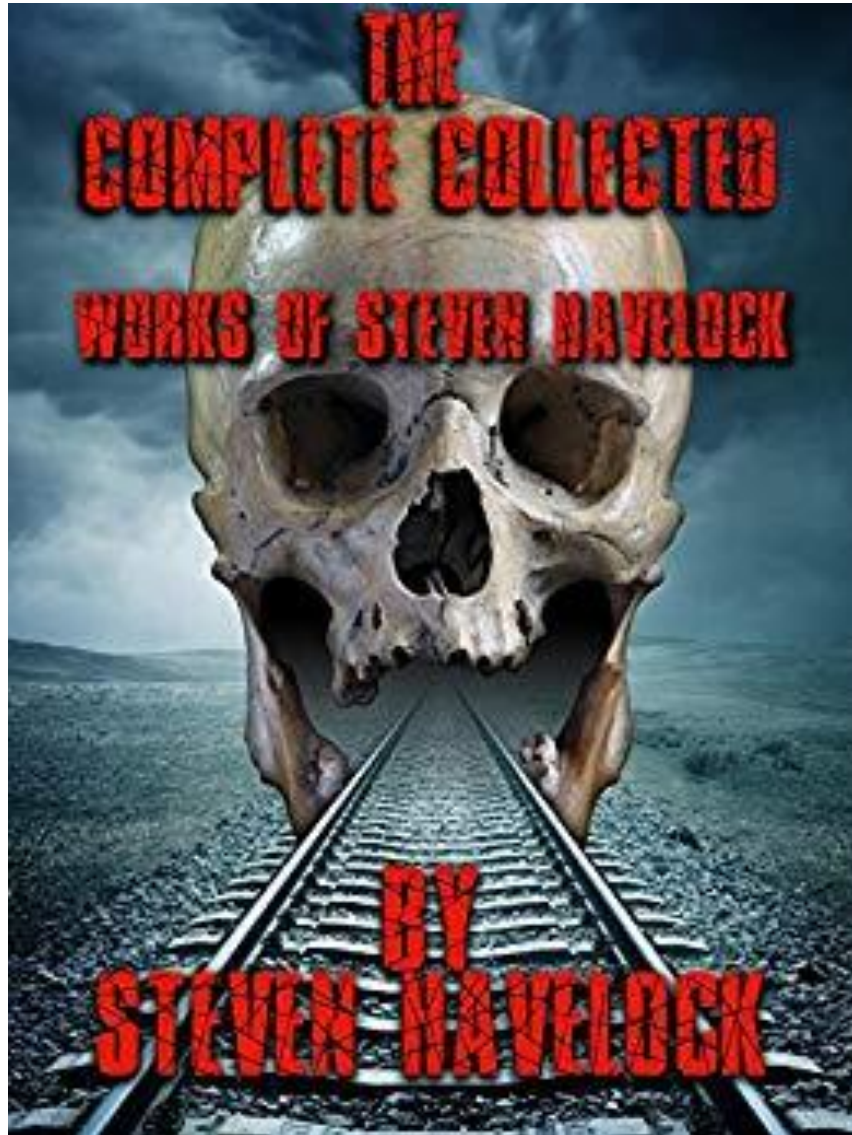
I grab my dagger again.

“Challenger!” the voice calls mockingly. “Remember me?”

Then we see it him. A hulking figure steps into the main chamber below. His shoulders and arms are massive, as is his chest and back, even at this distance I can tell he is twenty times my size. He wears a great yellow cloak, which he quickly flings off of himself, revealing a bulgy head topped with messy blonde strands of hair.

“Straw Man,” mutters the Challenger. I see fear in his good eye.

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‘Aye! My tribe still lives,’ Aajika said defiantly. ‘And Kursaal has come to rescue me.’

Yek Zerab eyed Kursaal sardonically. ‘My,’ he added, ‘your taste in lovers runs to the well-developed, girl. What a slave will this stalwart fellow make! I should think he will last at least six lunations in the orichalcum mines of Atlantis.’ He lowered his spear and pointed it menacingly at Kursaal.

‘We hoped that some of your fellow warriors would surrender themselves into slavery,’ the other pale man told Kursaal. ‘But they evaded us and got away into the swamp trees where we couldn’t follow in our atmosphere craft. How they fled! Like frightened apes.’

‘My people,’ Kursaal said dangerously, ‘never surrender. Your allies the Deathcaps should have told you that.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Yek-Zerab, ‘you have only two options. Either surrender and join your fellow slaves in the pen, or I will shoot you down where you stand. Which is it to be?’

Kursaal did not move. The stockier man looked from the Venusian to his Terran comrade. ‘He’ll do it, you know,’ he warned Kursaal. ‘These vril lances we carry aren’t for show.’ When Kursaal still did not react, the stocky Terran levelled his and fired off a shot at the ground beside Kursaal. Fire leapt up from the wooden planks and began licking around the wicker bars of the pen. The slaves woke up shrieking.

‘You fool, Beb-Awer!’ Yek-Zerab barked, turning to strike his companion. ‘Look what you have done!’

Kursaal sprang.

Like a hunting reptile he leapt upon Yek-Zerab, bone knife in paw. The Terran went sprawling, his vril lance clattered across the ground to rest in the lea of the airship, but Kursaal hauled him to his feet, holding the bone knife to his throat. He swung round to Beb-Awer.

‘I’ll kill him,’ he vowed as Yek-Zerab struggled in his brawny arms. ‘I’ll kill him—unless you help us escape.’

But Beb-Awer was too busy trying to extinguish the fire he had inadvertently begun to respond. He sheathed his vril lance and took off his cloak, trying to beat out the flames, but they only grew, and his cloak began to burn. Aajika and Wanii and the others were beating against the wicker bars from the inside. From the surrounding huts came a wailing and Deathcap people staggered out. Kursaal saw a man appeared from one of the bigger huts, and through the growing smoke he recognised him from the bone choker he wore around his neck.

Bone Choker also saw him. 'You!' he snarled. He stared around him in horror at the growing disaster.

'Free me!' Yek-Zerab cried in a choked voice. Kursaal's forearm was clenched across his windpipe and he was being half strangled. Kursaal pressed his chert dagger harder against the pulsating blood vessel in his throat.

'Quiet, or die,' he instructed. Then he turned to Beb-Awer. 'Set the slaves free before they die!'

Now the fires had spread to the pens where the riding reptiles were kept. People were running about the place, frightened by the fires. But when the reptiles began to panic, the chaos increased. One terrified creature began smashing at the bars, just as Aajika and her fellow slaves did on the far side of the square.

Bone Choker gathered men together, issuing instructions. Soon a chain of them was passing up leather buckets full of lagoon water to fling at the flames. But already the fires were taking hold, and the greatest buildings of the floating island were blazing.

'See what your foolishness has done?' Yek-Zerab said to Beb-Awer. 'What are you doing now? No! You mustn't!' He broke off as Kursaal dug the dagger deeper into his flesh, and watched in despair as Beb-Awer untied the withes that kept the pen door shut.

Aajika and her fellow slaves flooded out, some racing away towards the water, others standing in a frightened huddle. Aajika and Wanii remained near Kursaal. The flames had taken hold of much of the pen and as they left it, it collapsed in a shower of sparks. Beb-Awer leapt back, and almost collided with Kursaal and Yek-Zerab. He turned round nervously.

'Take us on board your airship,' said Kursaal. 'Do it!' he added, shouting over the noise and confusion of the panicked settlement. Beb-Awer looked uncertain, and traced his dagger lightly across Yek-Zerab's throat. 'Or your leader dies.'

'Do as he says,' Yek-Zerab said. 'We would be better off aboard the atmosphere craft.'

Kursaal beckoned Aajika and Wanii and other others with his head. 'Follow me,' he said.

Beb-Awer led them into the airship. Kursaal came next, pushing Yek-Zerab before him. Aajika and the other freed slaves came anxiously after.

A short passageway of some black, glittering substance led past two doorways and into the main cabin of the airship. The freed slaves entered this in wonder, peering round them at the incomprehensible scene. A great crystal viewport looked out on a scene of confusion, the entire settlement on fire, with warriors and villagers and reptiles running in all directions while escaped slaves leapt from the sides into the water or commandeered canoes. Kursaal saw Bone Choker in the middle, an expression of anger on his painted face. While others continued to fight the fires, he was leading his spearmen towards the open doors of the airship.

‘Close the doors,’ he snapped at Beb-Awer, who went to a kind of jewel studded shelf that ran along the wall beneath the viewport, and pressed a red jewel. There was a humming sound from down the passageway, followed by a clang. Kursaal saw Bone Choker and his men reached the doors just in time for them to shut in their faces. Now the flames spread to encircle the village square. All the huts were ablaze. Bone Choker spat a curse, and went to help fight the fire.

‘You must fly us away from here,’ Kursaal said. He had no understanding of the airship or its workings, but he knew that they would soon be burnt alive if they did not get out. Already the hull of the vessel was growing uncomfortably hot.

Beb-Awer looked from him to Yek-Zerab.

‘I cannot take off alone. I must call the rest...’

‘You must let me help him,’ Yek-Zerab interrupted. ‘One man cannot operate the atmosphere craft. Even a crew of two will find it difficult.’

‘Very well,’ said Kursaal, but he did not set the Terran free. ‘You will do what you must while I keep my dagger to your throat.’

As Beb-Awer went to sit on a large black chair in the centre of the cabin, Yek-Zerab gave an incredulous laugh. ‘I must be free to move about,’ he told Kursaal patronisingly. ‘You know nothing of this matter. If we are to take off, I suggest you set me free.’

‘The fires are really starting to take hold now,’ Beb-Awer said warningly. ‘This is an atmosphere craft, not an ether ship, it’s not designed to stand up to heat. We will be baked alive if we don’t take off soon.’

‘How do I know that I can trust you if I set you free,’ Kursaal asked Yek-Zerab. ‘How do I know that you don’t plan some treachery?’

Yek-Zerab laughed. ‘You don’t,’ he said shortly. ‘But if you don’t set me free, we will all die. You. Me. These slaves you have so heroically rescued. All your efforts will be as nothing, and your brief life will be at an end.’

As he spoke, the flames began to lick around the crystal port.

‘Set him free.’ Aajika’s voice rang out through the cabin.

‘But we cannot trust him,’ Kursaal said patiently, without looking at her. ‘He will betray us. I know he is planning some treachery. If I free him, I throw away our only chance of escape.’ Sweat ran down his scalp as he spoke. The temperature of the cabin was increasing.

‘If we don’t take off right away, we will die,’ said Beb-Awer tremulously, looking up from where he sat. ‘Set Yek-Zerab free, you savage!’

‘Set him free,’ Aajika said again, and this time there was something in her tone that made Kursaal turn to look at her.

She stood in the middle of the cabin, holding in her paws the vril lance that Yek-Zerab had dropped when Kursaal attacked him. It was levelled at Yek-Zerab.

‘Set him free,’ she said, ‘and I will make sure that he does nothing treacherous.’

‘You don’t know how to work that thing,’ Kursaal said.

Aajika’s paws moved, and a crimson beam shot out and exploded against the far bulkhead. The two Terrans jumped in shock.

‘Don’t fire that thing!’ Yek-Zerab pleaded. ‘You don’t know what havoc you could wreak in here! Very well, very well! I will help Beb-Awer take off. I will not try any treachery!’

‘And quickly,’ cried Beb-Awer. ‘Already there are fires on the hull.’

With a grunt, Kursaal released his hold on Yek-Zerab. He lowered his dagger and gestured to the man to take his place.

In a swirl of red cloak, Yek-Zerab strode to the jewelled shelf beneath the crystal viewport. He looked over at Beb-Awer, sitting on the large chair, then ran his fingers across the jewels. There was a thrum of noise from somewhere beneath the deck. Beb-Awer operated some similar controls on the arm of his chair. Keeping his eyes on the two Terrans, Kursaal crossed over to stand beside Aajika and the other slaves.

‘Well done,’ he said. ‘How did you learn how to control that weapon?’

She looked up at him. ‘I watched them,’ she said. ‘Ever since the Deathcaps brought us here and I discovered who were to be our owners, I have watched them. There is a stud’—she lifted the vril lance to show him—‘that operates it.’

Kursaal felt another vibration run through the deck. On the crystal viewport, the scene began to change as they rose up through the pluming smoke. Now the flames were below them.

‘That was clever of you,’ he said.

‘My sister is very clever,’ said a younger she, thrusting herself forward and scowling. ‘She would have got us out of there if you had not come.’ Kursaal had seen the she in Aajika’s cave.

‘Wanii!’ Aajika said reprovingly. ‘You know that’s not true.’

The airship seemed to stop rising. Kursaal saw that they were hovering over the blazing settlement. From up here, he could see that the floating island was anchored in a lagoon, encircled on all sides by sandbars and swamp. On the far side from the swamp, whose jivnik

trees were visible on the extreme left of the viewport, stretched the motionless waters of the Venusian ocean.

‘Why have we stopped?’ Kursaal demanded.

Beb-Awer looked helplessly to Yek-Zerab. The Terran leader gave the Venusian savage a hooded look. ‘We are awaiting your instructions,’ he said. ‘Since you have hijacked our atmosphere craft, you could have the decency to give us clear destination coordinates.’

‘What does that mean?’ Kursaal said, bewildered.

‘Where are we going?’ Beb-Awer translated Yek-Zerab’s words. ‘Right now, we are hovering above the lagoon settlement. Our vril beams will keep us stationary only for so long before we begin to lose power. We need to know where we are going.’

‘Take us ashore, then,’ said Kursaal. ‘Beyond the jivnik swamp. Once we are back in our own territory...’

‘Yes?’ said Yek-Zerab, looking up from his jewels.

‘Once we are back home,’ said Kursaal, ‘then we will decide what is to be your fate.’

As Beb-Awer and Yek-Zerab guided the airship northwards across the lagoon and towards the jivnik trees that grew along the swampy shore, Kursaal imagined how strong his tribe could become if they owned such a vessel. None of the other tribes he knew of had air power, except some of the mountain tribes who were said to fly into battle on winged reptiles. But this was only hearsay, if not myth. Should the Crag Tribe have control of airships, they could become richer and more powerful. The Deathcaps would raid them no more. Indeed, it would be the Deathcaps who would pay tribute to the Tribe.

So intent was Kursaal on his meditations, he did not notice the door to the cabin, beyond where Aajika stood and the cluster of freed slaves were sitting, opening to the slightest crack. Someone was watching them from the passage beyond.

‘What will we do with them?’ Aajika asked, moving to stand beside Kursaal.

He turned to look fondly down at her. ‘We will give them their just deserts,’ he promised her. ‘Did they hurt you?’

‘They were brutal and uncaring,’ she said, ‘but not as bad as the Deathcaps. I hope the other slaves escaped the floating island, but if the Deathcaps are all killed, I would not grieve.’

‘None should grieve for the deaths of enemies,’ Kursaal said. ‘When we return to the caves, we will take action that will ensure that the Tribe is never threatened again. If word of the retreat of my father and the others is bruited abroad, the tribes of the mountains and the shore will think the Crag Tribe are weaklings. But we are not. We have defeated the Deathcaps and we now have

power possessed by no other tribe.'

'Do you mean the airship?' she asked. 'But we do not know how it works.'

'But we have our own slaves now,' Kursaal said, 'who can work it. I will lead the Tribe to greatness, Aajika, and you will be my queen.'

Aajika gazed up at him wonderingly, and looked to where Wanii was watching the two of them beadily. 'But you know that cannot be, Kursaal,' she said with a laugh. 'Would you conquer all the tribes and break all law and custom too? It is impossible. You cannot take me as your mate for we are of the same tribe.'

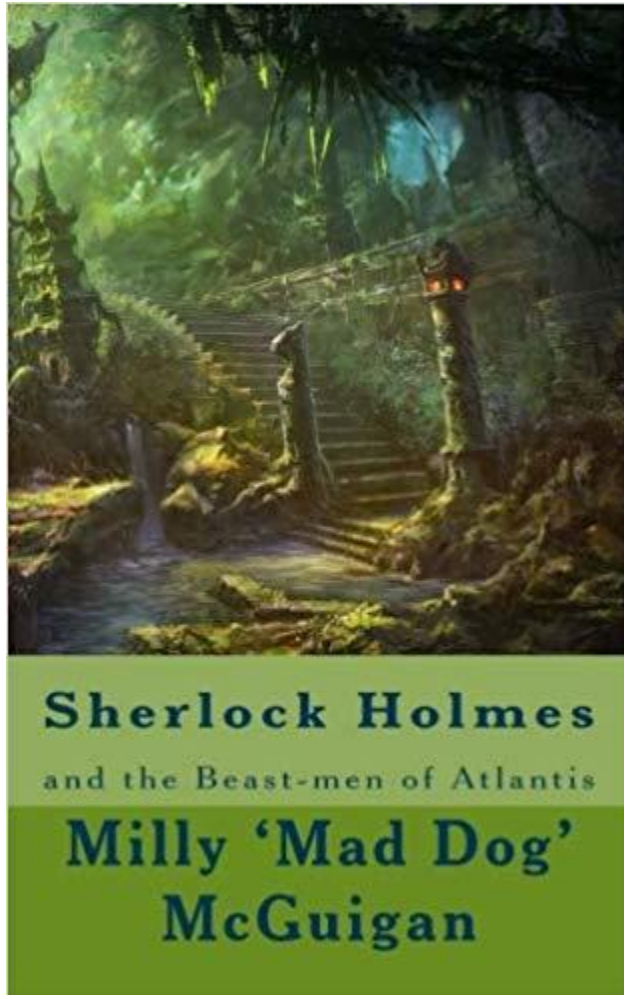
She patted him on his muscular arm. 'Do not fret,' she added. 'You have proved yourself a mighty warrior this day. You will go out into the world to win yourself a queen worthy of such a great fighter, the most beautiful maiden of the strongest tribe you will lead back to your cave to bear your cubs. I believe in you.'

Seeing the adoration in her eyes yet also hearing her words, Kursaal felt only despair at the constraints of tribal custom. She loved him, he was sure of it. And yet these laws and traditions would keep them apart.

His head sank despondently on his breast.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty-Six

Mud was delighted to see Rat stepping into Ed's place.

"Now that's a nice piece o' luck," he said to himself, grinning with big gleaming teeth through his bushy brown beard. "I wouldna expected my boy to walk right into my open arms, but damn if he idn't doin' exactly that."

"Hey, Rat!" he hollered, placing the tray of drinks he carried on the table between Hardy and Illara.

Rat almost jumped to hear his name shouted at him. When he turned to see who it was who was shouting at him so, his face went positively white with terror. Mud bounded across the barroom, and grasped Rat by the arm with a burly fist.

"Well, hey, if it isn't my ol' buddy!" Mud bellowed in Rat's ear. "How ya been doin, Rat?" As Mud talked, he guided Rat to the table where Hardy and Illara were sitting.

"I wancha ta meet some friends," Mud said.

"Ah... sorry... can't do it... no time..."

"Sure ya can," Mud laughed. "Yuh always gotta make time for that boodle."

Rat tried to squirm his way out of Mud's grip, but Mud only squeezed his arm that much more tightly. And when he realized that Mud was taking him to the very table that Ed the barkeep had bugged, to gather profitable intelligence, he went silent, his tongue tied with terror.

So Mud half-dragged and half-carried a nearly insensible Rat to the table where Illara and Hardy were patiently waiting. Rat saw the smile on Illara's face and his heart sank. Hers was a beautiful smile, and at times, it was a radiant smile. But this was not one of those times.

Now, it was the smile of a very dangerous woman. Hard set and steely, there was no mercy in her eyes. And the smile Illara greeted Rat with was a selfish smile, one that offered no shared greeting. It was the barely polite, closed smile that admitted no outsiders.

"These are my good buddies," Mud said, as he ushered Rat into the booth. Rat, a small man with a bony face, was helpless against Mud's massive girth. He knew precisely where the cameras were hidden, and two of them were aimed directly at his head. Every syllable he uttered would be recorded faithfully, and with heart-breaking clarity.

"Gang," Mud said, waving his hand at Illara and Hardy, "This is my friend, calls himself 'Rat', on account of he's so pretty."

Mud's wit was met with a round of laughter. Rat himself laughed nervously with the others.

"Whatcha wanna be drinkin'?" Mud asked Rat.

"Nah, nuthin'," Rat answered, his shoulders shaking.

"Yeah, sure you got time. You wanna hear the deal I got for you."

Mud spoke into the speaker mounted at the end of the table. "Gimme another beer."

"Deal?" Rat asked. He didn't know why this Mud fellow was so suddenly so anxious to be friendly with him, but the abrupt turn in Mud's attitude toward him couldn't be anything but suspicious. And with Lacey's disappearance being the subject of much heated gossip and much worry among her friends, a bounty was finally put out for any information that would lead to her safe return.

And it was that which put Rat in such terror, that Mud had come to ask Rat about Lacey. And to be interrogated just there, with surveillance cameras buried in the wall only inches away from his face was a torment he knew he could not bear up to.

But the first words that came out of Mud's mouth gave Rat a huge surge of comfort.

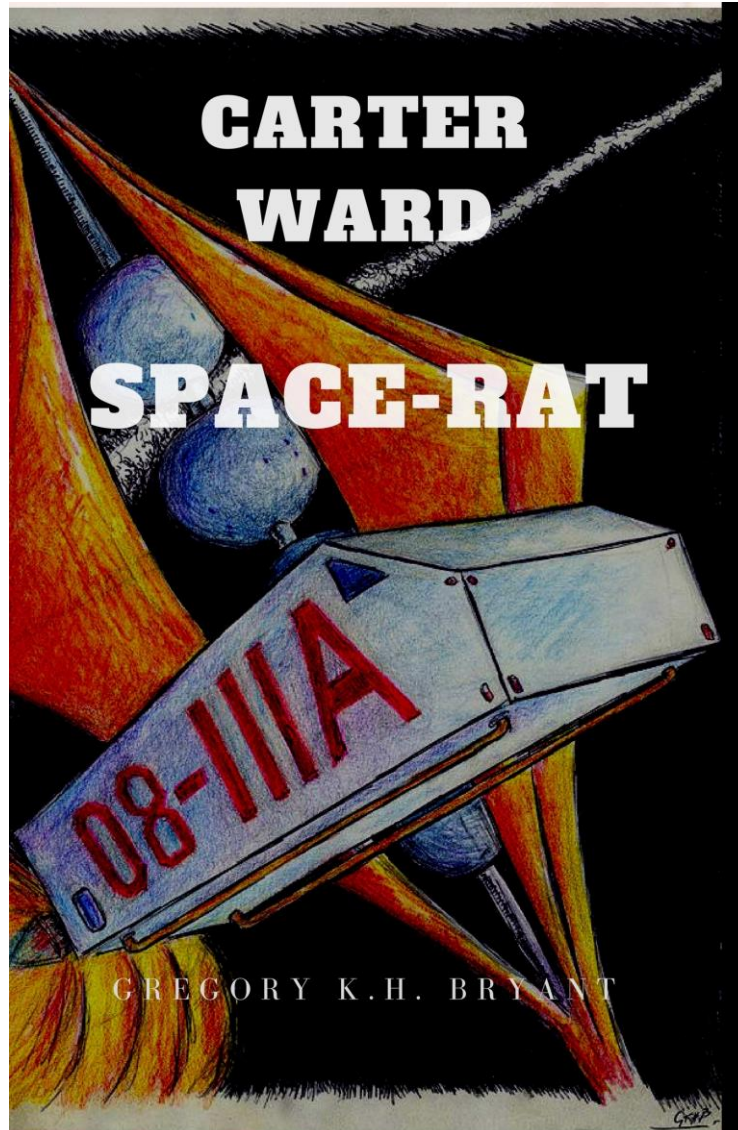
"Member how you wuz so keen to pick up some 'uh my load? Well, if yer still up for it, I got as many pounds of mud as you wanna buy."

"Yeah?" Rat asked.

"I'm not kiddin' ya," Mud said. "I just picked up a couple hundred pounds of it that I gotta unload, and fast, too, on account of I got some guys want me to ship a load of ice for 'em. And I gotta make room for them. Ya see? And I don't got the room for it now. I'll be makin' a helluva lot more on the ice than I will on the mud, so ya see I gotta unload the mud, and real fast, too."

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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 XII: "It was Dreadful in the Forest"

I have said—or perhaps I have not said, for my memory plays me sad tricks these days—that I glowed with pride when three such men as my comrades thanked me for having saved, or at least greatly helped, the situation. As the youngster of the party, not merely in years, but in experience, character, knowledge, and all that goes to make a man, I had been overshadowed from the first. And now I was coming into my own. I warmed at the thought. Alas! for the pride which goes before a fall! That little glow of self-satisfaction, that added measure of self-confidence, were to lead me on that very night to the most dreadful experience of my life, ending with a shock which turns my heart sick when I think of it.

It came about in this way. I had been unduly excited by the adventure of the tree, and sleep seemed to be impossible. Summerlee was on guard, sitting hunched over our small fire, a quaint, angular figure, his rifle across his knees and his pointed, goat-like beard wagging with each weary nod of his head. Lord John lay silent, wrapped in the South American poncho which he wore, while Challenger snored with a roll and rattle which reverberated through the woods. The full moon was shining brightly, and the air was crisply cold. What a night for a walk! And then suddenly came the thought, "Why not?" Suppose I stole softly away, suppose I made my way down to the central lake, suppose I was back at breakfast with some record of the place—would I not in that case be thought an even more worthy associate? Then, if Summerlee carried the day and some means of escape were found, we should return to London with first-hand knowledge of the central mystery of the plateau, to which I alone, of all men, would have penetrated. I thought of Gladys, with her "There are heroisms all round us." I seemed to hear her voice as she said it. I thought also of McArdle. What a three column article for the paper! What a foundation for a career! A correspondentship in the next great war might be within my reach. I clutched at a gun—my pockets were full of cartridges—and, parting the thorn bushes at the gate of our zareba, quickly slipped out. My last glance showed me the unconscious Summerlee, most futile of sentinels, still nodding away like a queer mechanical toy in front of the smouldering fire.

I had not gone a hundred yards before I deeply repented my rashness. I may have said somewhere in this chronicle that I am too imaginative to be a really courageous man, but that I have an overpowering fear of seeming afraid. This was the power which now carried me onwards. I simply could not slink back with nothing done. Even if my comrades should not have missed me, and should never know of my weakness, there would still remain some intolerable self-shame in my own soul. And yet I shuddered at the position in which I found myself, and would have given all I possessed at that moment to have been honourably free of the whole business.

It was dreadful in the forest. The trees grew so thickly and their foliage spread so widely that I could see nothing of the moon-light save that here and there the high branches made a tangled filigree against the starry sky. As the eyes became more used to the obscurity one learned that there were different degrees of darkness among the trees—that some were dimly visible, while between and among them there were coal-black shadowed patches, like the mouths of caves, from which I shrank in horror as I passed. I thought of the despairing yell of the tortured

iguanodon—that dreadful cry which had echoed through the woods. I thought, too, of the glimpse I had in the light of Lord John’s torch of that bloated, warty, blood-slaver muzzel. Even now I was on its hunting-ground. At any instant it might spring upon me from the shadows—this nameless and horrible monster. I stopped, and, picking a cartridge from my pocket, I opened the breech of my gun. As I touched the lever my heart leaped within me. It was the shot-gun, not the rifle, which I had taken!

Again the impulse to return swept over me. Here, surely, was a most excellent reason for my failure—one for which no one would think the less of me. But again the foolish pride fought against that very word. I could not—must not—fail. After all, my rifle would probably have been as useless as a shot-gun against such dangers as I might meet. If I were to go back to camp to change my weapon I could hardly expect to enter and to leave again without being seen. In that case there would be explanations, and my attempt would no longer be all my own. After a little hesitation, then, I screwed up my courage and continued upon my way, my useless gun under my arm.

The darkness of the forest had been alarming, but even worse was the white, still flood of moonlight in the open glade of the iguanodons. Hid among the bushes, I looked out at it. None of the great brutes were in sight. Perhaps the tragedy which had befallen one of them had driven them from their feeding-ground. In the misty, silvery night I could see no sign of any living thing. Taking courage, therefore, I slipped rapidly across it, and among the jungle on the farther side I picked up once again the brook which was my guide. It was a cheery companion, gurgling and chuckling as it ran, like the dear old trout-stream in the West Country where I have fished at night in my boyhood. So long as I followed it down I must come to the lake, and so long as I followed it back I must come to the camp. Often I had to lose sight of it on account of the tangled brush-wood, but I was always within earshot of its tinkle and splash.

As one descended the slope the woods became thinner, and bushes, with occasional high trees, took the place of the forest. I could make good progress, therefore, and I could see without being seen. I passed close to the pterodactyl swamp, and as I did so, with a dry, crisp, leathery rattle of wings, one of these great creatures—it was twenty feet at least from tip to tip—rose up from somewhere near me and soared into the air. As it passed across the face of the moon the light shone clearly through the membranous wings, and it looked like a flying skeleton against the white, tropical radiance. I crouched low among the bushes, for I knew from past experience that with a single cry the creature could bring a hundred of its loathsome mates about my ears. It was not until it had settled again that I dared to steal onwards upon my journey.

The night had been exceedingly still, but as I advanced I became conscious of a low, rumbling sound, a continuous murmur, somewhere in front of me. This grew louder as I proceeded, until at last it was clearly quite close to me. When I stood still the sound was constant, so that it seemed to come from some stationary cause. It was like a boiling kettle or the bubbling of some great pot. Soon I came upon the source of it, for in the centre of a small clearing I found a lake—or a pool, rather, for it was not larger than the basin of the Trafalgar Square fountain—of some black, pitch-like stuff, the surface of which rose and fell in great blisters of bursting gas. The air above it was shimmering with heat, and the ground round was so hot that I could hardly bear to lay my hand on it. It was clear that the great volcanic outburst which had raised this strange plateau so

many years ago had not yet entirely spent its forces. Blackened rocks and mounds of lava I had already seen everywhere peeping out from amid the luxuriant vegetation which draped them, but this asphalt pool in the jungle was the first sign that we had of actual existing activity on the slopes of the ancient crater. I had no time to examine it further for I had need to hurry if I were to be back in camp in the morning.

It was a fearsome walk, and one which will be with me so long as memory holds. In the great moonlight clearings I slunk along among the shadows on the margin. In the jungle I crept forward, stopping with a beating heart whenever I heard, as I often did, the crash of breaking branches as some wild beast went past. Now and then great shadows loomed up for an instant and were gone—great, silent shadows which seemed to prowl upon padded feet. How often I stopped with the intention of returning, and yet every time my pride conquered my fear, and sent me on again until my object should be attained.

At last (my watch showed that it was one in the morning) I saw the gleam of water amid the openings of the jungle, and ten minutes later I was among the reeds upon the borders of the central lake. I was exceedingly dry, so I lay down and took a long draught of its waters, which were fresh and cold. There was a broad pathway with many tracks upon it at the spot which I had found, so that it was clearly one of the drinking-places of the animals. Close to the water's edge there was a huge isolated block of lava. Up this I climbed, and, lying on the top, I had an excellent view in every direction.

The first thing which I saw filled me with amazement. When I described the view from the summit of the great tree, I said that on the farther cliff I could see a number of dark spots, which appeared to be the mouths of caves. Now, as I looked up at the same cliffs, I saw discs of light in every direction, ruddy, clearly-defined patches, like the port-holes of a liner in the darkness. For a moment I thought it was the lava-glow from some volcanic action; but this could not be so. Any volcanic action would surely be down in the hollow and not high among the rocks. What, then, was the alternative? It was wonderful, and yet it must surely be. These ruddy spots must be the reflection of fires within the caves—fires which could only be lit by the hand of man. There were human beings, then, upon the plateau. How gloriously my expedition was justified! Here was news indeed for us to bear back with us to London!

For a long time I lay and watched these red, quivering blotches of light. I suppose they were ten miles off from me, yet even at that distance one could observe how, from time to time, they twinkled or were obscured as someone passed before them. What would I not have given to be able to crawl up to them, to peep in, and to take back some word to my comrades as to the appearance and character of the race who lived in so strange a place! It was out of the question for the moment, and yet surely we could not leave the plateau until we had some definite knowledge upon the point.

Lake Gladys—my own lake—lay like a sheet of quicksilver before me, with a reflected moon shining brightly in the centre of it. It was shallow, for in many places I saw low sandbanks protruding above the water. Everywhere upon the still surface I could see signs of life, sometimes mere rings and ripples in the water, sometimes the gleam of a great silver-sided fish in the air, sometimes the arched, slate-coloured back of some passing monster. Once upon a

yellow sandbank I saw a creature like a huge swan, with a clumsy body and a high, flexible neck, shuffling about upon the margin. Presently it plunged in, and for some time I could see the arched neck and darting head undulating over the water. Then it dived, and I saw it no more.

My attention was soon drawn away from these distant sights and brought back to what was going on at my very feet. Two creatures like large armadillos had come down to the drinking-place, and were squatting at the edge of the water, their long, flexible tongues like red ribbons shooting in and out as they lapped. A huge deer, with branching horns, a magnificent creature which carried itself like a king, came down with its doe and two fawns and drank beside the armadillos. No such deer exist anywhere else upon earth, for the moose or elks which I have seen would hardly have reached its shoulders. Presently it gave a warning snort, and was off with its family among the reeds, while the armadillos also scuttled for shelter. A new-comer, a most monstrous animal, was coming down the path.

For a moment I wondered where I could have seen that ungainly shape, that arched back with triangular fringes along it, that strange bird-like head held close to the ground. Then it came back, to me. It was the stegosaurus—the very creature which Maple White had preserved in his sketch-book, and which had been the first object which arrested the attention of Challenger! There he was—perhaps the very specimen which the American artist had encountered. The ground shook beneath his tremendous weight, and his gulplings of water resounded through the still night. For five minutes he was so close to my rock that by stretching out my hand I could have touched the hideous waving hackles upon his back. Then he lumbered away and was lost among the boulders.

Looking at my watch, I saw that it was half-past two o'clock, and high time, therefore, that I started upon my homeward journey. There was no difficulty about the direction in which I should return for all along I had kept the little brook upon my left, and it opened into the central lake within a stone's-throw of the boulder upon which I had been lying. I set off, therefore, in high spirits, for I felt that I had done good work and was bringing back a fine budget of news for my companions. Foremost of all, of course, were the sight of the fiery caves and the certainty that some troglodytic race inhabited them. But besides that I could speak from experience of the central lake. I could testify that it was full of strange creatures, and I had seen several land forms of primeval life which we had not before encountered. I reflected as I walked that few men in the world could have spent a stranger night or added more to human knowledge in the course of it.

I was plodding up the slope, turning these thoughts over in my mind, and had reached a point which may have been half-way to home, when my mind was brought back to my own position by a strange noise behind me. It was something between a snore and a growl, low, deep, and exceedingly menacing. Some strange creature was evidently near me, but nothing could be seen, so I hastened more rapidly upon my way. I had traversed half a mile or so when suddenly the sound was repeated, still behind me, but louder and more menacing than before. My heart stood still within me as it flashed across me that the beast, whatever it was, must surely be after ME. My skin grew cold and my hair rose at the thought. That these monsters should tear each other to pieces was a part of the strange struggle for existence, but that they should turn upon modern man, that they should deliberately track and hunt down the predominant human, was a staggering and fearsome thought. I remembered again the blood-beslobbered face which we had seen in the

glare of Lord John's torch, like some horrible vision from the deepest circle of Dante's hell. With my knees shaking beneath me, I stood and glared with starting eyes down the moonlit path which lay behind me. All was quiet as in a dream landscape. Silver clearings and the black patches of the bushes—nothing else could I see. Then from out of the silence, imminent and threatening, there came once more that low, throaty croaking, far louder and closer than before. There could no longer be a doubt. Something was on my trail, and was closing in upon me every minute.

I stood like a man paralyzed, still staring at the ground which I had traversed. Then suddenly I saw it. There was movement among the bushes at the far end of the clearing which I had just traversed. A great dark shadow disengaged itself and hopped out into the clear moonlight. I say "hopped" advisedly, for the beast moved like a kangaroo, springing along in an erect position upon its powerful hind legs, while its front ones were held bent in front of it. It was of enormous size and power, like an erect elephant, but its movements, in spite of its bulk, were exceedingly alert. For a moment, as I saw its shape, I hoped that it was an iguanodon, which I knew to be harmless, but, ignorant as I was, I soon saw that this was a very different creature. Instead of the gentle, deer-shaped head of the great three-toed leaf-eater, this beast had a broad, squat, toad-like face like that which had alarmed us in our camp. His ferocious cry and the horrible energy of his pursuit both assured me that this was surely one of the great flesh-eating dinosaurs, the most terrible beasts which have ever walked this earth. As the huge brute loped along it dropped forward upon its fore-paws and brought its nose to the ground every twenty yards or so. It was smelling out my trail. Sometimes, for an instant, it was at fault. Then it would catch it up again and come bounding swiftly along the path I had taken.

Even now when I think of that nightmare the sweat breaks out upon my brow. What could I do? My useless fowling-piece was in my hand. What help could I get from that? I looked desperately round for some rock or tree, but I was in a bushy jungle with nothing higher than a sapling within sight, while I knew that the creature behind me could tear down an ordinary tree as though it were a reed. My only possible chance lay in flight. I could not move swiftly over the rough, broken ground, but as I looked round me in despair I saw a well-marked, hard-beaten path which ran across in front of me. We had seen several of the sort, the runs of various wild beasts, during our expeditions. Along this I could perhaps hold my own, for I was a fast runner, and in excellent condition. Flinging away my useless gun, I set myself to do such a half-mile as I have never done before or since. My limbs ached, my chest heaved, I felt that my throat would burst for want of air, and yet with that horror behind me I ran and I ran and ran. At last I paused, hardly able to move. For a moment I thought that I had thrown him off. The path lay still behind me. And then suddenly, with a crashing and a rending, a thudding of giant feet and a panting of monster lungs the beast was upon me once more. He was at my very heels. I was lost.

Madman that I was to linger so long before I fled! Up to then he had hunted by scent, and his movement was slow. But he had actually seen me as I started to run. From then onwards he had hunted by sight, for the path showed him where I had gone. Now, as he came round the curve, he was springing in great bounds. The moonlight shone upon his huge projecting eyes, the row of enormous teeth in his open mouth, and the gleaming fringe of claws upon his short, powerful forearms. With a scream of terror I turned and rushed wildly down the path. Behind me the thick, gasping breathing of the creature sounded louder and louder. His heavy footfall was beside me. Every instant I expected to feel his grip upon my back. And then suddenly there came a crash—I

was falling through space, and everything beyond was darkness and rest.

As I emerged from my unconsciousness—which could not, I think, have lasted more than a few minutes—I was aware of a most dreadful and penetrating smell. Putting out my hand in the darkness I came upon something which felt like a huge lump of meat, while my other hand closed upon a large bone. Up above me there was a circle of starlit sky, which showed me that I was lying at the bottom of a deep pit. Slowly I staggered to my feet and felt myself all over. I was stiff and sore from head to foot, but there was no limb which would not move, no joint which would not bend. As the circumstances of my fall came back into my confused brain, I looked up in terror, expecting to see that dreadful head silhouetted against the paling sky. There was no sign of the monster, however, nor could I hear any sound from above. I began to walk slowly round, therefore, feeling in every direction to find out what this strange place could be into which I had been so opportunely precipitated.

It was, as I have said, a pit, with sharply-sloping walls and a level bottom about twenty feet across. This bottom was littered with great gobbets of flesh, most of which was in the last state of putridity. The atmosphere was poisonous and horrible. After tripping and stumbling over these lumps of decay, I came suddenly against something hard, and I found that an upright post was firmly fixed in the centre of the hollow. It was so high that I could not reach the top of it with my hand, and it appeared to be covered with grease.

Suddenly I remembered that I had a tin box of wax-vestas in my pocket. Striking one of them, I was able at last to form some opinion of this place into which I had fallen. There could be no question as to its nature. It was a trap—made by the hand of man. The post in the centre, some nine feet long, was sharpened at the upper end, and was black with the stale blood of the creatures who had been impaled upon it. The remains scattered about were fragments of the victims, which had been cut away in order to clear the stake for the next who might blunder in. I remembered that Challenger had declared that man could not exist upon the plateau, since with his feeble weapons he could not hold his own against the monsters who roamed over it. But now it was clear enough how it could be done. In their narrow-mouthed caves the natives, whoever they might be, had refuges into which the huge saurians could not penetrate, while with their developed brains they were capable of setting such traps, covered with branches, across the paths which marked the run of the animals as would destroy them in spite of all their strength and activity. Man was always the master.

The sloping wall of the pit was not difficult for an active man to climb, but I hesitated long before I trusted myself within reach of the dreadful creature which had so nearly destroyed me. How did I know that he was not lurking in the nearest clump of bushes, waiting for my reappearance? I took heart, however, as I recalled a conversation between Challenger and Summerlee upon the habits of the great saurians. Both were agreed that the monsters were practically brainless, that there was no room for reason in their tiny cranial cavities, and that if they have disappeared from the rest of the world it was assuredly on account of their own stupidity, which made it impossible for them to adapt themselves to changing conditions.

To lie in wait for me now would mean that the creature had appreciated what had happened to me, and this in turn would argue some power connecting cause and effect. Surely it was more

likely that a brainless creature, acting solely by vague predatory instinct, would give up the chase when I disappeared, and, after a pause of astonishment, would wander away in search of some other prey? I clambered to the edge of the pit and looked over. The stars were fading, the sky was whitening, and the cold wind of morning blew pleasantly upon my face. I could see or hear nothing of my enemy. Slowly I climbed out and sat for a while upon the ground, ready to spring back into my refuge if any danger should appear. Then, reassured by the absolute stillness and by the growing light, I took my courage in both hands and stole back along the path which I had come. Some distance down it I picked up my gun, and shortly afterwards struck the brook which was my guide. So, with many a frightened backward glance, I made for home.

And suddenly there came something to remind me of my absent companions. In the clear, still morning air there sounded far away the sharp, hard note of a single rifle-shot. I paused and listened, but there was nothing more. For a moment I was shocked at the thought that some sudden danger might have befallen them. But then a simpler and more natural explanation came to my mind. It was now broad daylight. No doubt my absence had been noticed. They had imagined, that I was lost in the woods, and had fired this shot to guide me home. It is true that we had made a strict resolution against firing, but if it seemed to them that I might be in danger they would not hesitate. It was for me now to hurry on as fast as possible, and so to reassure them.

I was weary and spent, so my progress was not so fast as I wished; but at last I came into regions which I knew. There was the swamp of the pterodactyls upon my left; there in front of me was the glade of the iguanodons. Now I was in the last belt of trees which separated me from Fort Challenger. I raised my voice in a cheery shout to allay their fears. No answering greeting came back to me. My heart sank at that ominous stillness. I quickened my pace into a run. The zareba rose before me, even as I had left it, but the gate was open. I rushed in. In the cold, morning light it was a fearful sight which met my eyes. Our effects were scattered in wild confusion over the ground; my comrades had disappeared, and close to the smouldering ashes of our fire the grass was stained crimson with a hideous pool of blood.

I was so stunned by this sudden shock that for a time I must have nearly lost my reason. I have a vague recollection, as one remembers a bad dream, of rushing about through the woods all round the empty camp, calling wildly for my companions. No answer came back from the silent shadows. The horrible thought that I might never see them again, that I might find myself abandoned all alone in that dreadful place, with no possible way of descending into the world below, that I might live and die in that nightmare country, drove me to desperation. I could have torn my hair and beaten my head in my despair. Only now did I realize how I had learned to lean upon my companions, upon the serene self-confidence of Challenger, and upon the masterful, humorous coolness of Lord John Roxton. Without them I was like a child in the dark, helpless and powerless. I did not know which way to turn or what I should do first.

After a period, during which I sat in bewilderment, I set myself to try and discover what sudden misfortune could have befallen my companions. The whole disordered appearance of the camp showed that there had been some sort of attack, and the rifle-shot no doubt marked the time when it had occurred. That there should have been only one shot showed that it had been all over in an instant. The rifles still lay upon the ground, and one of them—Lord John's—had the empty cartridge in the breech. The blankets of Challenger and of Summerlee beside the fire suggested

that they had been asleep at the time. The cases of ammunition and of food were scattered about in a wild litter, together with our unfortunate cameras and plate-carriers, but none of them were missing. On the other hand, all the exposed provisions—and I remembered that there were a considerable quantity of them—were gone. They were animals, then, and not natives, who had made the inroad, for surely the latter would have left nothing behind.

But if animals, or some single terrible animal, then what had become of my comrades? A ferocious beast would surely have destroyed them and left their remains. It is true that there was that one hideous pool of blood, which told of violence. Such a monster as had pursued me during the night could have carried away a victim as easily as a cat would a mouse. In that case the others would have followed in pursuit. But then they would assuredly have taken their rifles with them. The more I tried to think it out with my confused and weary brain the less could I find any plausible explanation. I searched round in the forest, but could see no tracks which could help me to a conclusion. Once I lost myself, and it was only by good luck, and after an hour of wandering, that I found the camp once more.

Suddenly a thought came to me and brought some little comfort to my heart. I was not absolutely alone in the world. Down at the bottom of the cliff, and within call of me, was waiting the faithful Zambo. I went to the edge of the plateau and looked over. Sure enough, he was squatting among his blankets beside his fire in his little camp. But, to my amazement, a second man was seated in front of him. For an instant my heart leaped for joy, as I thought that one of my comrades had made his way safely down. But a second glance dispelled the hope. The rising sun shone red upon the man's skin. He was an Indian. I shouted loudly and waved my handkerchief. Presently Zambo looked up, waved his hand, and turned to ascend the pinnacle. In a short time he was standing close to me and listening with deep distress to the story which I told him.

“Devil got them for sure, Massa Malone,” said he. “You got into the devil's country, sah, and he take you all to himself. You take advice, Massa Malone, and come down quick, else he get you as well.”

“How can I come down, Zambo?”

“You get creepers from trees, Massa Malone. Throw them over here. I make fast to this stump, and so you have bridge.”

“We have thought of that. There are no creepers here which could bear us.”

“Send for ropes, Massa Malone.”

“Who can I send, and where?”

“Send to Indian villages, sah. Plenty hide rope in Indian village. Indian down below; send him.”

“Who is he?”

“One of our Indians. Other ones beat him and take away his pay. He come back to us. Ready

now to take letter, bring rope,—anything.”

To take a letter! Why not? Perhaps he might bring help; but in any case he would ensure that our lives were not spent for nothing, and that news of all that we had won for Science should reach our friends at home. I had two completed letters already waiting. I would spend the day in writing a third, which would bring my experiences absolutely up to date. The Indian could bear this back to the world. I ordered Zambo, therefore, to come again in the evening, and I spent my miserable and lonely day in recording my own adventures of the night before. I also drew up a note, to be given to any white merchant or captain of a steam-boat whom the Indian could find, imploring them to see that ropes were sent to us, since our lives must depend upon it. These documents I threw to Zambo in the evening, and also my purse, which contained three English sovereigns. These were to be given to the Indian, and he was promised twice as much if he returned with the ropes.

So now you will understand, my dear Mr. McArdle, how this communication reaches you, and you will also know the truth, in case you never hear again from your unfortunate correspondent. To-night I am too weary and too depressed to make my plans. To-morrow I must think out some way by which I shall keep in touch with this camp, and yet search round for any traces of my unhappy friends.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XVI: Yolara of Muria vs. the O'Keefe

I awakened with all the familiar, homely sensation of a shade having been pulled up in a darkened room. I thrilled with a wonderful sense of deep rest and restored resiliency. The ebon shadow had vanished from above and down into the room was pouring the silvery light. From the fountain pool came a mighty splashing and shouts of laughter. I jumped and drew the curtain. O'Keefe and Rador were swimming a wild race; the dwarf like an otter, out-distancing and playing around the Irishman at will.

Had that overpowering sleep—and now I confess that my struggle against it had been largely inspired by fear that it was the abnormal slumber which Throckmartin had described as having heralded the approach of the Dweller before it had carried away Thora and Stanton—had that sleep been after all nothing but natural reaction of tired nerves and brains?

And that last vision of the golden-eyed girl bending over Larry? Had that also been a delusion of an overstressed mind? Well, it might have been, I could not tell. At any rate, I decided, I would speak about it to O'Keefe once we were alone again—and then giving myself up to the urge of buoyant well-being I shouted like a boy, stripped and joined the two in the pool. The water was warm and I felt the unwonted tingling of life in every vein increase; something from it seemed to pulse through the skin, carrying a clean vigorous vitality that toned every fibre. Tiring at last, we swam to the edge and drew ourselves out. The green dwarf quickly clothed himself and Larry rather carefully donned his uniform.

“The Afyo Maie has summoned us, Doc,” he said. “We’re to—well—I suppose you’d call it breakfast with her. After that, Rador tells me, we’re to have a session with the Council of Nine. I suppose Yolara is as curious as any lady of—the upper world, as you might put it—and just naturally can’t wait,” he added.

He gave himself a last shake, patted the automatic hidden under his left arm, whistled cheerfully.

“After you, my dear Alphonse,” he said to Rador, with a low bow. The dwarf laughed, bent in an absurd imitation of Larry’s mocking courtesy and started ahead of us to the house of the priestess. When he had gone a little way on the orchid-walled path I whispered to O'Keefe:

“Larry, when you were falling off to sleep—did you think you saw anything?”

“See anything!” he grinned. “Doc, sleep hit me like a Hun shell. I thought they were pulling the gas on us. I—I had some intention of bidding you tender farewells,” he continued, half sheepishly. “I think I did start ‘em, didn’t I?”

I nodded.

“But wait a minute—” he hesitated. “I had a queer sort of dream—”

““What was it?” I asked eagerly,

“Well,” he answered slowly, “I suppose it was because I’d been thinking of—Golden Eyes. Anyway, I thought she came through the wall and leaned over me—yes, and put one of those long white hands of hers on my head—I couldn’t raise my lids—but in some queer way I could see her. Then it got real dreamish. Why do you ask?”

Rador turned back toward us,

“Later,” I answered, “Not now. When we’re alone.”

But through me went a little glow of reassurance. Whatever the maze through which we were moving; whatever of menacing evil lurking there—the Golden Girl was clearly watching over us; watching with whatever unknown powers she could muster.

We passed the pillared entrance; went through a long bowered corridor and stopped before a door that seemed to be sliced from a monolith of pale jade—high, narrow, set in a wall of opal.

Rador stamped twice and the same supernally sweet, silver bell tones of—yesterday, I must call it, although in that place of eternal day the term is meaningless—bade us enter. The door slipped aside. The chamber was small, the opal walls screening it on three sides, the black opacity covering it, the fourth side opening out into a delicious little walled garden—a mass of the fragrant, luminous blooms and delicately coloured fruit. Facing it was a small table of reddish wood and from the omnipresent cushions heaped around it arose to greet us—Yolara.

Larry drew in his breath with an involuntary gasp of admiration and bowed low. My own admiration was as frank—and the priestess was well pleased with our homage.

She was swathed in the filmy, half-revelant webs, now of palest blue. The corn-silk hair was caught within a wide-meshed golden net in which sparkled tiny brilliants, like blended sapphires and diamonds. Her own azure eyes sparkled as brightly as they, and I noted again in their clear depths the half-eager approval as they rested upon O’Keefe’s lithe, well-knit figure and his keen, clean-cut face. The high-arched, slender feet rested upon soft sandals whose gauzy withes laced the exquisitely formed leg to just below the dimpled knee.

“Some giddy wonder!” exclaimed Larry, looking at me and placing a hand over his heart. “Put her on a New York roof and she’d empty Broadway. Take the cue from me, Doc.”

He turned to Yolara, whose face was somewhat puzzled.

“I said, O lady whose shining hair is a web for hearts, that in our world your beauty would dazzle the sight of men as would a little woman sun!” he said, in the florid imagery to which the tongue lends itself so well.

A flush stole up through the translucent skin. The blue eyes softened and she waved us toward the cushions. Black-haired maids stole in, placing before us the fruits, the little loaves and a

steaming drink somewhat the colour and odour of chocolate. I was conscious of outrageous hunger.

“What are you named, strangers?” she asked.

“This man is named Goodwin,” said O’Keefe. “As for me, call me Larry.”

“Nothing like getting acquainted quick,” he said to me—but kept his eyes upon Yolará as though he were voicing another honeyed phrase. And so she took it, for: “You must teach me your tongue,” she murmured.

“Then shall I have two words where now I have one to tell you of your loveliness,” he answered.

“And also that’ll take time,” he spoke to me. “Essential occupation out of which we can’t be drafted to make these fun-loving folk any Roman holiday. Get me!”

“Larree,” mused Yolará. “I like the sound. It is sweet—” and indeed it was as she spoke it.

“And what is your land named, Larree?” she continued. “And Goodwin’s?” She caught the sound perfectly.

“My land, O lady of loveliness, is two—Ireland and America; his but one—America.”

She repeated the two names—slowly, over and over. We seized the opportunity to attack the food; halting half guiltily as she spoke again.

“Oh, but you are hungry!” she cried. “Eat then.” She leaned her chin upon her hands and regarded us, whole fountains of questions brimming up in her eyes.

“How is it, Larree, that you have two countries and Goodwin but one?” she asked, at last unable to keep silent longer.

“I was born in Ireland; he in America. But I have dwelt long in his land and my heart loves each,” he said.

She nodded, understandingly.

“Are all the men of Ireland like you, Larree? As all the men here are like Lugur or Rador? I like to look at you,” she went on, with naïve frankness. “I am tired of men like Lugur and Rador. But they are strong,” she added, swiftly. “Lugur can hold up ten in his two arms and raise six with but one hand.”

We could not understand her numerals and she raised white fingers to illustrate.

“That is little, O lady, to the men of Ireland,” replied O’Keefe. “Lo, I have seen one of my race hold up ten times ten of our—what call you that swift thing in which Rador brought us here?”

“Corial,” said she.

“Hold up ten times twenty of our corials with but two fingers—and these corials of ours—”

“Coria,” said she.

“And these coria of ours are each greater in weight than ten of yours. Yes, and I have seen another with but one blow of his hand raise hell!

“And so I have,” he murmured to me. “And both at Forty-second and Fifth Avenue, N. Y.—U. S. A.”

Yolara considered all this with manifest doubt.

“Hell?” she inquired at last. “I know not the word.”

“Well,” answered O’Keefe. “Say Muria then. In many ways they are, I gather, O heart’s delight, one and the same.”

Now the doubt in the blue eyes was strong indeed. She shook her head.

“None of our men can do that!” she answered, at length. “Nor do I think you could, Larree.”

“Oh, no,” said Larry easily. “I never tried to be that strong. I fly,” he added, casually.

The priestess rose to her feet, gazing at him with startled eyes.

“Fly!” she repeated incredulously. “Like a Zitia? A bird?”

Larry nodded—and then seeing the dawning command in her eyes, went on hastily.

“Not with my own wings, Yolara. In a—a corial that moves through—what’s the word for air, Doc—well, through this—” He made a wide gesture up toward the nebulous haze above us. He took a pencil and on a white cloth made a hasty sketch of an airplane. “In a—a corial like this—” She regarded the sketch gravely, thrust a hand down into her girdle and brought forth a keen-bladed poniard; cut Larry’s markings out and placed the fragment carefully aside.

“That I can understand,” she said.

“Remarkably intelligent young woman,” muttered O’Keefe. “Hope I’m not giving anything away—but she had me.”

“But what are your women like, Larree? Are they like me? And how many have loved you?” she whispered.

“In all Ireland and America there is none like you, Yolara,” he answered. “And take that any way you please,” he muttered in English. She took it, it was evident, as it most pleased her.

“Do you have goddesses?” she asked.

“Every woman in Ireland and America, is a goddess”; thus Larry.

“Now that I do not believe.” There was both anger and mockery in her eyes. “I know women, Larree—and if that were so there would be no peace for men.”

“There isn’t!” replied he. The anger died out and she laughed, sweetly, understandingly.

“And which goddess do you worship, Larree?”

“You!” said Larry O’Keefe boldly.

“Larry! Larry!” I whispered. “Be careful. It’s high explosive.”

But the priestess was laughing—little trills of sweet bell notes; and pleasure was in each note.

“You are indeed bold, Larree,” she said, “to offer me your worship. Yet am I pleased by your boldness. Still—Lugur is strong; and you are not of those who—what did you say—have tried. And your wings are not here—Larree!”

Again her laughter rang out. The Irishman flushed; it was touché for Yolara!

“Fear not for me with Lugur,” he said, grimly. “Rather fear for him!”

The laughter died; she looked at him searchingly; a little enigmatic smile about her mouth—so sweet and so cruel.

“Well—we shall see,” she murmured. “You say you battle in your world. With what?”

“Oh, with this and with that,” answered Larry, airily. “We manage—”

“Have you the Keth—I mean that with which I sent Songar into the nothingness?” she asked swiftly.

“See what she’s driving at?” O’Keefe spoke to me, swiftly. “Well I do! But here’s where the O’Keefe lands.

“I said,” he turned to her, “O voice of silver fire, that your spirit is high even as your beauty—and searches out men’s souls as does your loveliness their hearts. And now listen, Yolara, for what I speak is truth”—into his eyes came the far-away gaze; into his voice the Irish softness—”Lo, in my land of Ireland, this many of your life’s length ago—see”—he raised his ten fingers, clenched and unclenched them times twenty—”the mighty men of my race, the Taitha-

da-Dainn, could send men out into the nothingness even as do you with the Keth. And this they did by their harpings, and by words spoken—words of power, O Yolara, that have their power still—and by pipings and by slaying sounds.

“There was Cravetheen who played swift flames from his harp, flying flames that ate those they were sent against. And there was Dalua, of Hy Brasil, whose pipes played away from man and beast and all living things their shadows—and at last played them to shadows too, so that wherever Dalua went his shadows that had been men and beast followed like a storm of little rustling leaves; yea, and Bel the Harper, who could make women’s hearts run like wax and men’s hearts flame to ashes and whose harpings could shatter strong cliffs and bow great trees to the sod—”

His eyes were bright, dream-filled; she shrank a little from him, faint pallor under the perfect skin.

“I say to you, Yolara, that these things were and are—in Ireland.” His voice rang strong. “And I have seen men as many as those that are in your great chamber this many times over”—he clenched his hands once more, perhaps a dozen times—”blasted into nothingness before your Keth could even have touched them. Yea—and rocks as mighty as those through which we came lifted up and shattered before the lids could fall over your blue eyes. And this is truth, Yolara—all truth! Stay—have you that little cone of the Keth with which you destroyed Songar?”

She nodded, gazing at him, fascinated, fear and puzzlement contending.

“Then use it.” He took a vase of crystal from the table, placed it on the threshold that led into the garden. “Use it on this—and I will show you.”

“I will use it upon one of the ladala—” she began eagerly.

The exaltation dropped from him; there was a touch of horror in the eyes he turned to her; her own dropped before it.

“It shall be as you say,” she said hurriedly. She drew the shining cone from her breast; levelled it at the vase. The green ray leaped forth, spread over the crystal, but before its action could even be begun, a flash of light shot from O’Keefe’s hand, his automatic spat and the trembling vase flew into fragments. As quickly as he had drawn it, he thrust the pistol back into place and stood there empty handed, looking at her sternly. From the anteroom came shouting, a rush of feet.

Yolara’s face was white, her eyes strained—but her voice was unshaken as she called to the clamouring guards:

“It is nothing—go to your places!”

But when the sound of their return had ceased she stared tensely at the Irishman—then looked again at the shattered vase.

“It is true!” she cried, “but see, the Keth is—alive!”

I followed her pointing finger. Each broken bit of the crystal was vibrating, shaking its particles out into space. Broken it the bullet of Larry’s had—but not released it from the grip of the disintegrating force. The priestess’s face was triumphant.

“But what matters it, O shining urn of beauty—what matters it to the vase that is broken what happens to its fragments?” asked Larry, gravely—and pointedly.

The triumph died from her face and for a space she was silent; brooding.

“Next,” whispered O’Keefe to me. “Lots of surprises in the little box; keep your eye on the opening and see what comes out.”

We had not long to wait. There was a sparkle of anger about Yolara, something too of injured pride. She clapped her hands; whispered to the maid who answered her summons, and then sat back regarding us, maliciously.

“You have answered me as to your strength—but you have not proved it; but the Keth you have answered. Now answer this!” she said.

She pointed out into the garden. I saw a flowering branch bend and snap as though a hand had broken it—but no hand was there! Saw then another and another bend and break, a little tree sway and fall—and closer and closer to us came the trail of snapping boughs while down into the garden poured the silvery light revealing—nothing! Now a great ewer beside a pillar rose swiftly in air and hurled itself crashing at my feet. Cushions close to us swirled about as though in the vortex of a whirlwind.

And unseen hands held my arms in a mighty clutch fast to my sides, another gripped my throat and I felt a needle-sharp poniard point pierce my shirt, touch the skin just over my heart!

“Larry!” I cried, despairingly. I twisted my head; saw that he too was caught in this grip of the invisible. But his face was calm, even amused.

“Keep cool, Doc!” he said. “Remember—she wants to learn the language!”

Now from Yolara burst chime upon chime of mocking laughter. She gave a command—the hands loosened, the poniard withdrew from my heart; suddenly as I had been caught I was free—and unpleasantly weak and shaky.

“Have you that in Ireland, Larree!” cried the priestess—and once more trembled with laughter.

“A good play, Yolara.” His voice was as calm as his face. “But they did that in Ireland even before Dalua piped away his first man’s shadow. And in Goodwin’s land they make ships—coria that go on water—so you can pass by them and see only sea and sky; and those water coria are each of them many times greater than this whole palace of yours.”

But the priestess laughed on.

“It did get me a little,” whispered Larry. “That wasn’t quite up to my mark. But God! If we could find that trick out and take it back with us!”

“Not so, Larree!” Yolara gasped, through her laughter. “Not so! Goodwin’s cry betrayed you!”

Her good humour had entirely returned; she was like a mischievous child pleased over some successful trick; and like a child she cried—“I’ll show you!”—signalled again; whispered to the maid who, quickly returning, laid before her a long metal case. Yolara took from her girdle something that looked like a small pencil, pressed it and shot a thin stream of light for all the world like an electric flash, upon its hasp. The lid flew open. Out of it she drew three flat, oval crystals, faint rose in hue. She handed one to O’Keefe and one to me.

“Look!” she commanded, placing the third before her own eyes. I peered through the stone and instantly there leaped into sight, out of thin air—six grinning dwarfs! Each was covered from top of head to soles of feet in a web so tenuous that through it their bodies were plain. The gauzy stuff seemed to vibrate—its strands to run together like quick-silver. I snatched the crystal from my eyes and—the chamber was empty! Put it back—and there were the grinning six!

Yolara gave another sign and they disappeared, even from the crystals.

“It is what they wear, Larree,” explained Yolara, graciously. “It is something that came to us from—the Ancient Ones. But we have so few”—she sighed.

“Such treasures must be two-edged swords, Yolara,” commented O’Keefe. “For how know you that one within them creeps not to you with hand eager to strike?”

“There is no danger,” she said indifferently. “I am the keeper of them.”

She mused for a space, then abruptly:

“And now no more. You two are to appear before the Council at a certain time—but fear nothing. You, Goodwin, go with Rador about our city and increase your wisdom. But you, Larree, await me here in my garden—” she smiled at him, provocatively—maliciously, too. “For shall not one who has resisted a world of goddesses be given all chance to worship when at last he finds his own?”

She laughed—whole-heartedly and was gone. And at that moment I liked Yolara better than ever I had before and—alas—better than ever I was to in the future.

I noted Rador standing outside the open jade door and started to go, but O’Keefe caught me by the arm.

“Wait a minute,” he urged. “About Golden Eyes—you were going to tell me something—it’s

been on my mind all through that little sparring match.”

I told him of the vision that had passed through my closing lids. He listened gravely and then laughed.

“Hell of a lot of privacy in this place!” he grinned. “Ladies who can walk through walls and others with regular invisible cloaks to let ‘em flit wherever they please. Oh, well, don’t let it get on your nerves, Doc. Remember—everything’s natural! That robe stuff is just camouflage of course. But Lord, if we could only get a piece of it!”

“The material simply admits all light-vibrations, or perhaps curves them, just as the opacities cut them off,” I answered. “A man under the X-ray is partly invisible; this makes him wholly so. He doesn’t register, as the people of the motion-picture profession say.”

“Camouflage,” repeated Larry. “And as for the Shining One—Say!” he snorted. “I’d like to set the O’Keefe banshee up against it. I’ll bet that old resourceful Irish body would give it the first three bites and a strangle hold and wallop it before it knew it had ‘em. Oh! Wow! Boy Howdy!”

I heard him still chuckling gleefully over this vision as I passed along the opal wall with the green dwarf.

A shell was awaiting us. I paused before entering it to examine the polished surface of runway and great road. It was obsidian—volcanic glass of pale emerald, unflawed, translucent, with no sign of block or juncture. I examined the shell.

“What makes it go?” I asked Rador. At a word from him the driver touched a concealed spring and an aperture appeared beneath the control-lever, of which I have spoken in a preceding chapter. Within was a small cube of black crystal, through whose sides I saw, dimly, a rapidly revolving, glowing ball, not more than two inches in diameter. Beneath the cube was a curiously shaped, slender cylinder winding down into the lower body of the Nautilus whorl.

“Watch!” said Rador. He motioned me into the vehicle and took a place beside me. The driver touched the lever; a stream of coruscations flew from the ball down into the cylinder. The shell started smoothly, and as the tiny torrent of shining particles increased it gathered speed.

“The corial does not touch the road,” explained Rador. “It is lifted so far”—he held his forefinger and thumb less than a sixteenth of an inch apart—“above it.”

And perhaps here is the best place to explain the activation of the shells or coria. The force utilized was atomic energy. Passing from the whirling ball the ions darted through the cylinder to two bands of a peculiar metal affixed to the base of the vehicles somewhat like skids of a sled. Impinging upon these they produced a partial negation of gravity, lifting the shell slightly, and at the same time creating a powerful repulsive force or thrust that could be directed backward, forward, or sidewise at the will of the driver. The creation of this energy and the mechanism of its utilization were, briefly, as follows:

[Dr. Goodwin's lucid and exceedingly comprehensive description of this extraordinary mechanism has been deleted by the Executive Council of the International Association of Science as too dangerously suggestive to scientists of the Central European Powers with which we were so recently at war. It is allowable, however, to state that his observations are in the possession of experts in this country, who are, unfortunately, hampered in their research not only by the scarcity of the radioactive elements that we know, but also by the lack of the element or elements unknown to us that entered into the formation of the fiery ball within the cube of black crystal. Nevertheless, as the principle is so clear, it is believed that these difficulties will ultimately be overcome.—J. B. K., President, I. A. of S.]

The wide, glistening road was gay with the coria. They darted in and out of the gardens; within them the fair-haired, extraordinarily beautiful women on their cushions were like princesses of Elfland, caught in gorgeous fairy webs, resting within the hearts of flowers. In some shells were flaxen-haired dwarfish men of Lugur's type; sometimes black-polled brother officers of Rador; often raven-tressed girls, plainly hand-maidens of the women; and now and then beauties of the lower folk went by with one of the blond dwarfs.

We swept around the turn that made of the jewel-like roadway an enormous horseshoe and, speedily, upon our right the cliffs through which we had come in our journey from the Moon Pool began to march forward beneath their mantles of moss. They formed a gigantic abutment, a titanic salient. It had been from the very front of this salient's invading angle that we had emerged; on each side of it the precipices, faintly glowing, drew back and vanished into distance.

The slender, graceful bridges under which we skimmed ended at openings in the upflung, far walls of verdure. Each had its little garrison of soldiers. Through some of the openings a rivulet of the green obsidian river passed. These were roadways to the farther country, to the land of the ladala, Rador told me; adding that none of the lesser folk could cross into the pavilioned city unless summoned or with pass.

We turned the bend of the road and flew down that farther emerald ribbon we had seen from the great oval. Before us rose the shining cliffs and the lake. A half-mile, perhaps, from these the last of the bridges flung itself. It was more massive and about it hovered a spirit of ancientness lacking in the other spans; also its garrison was larger and at its base the tangent way was guarded by two massive structures, somewhat like blockhouses, between which it ran. Something about it aroused in me an intense curiosity.

"Where does that road lead, Rador?" I asked.

"To the one place above all of which I may not tell you, Goodwin," he answered. And again I wondered.

We skimmed slowly out upon the great pier. Far to the left was the prismatic, rainbow curtain between the Cyclopean pillars. On the white waters graceful shells—lacustrian replicas of the Elf chariots—swam, but none was near that distant web of wonder.

“Rador—what is that?” I asked.

“It is the Veil of the Shining One!” he answered slowly.

Was the Shining One that which we named the Dweller?

“What is the Shining One?” I cried, eagerly. Again he was silent. Nor did he speak until we had turned on our homeward way.

And lively as my interest, my scientific curiosity, were—I was conscious suddenly of acute depression. Beautiful, wondrously beautiful this place was—and yet in its wonder dwelt a keen edge of menace, of unease—of inexplicable, inhuman woe; as though in a secret garden of God a soul should sense upon it the gaze of some lurking spirit of evil which some way, somehow, had crept into the sanctuary and only bided its time to spring.

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