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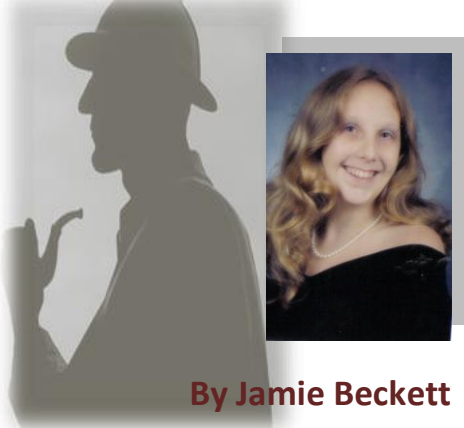
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MYSTERY WEEKEND



By Jamie Beckett

It wasn't your stereotypical dark and stormy night, but it was full of mystery and tension. The people gathered in the room at Morgan's Gate were all staring at each other suspiciously; each convinced that the other was up to no good. The man at the center of the room was John Myers, a retired police detective. He was a tall man who didn't quite look his sixty years. There was barely any gray showing in his hair and he carried himself confidently. He looked around at each of the people gathered, taking them all in with a trained eye.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The group had shown up for a murder mystery weekend the night before and had been introduced to the detective who was going to be helping with the "investigation". The guests had been excited to get the show going. None of them had ever been to one before and they couldn't wait to get their chance to play detective. There was one problem, though. One of the guests had actually turned up dead and the little inn they were staying at was pretty remote so Myers had taken charge of the situation until the authorities arrived. He was well known and respected in the area and had finally retired the year before after 40 years of service. Forced out was more like it. He had reached the magic age and the city had decided it was time for someone else to take over.

There was another problem as well. The man, who'd died, Jefferson Dawes, wasn't exactly missed among them.

He'd spent the entire day driving people crazy with his demanding and snobbish attitude. He'd managed to piss off pretty much every person assembled that night and they were nervous. Detective Myers had a way of making you feel guilty even if you hadn't actually done anything wrong and they were convinced he was already planning to have them all dragged in for the murder.

Sydney Phillips was one of the assembled guests and probably the most nervous. He'd been working as Mr. Dawes personal assistant for a few years now and had just gotten into an argument with him a couple of days before over a mistake that had been made in the office. Sydney had insisted it wasn't his fault, but old man Dawes wouldn't listen. He'd been lucky to walk out of the man's office with his job intact. He definitely hadn't held his tongue that day. Myers had been very interested in the fact the two worked together. Sydney was there because Dawes wanted to try and get some work done so the weekend wouldn't be a total waste to him. He also didn't like doing anything for himself, something that had also begun to get under Sydney's skin. It was one thing to set up Mr. Dawes' appointments and make photocopies of important papers and another thing entirely to walk his nasty, badly trained dog every day or do the man's laundry. Because of that Sydney had left out the little detail of their fight. Myers had nodded and made a note in his little notepad, looking as though he knew Sydney was holding back a little.

The next one to get interviewed was a girl by the name of Susan Andrews. She was a college student who'd been planning to write a story for her school's newspaper about the event. She had been asking questions of everyone all day and had gotten into an argument with Myers herself. He felt she was nothing more than some snot-nosed punk that wasn't worth his time. He hadn't been interested in any of it, really. He'd just come because he'd wanted to shut his son, who was running the place, up. That and the free room and

food... he was known to be a bit of a cheapskate. When he refused her interview as rudely as possible, she hadn't been able to stop herself from giving the man a piece of her mind. He was a nasty man and she wouldn't tolerate being treated so rudely. Her fiery temper was well-known among her friends and had caused her a lot of trouble over the years. Sometimes she couldn't quite control herself when she really got set off. Mr. Myers had asked them all about her little blowup at length. She tried to play down the whole incident, but others had been more than happy to tell all. She just gave them irritated looks behind Myer's back.

The first one that had actually caught Myer's attention was the man's son, Bradley. Most murder victims had some sort of relationship with their killers and a son of a rich man had lots of motivation especially when their relationship wasn't the best at times. Myers was a cold man and had ruled his home with an iron fist. Only the best was acceptable to him and often Bradley fell a little short. They'd actually argued many times over the years about his starting the inn. To his father, the inn was a small time operation that wasn't worth the money he was putting into it. Bradley was determined to prove his father wrong any way he could. He may never get an actual apology from the man, but maybe he'd manage to shut the man up from now on. The constant arguments had been tough, not to mention all the snide remarks he'd had to put up with.

Next on Myers' list was Amanda Jenkins. She was a slightly older woman who had been invited to the weekend event by her friend Nancy. They were big mystery buffs and would spend hours reading mystery stories and watching TV Crime Shows hoping to spot someone familiar. Sometimes they would solve the fictional mysteries before the detective would. As soon as they'd arrived, they ended up fighting with Dawes. They'd reserved a room several weeks ago and were looking forward to the great view they were going to have. Unfortunately,

when Myers had arrived and saw his own room, he insisted on being moved. He wanted theirs and wouldn't let up until they finally gave in. He'd also insisted on having their table in the dining room the night before. Amanda wasn't one to put up with rude behavior and had given him a real earful, much to the delight of the other guests. He'd been furious and had insisted on making them leave. He hadn't been too happy when his son had informed him that the bus that brought everyone here wouldn't be back until the end of the weekend. There was nothing he could do, short of making the two women walk miles in the dark and cold to get to the bus terminal where Amanda's car was parked. That was part of the gimmick- the isolation. The women couldn't help but smile smugly as he stormed off.

"Alright, every one, let's all have a seat and relax." Myers was the first to sit, finishing his notes. "We're going to be here awhile so you may as well get comfortable. No one will be leaving this room until the cops have gotten here and gone over the scene."

The group all took his lead, not saying a word. The tension in the air was so thick it was almost suffocating. Everyone was looking at each other with suspicious eyes, not sure who to trust and where they stood in the investigation themselves. While Myers had expressed more interest in the son and Dawes' assistant, he clearly thought each of them could have committed the crime and he wasn't shy about letting them know it. Bradley could imagine the man sitting in a police station somewhere playing the bad cop. The former Detective was an intimidating presence who also gave off an air of competence. One thing was for sure... with this guy leading the investigation, someone was going to get caught.

Several of the people gathered; sat back in the plush old-fashioned furniture, trying to get as comfortable as possible. Others sat straight on the edges of their seats and seemed to watch the clock, almost willing it to do something. Whether it was to speed it up or slow down, no one could tell. Some had their eyes on the detective, knowing that the

bag he held beside him contained the murder weapon. He wouldn't let anyone near it, though, or get a look. No one was quite sure if that was normal or if he was just trying to add to the tension and maybe make the killer break. Either way, everyone's eyes kept straying to it now and then.

Finally, after many hours sitting in the quiet room, there was a knock at the door. Detective Myers got up and looked out the window, seeing several vehicles with flashing lights on outside. Not wanting to leave the room (and the suspects) unattended for even a minute, he opened the window and tossed a key down to the police that Bradley had provided. Myers had insisted on the door being locked so no one could sneak in and mess with the scene at all.

Within minutes, the door to their room opened and in walked several uniformed officers, as well as a detective who was dressed similarly to Myers, a rumpled suit and shoes that had seen far better days. The man who greeted Myers looked about ten years younger and overworked. He nodded as Myers introduced everyone in the group to him.

"So what do we have here?"

"Well, around one this morning, I heard a noise from one of the rooms and decided to investigate. I came across a deceased male, Caucasian and in his 60s. He was laying in the third room to the right." He handed the man a bag. "I found the item inside lying in the room. It appears to be the murder weapon."

The other detective nodded, looking to the men beside him. "Go over the room for me."

"Yes, Sir," the older one answered. They both left and many of the eyes in the room followed.

"I interviewed everyone here," Myers continued. He handed the notes over. "This is what I've gotten so far."

The other detective glanced over them. "Thank you, Detective Myers. I'll take

it from here. Why don't you go ahead and go home? I have an extra patrol car that can take you to pick up your car."

Myers nodded. "Thank you. It's been a long night. Just let me get my things and I'll be ready to go."

"Of course... You can meet officer Peters at the front door."

Myers nodded again and turned to collect his bags. He chatted with Officer Peters the whole way to the bus station. He was a nice man, a rookie fascinated by all the old stories of his days on the force.

A couple of hours later, they pulled into the bus station and Myers picked up his bags. "Thanks for the ride young man. I appreciate it."

"No problem, Sir. You have a good night now."

Myers walked across the parking lot and set the bag in the trunk. He started the car and steered himself out of the bus depot. *What a night*, he thought. He was anxious to get home and count his money from tonight. He'd been careful not to take much, just enough to make putting up with that old man worth it. He'd deserved what he got...

PRIVATE TAHA



By Etheridge G. Lovett

"Listen up Marines; we're heading into the city of Fallujah. As you all know, many innocent Iraqis have already lost their lives to the insurgents. This is why it is necessary for us

to help crush their aggressive infiltration. I want all of you to remember your training and cover for each other. Do you hear me Marines?" Captain Richard Brown questioned, his deep voice competing with the loud twirling sound of the Chinook helicopter blades.

"Yes—Sir!" the platoon of Marines shouted back to their fearless leader.

"Private TAHA, since you recently arrived, I want you to stay with my squad until you learn the ropes out here," Captain Brown ordered.

"I'm at your disposal, Sir," Private TAHA replied in an almost child-like voice.

The other Marines snickered as one of them blurted out, "I'm at your disposal? What kind of response is that for a Marine?"

Unable to hold back their laughter, the Marines exploded with jeers and taunts. Private TAHA dropped his head, remaining silent.

"Alright, that's enough clowning around... Calm down and get focused... Let's keep our minds on the mission at hand," Captain Brown reminded.

Some of the Marines continued to laugh as they checked their weapons, ammunition and other combat gear.

Feeling sympathy for young Private TAHA, Staff Sergeant Ronald Smith approached him saying, "I gather that this is your first mission to Iraq."

"Yes, it is," TAHA answered.

"Don't let the boys get to you. They're like a bunch of children sometimes, but they'll give their lives for you when the time comes," Sergeant Smith explained, patting TAHA upon the shoulder.

"So will I," TAHA said to Sergeant Smith as he continued checking his combat gear.

"So, where's your hometown?" Sergeant Smith asked in an attempt to create conversation.

"The Pentagon," TAHA answered.

"So, you served at the Pentagon before you arrived here?" Sergeant Smith asked.

"No, the Pentagon is my home... I was born there," TAHA answered, releasing a slight smile. He then tightened the straps on his ammunition vest.

"Well, so much for an honest, in-depth conversation," Sergeant Smith said.

"Listen up Marines; we're now crossing into the city of Fallujah. Everyone look alive and put on your helmets and prepare to exit the Chinook as soon as we land," Captain Brown said to his platoon.

No sooner than he finished his statement, something struck the side of the helicopter with a deafening blow. The smell of fuel permeated the aircraft, filling everyone's nostrils. Thick, black smoke billowed from the helicopter spiraling radically towards the ground.

"Everyone hang on, we're going down!" One of the pilots shouted back in the cabin.

The Marines held on with all the strength they could muster. The heavily damaged helicopter struck the earth with a bone-crushing thud, instantly killing several of the Marines on board. Fire and smoke spread throughout the downed aircraft. Only ten Marines emerged unscathed, but confused and dazed. Once they regained their senses, with no thought for their own safety, the surviving brave Marines scrambled to pull the bodies of their comrades away from the rising flames. They covered their dead with tents gathered from the wreckage. Many of the Marines wept bitterly for their fallen friends. They watched aimlessly at the surreal and gruesome scene playing out before them like an epic horror flick.

"Tell me, what the hell happened?" Captain Brown asked in anger while looking upon the bloody carnage.

"By the large hole in the side of craft, it looks like we were hit by a shoulder fired missile, Sir," Sergeant Smith informed.

Many of the surviving Marines fought back their tears for the loss of their friends, but it was useless. The warm tears ran like a summer rain shower.

Like flying arrows cutting through the wind, machinegun fire whizzed past them through the black smoke rising up from the helicopter's charred remains.

"The insurgents are coming after us and we're sitting ducks out here... Follow me, let's run for cover and set up shop inside that old bombed out building up ahead and return fire!" Captain Brown shouted.

The Marines ran with their gear and weapons in hand until they made it safely inside the bombed out, concrete edifice.

"Sergeant Smith, take half of the men and set up a sniper's nest upstairs, I'll setup the remaining Marines down here. Anyone who comes within several yards of this building, I want you and your men to cut 'em in half with the .5 caliber Barrets and M249 SAWs, you got that Marine?" questioned Captain Brown.

"I got it, Sir!" Sergeant Smith shouted back. He was determined to survive Fallujah at any cost. As he thought of his fellow Marines lost in the crash, tears rolled down Smith's dusty, ash covered face. Anger and revenge quickly replaced the sadness he felt in his heart for his men who were killed. Checking his ammunition and weapons, Smith led his men up the stairwell, taking their positions near various windows.

"TAHA, I don't know what you're capable of doing, but you came to me highly qualified from the US Pentagon... I want you to stay near me," Captain Brown said.

"Those are my initial orders, Sir, to protect the top brass, as well as all fellow Marines," TAHA said.

A loud explosion followed TAHA's response, sending dirt and black gravel through the window of the already battered building. Sporadic gunfire followed from the insurgents, pinning the Marines down inside the building. The Marines returned heavy gunfire with their lethal weapons, causing the insurgents to run for cover.

Competing with the loud rapid gunfire, a man's amplified voice praying in an Arab language could be heard filling the smoky air. Gunfire from the insurgents ended abruptly.

"Cease fire! Cease fire Marines!" Captain Brown shouted to his men. "Count this as a blessing because we're now in the eye of the storm. The insurgents are summoned to their daily prayer, so save your ammunition. As soon as their prayer ends, you better believe they'll be on our asses like flies on cow dung so remain prepared and alert!"

"Captain Brown, do we have a moment to smoke a cigarette?" Private Shane Johnson questioned.

"Go ahead, but smoke in intervals... While two are smoking, the others must stay on watch at the windows," Captain Brown said.

"If you have cigarettes, light 'em up... TAHA, I know that you're not a smoker so keep an eye on any suspicious activity outside the window," Captain Brown ordered.

"I will, Sir," TAHA said, grabbing his weapon, kneeling at the window, peering out.

The other men sat alongside one wall, pulling out their cigarettes. They lit them, and smoked them in order to calm their nerves. Some of them drank water from their canteens. Even the Captain smoked a Cuban cigar he brought along from headquarters.

"TAHA, what kind of weird name is that?" one Marine asked, as the others snickered, blowing smoke from their cigarettes towards TAHA.

TAHA glanced back at them; then gazed back out of the window as instructed without responding.

"Private Reyes, have you reached anyone on that radio yet?" Captain Brown asked.

"Sir, I'm afraid it was damaged in the helicopter crash, but I'll keep trying to fix it and eventually be able to contact someone," Reyes answered.

"Good idea... Carry on, Marine," Captain Brown said, patting Reyes on the back.

Staring at the almost perfect haircut and doll-like smoothness of TAHA's skin, Private Chuck Andrews tossed a small pebble over, striking TAHA on the side of the face to get his attention as he asked, "TAHA, you look like a Mama's boy. How long did it take you to cut your neat head of hair, or shave your smooth little girly face?"

"I was created with smooth skin and neat hair, Marine," TAHA answered.

"Created? How weird... Are you kidding me? So I guess you were created with a full head of hair," Private Andrews said.

"Yes, I was," TAHA answered.

Everyone who was in earshot of hearing TAHA's response, laughed aloud.

"Okay, knock it off... Knock it off Marines... We're supposed to be like brothers out here... Don't forget your training," Captain Brown reminded.

As quickly as it began, the praying in the mosque ended. The surreal silence was

followed minutes later by a heavy barrage of gun and ear-pounding explosions. Before they could effectively return gunfire, many insurgents poured out of nearby buildings, running towards the building where the Marines were held up.

"Shoot them—kill them!" Captain Brown shouted, but it was too late. The building was successfully overrun by the insurgents. All of the Marines in the building were captured and quickly taken to be interrogated.

"You can strike me until your hands turn raw, I don't know a damn thing!" Captain Brown shouted to ten men wearing black fatigues with a black scarf tied around their faces.

A frown formed in the reddened eyes of the insurgents, the only part of their face visible. They continued beating Captain Brown for information. One by one, they bound and shoved each Marine into a dingy, blood-stained room, beating them mercilessly.

Crouched down in one corner of the room with other battered Marines, TAHA carefully observed the three insurgents guarding them with Ak47's in hand. TAHA whispered to the Marine nearest to him, saying, "When I begin my attack, you help the others get out of here."

With blood soaked lips, the Marine beside TAHA whispered over to him, "Listen up you nerdy little twit, don't you make one foolish move or else they'll kill all of us."

"They plan to kill all of us regardless," TAHA whispered. He snapped the thick restraints from around his feet and wrists like strands of thread, standing to his feet. He also snapped the restraints from around the Marine sitting beside him. The Marine was shocked. A frown formed upon TAHA's child-like face. The insurgents were stunned to see the young, slender Marine standing to his feet in defiance.

"Hey—you American... sit down!" shouted one of the insurgents in a demanding voice, but TAHA only stood, gazing at the insurgent and his comrades.

Aiming his weapon at TAHA, the insurgent yelled again, "Sit down before I blow your American face off!"

One of the Marines nearest to TAHA tried to pull him downward by his pant leg, but couldn't. TAHA's legs were as stiff as a board. With a look of anger burning in his green eyes, TAHA approached the insurgent who ordered him to sit down. The insurgent squeezed off

several rounds from his Ak47, but the rounds fired didn't harm the fast approaching Marine. Each round ricochet from his chest like rice flung against steel. TAHA grabbed the man, tossing him around the room like a rag doll. He then flung the insurgent's lifeless body out of a nearby window. TAHA then grabbed the weapons from the other insurgents with lightning speed, snapping the weapons in half with his bare hands. He also attacked the other insurgents, tossing their bodies out of the window.

"This is not happening... What the hell is this I'm seeing?" questioned Sergeant Smith with his eyes stretched wide in amazement.

TAHA proceeded to the next room where other insurgents were on the verge of beheading the defiant Captain Brown, who was blindfolded on his knees before them. TAHA caught the wrist of the machete wielding insurgent, crushing his wrist just before the blade touched the Captain's neck. One insurgent approached TAHA from behind with another machete in hand; swinging the blade across the back of TAHA's neck with great force. The blade struck TAHA's neck, but didn't penetrate his pseudo flesh.

"You really shouldn't have done that," TAHA warned, his voice deepening to a robotic tone. He grabbed the man, lifting him up over his head. With one effortless pull, TAHA snapped the man's spine in half like a twig, tossing his lifeless body to the ground.

One insurgent grabbed a bazooka, firing upon TAHA, completely severing his right arm. TAHA struck the insurgent so hard that he slammed up against the wall, snapping his neck and back.

Glistening steel and computerize components, all covered in blood, rapidly grew out of the wounded area of the severed arm, creating a new arm.

One insurgent was stunned as he watched TAHA's new arm emerge. The arm that was severed by the bazooka blast, lying on the ground, dissolved in the sand before everyone's very eyes. Seeing this, all of the insurgents yelled aloud in a panic as they fled out of the building.

"Captain, you and your men stay in here until I finish eliminating the insurgents... I'll give you the all clear signal when I'm done," TAHA commanded in a deep, robotic voice.

"TAHA, tell me... what will be the all clear signal?" Captain Brown asked.

"You'll know when it happens, Sir," TAHA promised. The young Marine bolted out of the building after the fleeing insurgents. He was met with the heavy pounding of rapid gunfire and grenade explosions. Amidst the black smoke billowing up from each explosion, TAHA continued to charge and attack the insurgents. His artificial green eyes were seen glowing through the billowing smoke as he fought courageously against the enemy. Eerie bone-chilling yells were heard coming from the insurgents as the sound of explosions, gunfire, and bones cracking, followed. Hundreds of insurgents died at the hands of the once shy new Marine recruit.

Curious over the incident, Captain Brown remembered what he had read in TAHA's initial top secret, highly classified documents sent when he first arrived under his command. He remembered reading the words – android-Marine, written at the bottom. It all made sense now. Captain Brown smiled.

"Sir, we should go outside and help TAHA... he can't fight the insurgents all alone," Sergeant Smith said.

Captain Brown wiped blood from his split lip, saying, "TAHA won't be in need of our help anytime soon."

"Why not, Sir?" Sergeant Smith asked in a voice of concern as the other Marines looked on.

"TAHA's definitely no coward, as you Marines first assumed. Fear has no place in him. He's a new breed of Marine sent to protect all of us.... TAHA's a god-damn one man Marine Corps... T A H A actually means **Technically Advance Human Android**... Fallujah's already in our hands, thanks to those intelligent minds up in the Pentagon... HOORAH!" Captain Brown shouted.

NOT SERENE



By Rick Weber

The winds of December blew snow across the path in front of them. Above them loomed the snow capped peak of Mount Index and below them was the placid surface of Lake Serene. To Chad Li, this was a whole new experience. It was hard for him to believe that this majestic and remote scene was less than a two hour drive from Seattle. The sight of Bridal Veil Falls alone was almost enough to take his breath away. As a software engineer from the Silicon Valley, he spent most of his time indoors writing code for the latest computer applications. In his free time, he would go to Hawaii for time on the beach where the Pacific waters were warm. This was before he met Rachel Hampton, a shy, reserved market analyst who worked at the same corporate facility he did.

Their chance meeting at a company softball game six months earlier had grown to a serious relationship. At the time, softball was the only outside activity that Chad did and only because his co-workers in the product development unit needed another person to fill their roster. Matched up against the marketing division in the first round resulted in defeat for Chad's team but not after he caught the eye of the woman with red hair and blue eyes playing first base. She tagged him out his first time at bat and proved to be a worthy competitor, better than some of the men on both teams. After the game both teams met for a few beers and Chad got up the nerve to ask her out. Of course, Rachel said yes.

It was close to Christmas and Rachel's family asked them to come up to share the holiday with them. Rachel told Chad that her father was an "outdoorsy" soul and would show them the great northwest. Chad could not

decline her family's request because his own parents were in Tokyo until after New Year's Day visiting his elderly grandparents. Chad acceded to Rachel's request figuring that it was time for him to meet the family.

Ahead of them on the path was John Hampton, Rachel's father, who spent a lot of time in the great outdoors; hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking. Both Rachel and Chad came up to Seattle the week before Christmas so that her parents could show them around. On the schedule was a weekend camping trip to Lake Serene. Although Chad did not have the necessary gear, John made sure that he was outfitted for the trek with a new parka, boots, backpack, and a sleeping bag before they set out.

In the morning they parked at one of the visitor centers and walked down an old service road to the beginning of the over six and a half mile trail to Lake Serene. After pitching their tents and setting up camp in an area not too far from the lake, John announced that they were in for a treat after lunch, a hike into a not well known part of the forest where there was a lot of wildlife to see in their native habitat. Chad was a bit sore from the hike to the campsite and was not looking forward to more walking, at least not right now. The switchbacks on the trail had been hard on his slender but strong frame. After seeing the smile the announcement brought to Rachel's face, he gave his tacit approval. They set out on a path off of the main trail going southwest of Lake Serene up the slopes to Mount Index.

Along the way among the maple and evergreen trees, John pointed out a coyote to them who scampered back into the forest after spotting them. A couple of hours into the hike, John pointed to a bald eagle soaring overhead. The sight was awesome, watching the eagle soaring with the peak of Mount Index as its backdrop. As John was commenting to them about the eagle, part of the pathway gave way under his feet and he was sent tumbling down the rocky slope. Rachel let out a scream as she watched her father plummet. Chad peered into the ravine and saw where John had stopped. "Stay here," he commanded Rachel, "I'll go and see what kind of shape he is in because you might have to go for help."

Rachel shouted out to her father but got no response.

On the way down, Chad kept hollering out, "John, John, John!" but heard nothing. As he got closer, Chad finally got a reply, "Chad, Chad, I'm over here. I think I broke a leg." When Chad got to John lying on the ground, he saw John's left leg twisted at an odd angle.

Chad stood up and waved to Rachel who was barely visible up on the path and yelled up to her, "He's hurt but I think we can make it up to you." With that, Chad put John's left arm around his neck and lifted him up taking the weight off of John's left leg. Chad could see that John, a sixty year old mountain man with a mane of white hair, was in severe pain. One look into John's green eyes told him so without asking.

"Besides your leg, are you hurt anywhere else," Chad asked. John could only shake his head no. "If I help you, do you think you can make it up the hill," Chad continued.

"Yes," John groaned.

"Okay, then we'll do it one step at a time," Chad said. Before going up, Chad waved to Rachel and yelled, "We're coming up but it's going to be slow."

This time they heard Rachel yell back to them, "I'll be here waiting for you!"

The journey up the mountainside was very slow and arduous to say the least. About every ten steps or so, they had to stop so that John could rest his good leg and Chad could get his breath. It took the two of them the better part of an hour to make it back up to the path where Rachel stood waiting.

"It's his left leg," Chad gasped to her as he helped John down to sit on a large rock. As Rachel assessed John's injury, Chad took a swig from a quart bottle of water from his backpack.

"You have a compound fracture," Rachel calmly told her father.

"Oh great," John groaned, "Just what I needed."

"We were lucky to get you back up to the path," Chad said to him, "but we are going to need help to get you out of here. There's no cell phone reception here. So, I'll see if I can at least get down to the main trail before dark. Hopefully, I'll be able to get some help or at least a cell phone signal."

John once again could only nod.

"Be careful," Rachel said to Chad.

"I will," Chad replied as he turned to go down the path.

Retracing their route back to the lake proved to be difficult for Chad. The light snow,

which had been falling had stopped but the sky remained overcast with a light fog settling around the cascade. As darkness began to fall, Chad became lost. He decided before he became completely disoriented that he would go back to the spot where John and Rachel were waiting. Chad turned back on the path and then heard a loud roar from the woods behind him. Thinking that he may have spooked a bear, Chad looked back to see what may have made the sound. Just inside the trees, he spotted a large hairy shape covered in thick black hair. He heard a second roar come from the shape which was too large to be a bear. Being unarmed, Chad knew that his only option was to run and hope that this creature would not pursue him. With that he hurried back up the path. In a short period of time, he finally made it back to Rachel and John. Out of breath and visibly shaken, Chad related the details of his encounter with the creature to Rachel and John.

After hearing Chad out, John gave his comments in a painful tone, "It had to be a bear. If I heard something let out a roar behind me like you did, I would have been scared enough to think that it was ten foot tall, too. It may have been a female trying to protect her cubs. Did you see any little ones there?"

"No," Chad replied, "But you may be right. It had to be a bear but WOW! It scared the living daylight out of me."

"As it should have," John said in a soft groan with Rachel watching in amazement. "It'll be dark soon," John added, "We have to get a fire going and build us a shelter if we're going to make it through the night up here."

As he sat on the big rock, John told Rachel and John to gather wood and brush to start a fire, as well as, evergreen limbs to make shelter for them to spend the night at the foot of Mount Index. With the fire started and Rachel tending to it, John gave Chad step by step instructions to build a lean-to of sorts for them to keep out of the weather for the night. With a nice fire going and their lodging built, they sat around the fire and dined on some granola bars and bottled water for supper. Even though John was in pain, he kept his spirits up by regaling Chad and Rachel with one good story.

"You know, Chad," as John started his tale. "That thing you saw earlier may have not been a bear." With that, both Chad and Rachel stared intently back at him. John continued, "The Pacific-Northwest has had the most sightings of "Sasquatch" or "Bigfoot", as he is called, than anywhere else in the country." Chad and Rachel then relaxed their expressions and grinned at John, who pressed on by telling

them the legend. "The first sightings of him or things like him here go back to the mid-nineteenth century. They were made by Indians to some of the first white men who moved here. They called these ape-like creatures, *skoocooms*. Some of the accounts have it that they possessed divine powers. Others said that they were evil. Whatever they were, the sightings kept on being reported for the past hundred and fifty years. A couple of times in the 1920's some miners reported being kidnapped or attacked by them. To be honest, I think that the miners had their incidents with the creatures after drinking too much whiskey that they smuggled in from Canada during Prohibition. In any case, the sightings continue to be reported to the present day. Chad, I hope you're not looking to become famous or infamous from your encounter this afternoon." Chad and Rachel both smiled and were amused by John's story telling skills. John's expression then turned serious as he said, "However, if what you saw was a bear, I think that it is in our best interest to take turns watching our little bivouac tonight in the event the bear comes looking for food." With that John issued a watch schedule for the three of them for the night.

Chad stood the first watch which turned out to be quiet. A couple of hours later Rachel relieved him and Chad went into the shelter to get some sleep. Her turn started quietly but a short time into it, she heard a rustling in the bushes and saw the large hairy creature Chad had described earlier emerge. At first, she was stunned but was shaken from her trance when she smelled a strong putrid odor as she stood downwind from the creature. Rachel let out a scream. This roused John and Chad from their slumber causing them to come out of the shelter with John hopping on one leg. Before they could make it out to Rachel, the creature fled back into the woods. John, once again, told them that it was a bear which she had seen.

In pain and unable to sleep, John took his turn guarding the campsite early allowing Rachel to go back to sleep in the shelter with Chad. Not long after, John heard the roar again coming toward them from outside the encampment. This time, John saw the creature as described by Chad, which ran at him. John reacted by pulling a burning log from the fire and waving at the creature, which had a vile odor about it. This time, Rachel and Chad came from the shelter each picking up a burning log and waving it at the creature in the same manner as John was doing. The creature was apeline with long dark hair similar to a yak. The creature scared by the flames, fled back into the forest. They succeeded in fending off the creature, hopefully, for the night.

Rachel and Chad gathered around John, who said to them calmly, "It wasn't a bear." Then, Rachel asked, "Well Daddy, what was it?" Chad remained silent looking at John and Rachel as each spoke.

John chuckled and shook his head before saying, "I think we just saw Bigfoot."

Chad then asked him, "Are you sure?" John replied, "There are no other animals around these parts that fit the description of the thing we just saw. I don't know if it's man or beast. It certainly isn't a college kid pulling a prank on us. Nothing human could smell that bad."

Suffice to say that there would be no sleep for any of them. They sat around the fire trying to explain what they had just seen.

It was now Chad's turn to play the skeptic. As an engineer, his schooling and professional career were rooted in logic. Everything was explainable. To Chad, the very thought of being visited by a mythical being was absurd.

"If there are no other indigenous animals fitting this description around here, could it have been some kind of exotic pets that someone let loose up here when they could no longer care for it," he offered.

"That might be a possibility," John answered, "but the state enacted strict laws a few years ago banning private individuals from owning any type of exotic animal. It does allow for them to be on game reserves but there are none around here. This area is nothing but federal and state forestlands."

Chad could just shake his head trying to come up with a logical reason for their encounter.

"When was the last reported sighting of Bigfoot here, Daddy?" Rachel asked.

"In this area alone," John replied, "There have been about a hundred in the past year. They're all over the internet. I tend to side with Chad. There has to be some sane, logical explanation for what we saw. I don't want to end up in the loony bin because I reported seeing Sasquatch."

Both Chad and Rachel laughed at John's last comment. Their discussions, which went on for the rest of the night, were a search for reason not a philosophical debate.

As dawn peered through the darkness, no conclusions had been reached by the three

hikers. As the path became illuminated, the discussion turned to making an action plan to get help. Chad once again volunteered to be the one to go.

"I wish I could get up on top of that mountain," Chad said pointing to Mount Index. "Maybe, up there I could get a good cell signal."

"The climb up there can get quite rough," John said, "Mount Index, like Everest, has its own North Face. When I was younger, I scaled it a couple of times. Those climbs ruled out any intentions I had about going to Nepal to conquer the Big One. You're better off going down-hill."

Rachel added, "Daddy's right. I tried that climb myself once but I never made it."

With that Chad did not question the merits of going downhill any further and set out to find help.

Before setting out, John gave Chad some last minute guidance about the trip down to the main trail giving him landmarks to look for as waypoints. The fog, which covered the slopes the day before, had lifted and the path was clear. Chad found the landmarks where John had said they would be and he became more confident that he would not get lost.

About an hour into his hike, Chad heard rustling in the trees above him on the slope as he went down the path. This time, there was no roar or putrid stench coming from the direction of the noise. He picked up his pace but the rustling of the branches seemed to be getting closer. Chad was too far from John and Rachel to run back to them this time. He was alone and had to make a stand. He picked up some dried brush near his feet and lit it with the lighter which he had. The dried shrubbery caught fire immediately as he turned to face the noise.

"Does this creature come out during the day?" he asked himself. His heart pounded and sweat came from his forehead in the cold weather. He waited for the creature to reappear but the rustling in the trees had suddenly stopped. Chad figured that the time had come for the final encounter.

His thoughts of a confrontation were interrupted when he heard a mechanical shaking sound from over head. This was followed by a rustling sound in the trees going away from him. He looked up to see a King's County Sheriff's helicopter hovering above him. He waved the burning shrub up at the helicopter and saw a hand wave at him from an open door on the aircraft. Fear suddenly turned into relief

as a harness was lowered down to him on a hoist. He stomped out the burning brush and put himself into the harness. As he was lifted up to the helicopter, Chad looked down into the trees but he could not see the creature.

Inside the helicopter, Chad told one of his rescuers about John and Rachel. The pilot retraced Chad's route up the path and after a short aerial search of the area, both of them were located. John was still seated on the big rock with Rachel beside him.

One of the crew, a paramedic, was lowered down in the hoist to tend to John, who was conscious but in great pain. While the paramedic tended to John, Rachel was hoisted up to the helicopter and reunited with Chad. They embraced each other with Rachel saying, "My hero".

Back on the ground, John asked the paramedic, "How did you know we were out here?"

The paramedic shouted into John's ear over the rotary engine's noise, "When the rangers saw that your car had been left on the lot overnight, they checked your campsite. After they saw that you were not there and the campsite had not been used overnight, the rangers called up a search party which included us. Now, we got to get you up into the bird." Shortly thereafter, John was hoisted up to the helicopter on a litter with the paramedic by his side.

Once inside the helicopter, John, Rachel, and Chad related their encounters with the creature to the crew. After hearing their accounts, the paramedic advised them, "You're not the first people we've met who saw Bigfoot. We fly up here all the time but had no luck ever seeing him ourselves."

"I am glad that we're not the only ones you met who saw him. I thought you were going to put us all in straight-jackets if we told you," John said. Everyone laughed as the helicopter headed to the Harborview Medical Center where John would be treated.

As the Medivac flight headed to Seattle, John said to Chad with a smile, "I guess this makes you a member of the family now."

While the mechanical bird flew to the southwest, the creature, hiding near its den among the trees on Mount Index, looked up at it and roared.

MOONLIGHT ECLIPSE



By CP Bialois/Edward White

The soft grass felt good under his feet, each time he wiggled his toes the blades of grass tickled the soft inner portion of his toes. He let out a deep breath; nothing tasted or felt as good as good old mother earth. He wasn't sure why but he felt that he'd been away for a long time and that this time nothing could make him leave it. He quickly shook his head to clear out any of those thoughts, he was home and he intended to stay. He closed his eyes and raised his face towards the sun. How warm and pleasant the sun felt on his skin as its warmth penetrated through him until it filled his heart and soul. This was the way to live; there could be no doubt about it. In the distance he heard thunder but he didn't pay it any attention as it was miles away and this was his special day. It was his first day back from... where? Strange he couldn't remember where he had returned from. Why was that?

"Doctor Jones." A strange voice filled the air. Something about it was oddly familiar.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, no one else was near him. It had to be his imagination, why would anyone be here except him? They were gone... weren't they?

"Doctor Jones. It is 0700."

Where the hell was it coming from? "Who are you? You can't be here." *But why can't they be here?* He asked himself. As sudden as the arrival of that strange voice, the world around him changed, the sun was gone and a cold rain began to fall. He looked around frantically searching for the cause of the change. "No, it's been so long." His voice was weak and sounded more like a whimper than its usual tone as he watched the world around him fade into a bright white light.

When he opened his eyes they settled upon a smooth grayish surface of the bottom of a bunk. He rubbed his eyes and sat up; his legs touched the cold floor.

"Doctor Jones, forgive my intrusion but you are needed in the botanical garden."

That voice, that cold unfeeling voice he heard in his dream. Damn that voice and its creator. "I'll be right there BOB." He rubbed his eyes once more and looked around him. The plain white and gray walls of his quarters stared back as did the haunting eyes of Miss November from the calendar's welcoming perch on the wall to his left.

"Very well Doctor Jones."

Thomas Jones stood and stretched as he walked to the cabin door. As he approached it BOB signaled him.

"Doctor Jones my sensors indicate that you are not dressed. Should you not put on proper attire?"

He looked down at himself, a white t-shirt and a pair of white boxers. Not appropriate dress for any circumstance that he could think of, but then who would mind?

"I think this is proper all things considered."

"Very well Doctor Jones." BOB's autonomous voice seemed to echo in the room. In fact it echoed everywhere on the moon base. Such was the result of having only one in the station's population.

Thomas reached out and pressed a button next to the door and it slid open with a swishing sound. The soft hum of the automated oxygen recyclotron filled the air. Although it was barely above a whisper it had the distinct advantage of being the only sound aside from his footsteps. Long ago he noticed the combination of the two held a type of rhythm and he often found himself humming along with it. It was a far cry from the sounds of the Rolling Stones or Third Eye Blind but hell he wasn't in the position to argue. With no new music or other entertainment available he had to make do with the few songs that were in BOB's database.

The doors to the botanical garden opened with a push of a button, the sweet smell of the roses and jasmine filled his lungs. He held onto their smell until he thought his lungs would explode. When he let out his breath he couldn't help but smile. This was where he belonged, this

was his world and he knew he'd never find happiness anywhere else. He looked around at the plants; everything was as he had left it.

"Any change BOB?"

"No Doctor Jones. Subject F and Subject S have shown increased metabolic rates. Unusual but not entirely unexpected."

Unusual was right, Thomas thought as he stepped across the path and activated the terminal. The screen flashed as power coursed through it, the black dissolved and was replaced with graphics then a series of numerical equations before stopping on the comparison readouts of the two subjects. He read through the statistical analysis and programmed in the correct change to the automated system. When he was finished he turned around, that was why he had demanded a swivel chair for his laboratory, he liked to swivel about. The memory caused him to laugh as he stood and walked over to the specimens. The plants doubled in size in less than a day, which was promising. Now he just had to ensure he could use the same technique in the hydroponics lab.

"BOB, run a spectrum analysis on subject F and S and cross reference with Specimen A, B, C, and D," Thomas instructed.

"Yes Doctor Jones." There was a brief pause as the enormous computer brain of BOB followed his instructions and worked through thousands of simulations to justify the results of the test. "Complete, Doctor Jones."

Thomas nodded then hesitated for a moment. He wasn't sure if he really wanted to know the answer, maybe it would be easier if he didn't bother. His food supply would last another month, two if he rationed it. Then instead of starving to death he'd walk out of an airlock and instantly freeze, quick and painless. Too bad that wasn't his style; he was too cowardly to take his own life no matter how simple it sounded. "Are the findings consistent?"

"Yes Doctor Jones."

"Alright, prepare the hydroponics specimens for integration with the botanical extract serum." He looked at his watch, "Set integration for twenty minutes from... mark."

"Yes Doctor Jones, integration will begin in nineteen minutes fifty-eight seconds...nineteen minutes fifty-seven seconds... nineteen minutes fifty-six seconds..."

"BOB, continue silent countdown," Thomas said.

"Yes, Doctor Jones."

Thomas nodded with a sigh, listening to a countdown was not something he needed to hear not then and not ever. Satisfied that everything was ready and his task for the day was completed Thomas headed for the door. He'd check back in about an hour and every hour after that as he had for the past ten months but for now he needed recreation.

Under any other circumstances it would've been entertaining, how many times he had dreamed of just goofing off every day, of not having any responsibilities. He was living the dream that so many people had wished for and he would've given it all away just to have one of them again. With that thought in mind he took it upon himself to learn the mechanical skills he needed to maintain the moon base but in truth it was only to keep busy. The base had been so well constructed that it wouldn't need any maintenance for at least sixty years, and even then BOB would be able to handle anything that needed to be done.

Still, it was a nice distraction at times to have something to do. Casually, he made his way to the command center and sat in the center chair, the "captain's chair" in most sci-fi shows.

"What would you like to play today Doctor Jones?" BOB's voice filled the room with its steady tones.

He sat quietly for a moment, "I don't feel like a game today, how about a movie?" The main window in front of him shimmered as an electron based screen materialized out of it and a selection of movies were listed. Thomas couldn't help but smile, he was in his own utopia. His eyes scrolled down the screen until they settled on one. "Ever seen *Dracula*, BOB?"

"I have no need to watch movies Doctor Jones; however, yes I have viewed it as it is in my database."

"Cheater," Thomas said.

"Which one would you like to see Doctor Jones?"

The name *Dracula* was highlighted, followed by a series of dates and actors appeared in a subcategory. An interesting selection, some of the greatest actors of the twentieth century were in them. "1979 version BOB. It had a wonderful shot of the sun at the end," Thomas said.

"We'll be facing the sun in fourteen hours Doctor Jones."

Thomas shook his head; he missed the warmth of the sun. A pity it had saw fit to destroy the human race, but then he was never one to dwell on the negative side of things. At least not for too long... "I prefer Technicolor."

"Yes Doctor Jones." On the screen the movie began in the grainy texture of primitive films but his mind was elsewhere. The command center had been designed to be the center of the moon base; from there the functions of the base's systems could be controlled. It had been hoped that within the next ten years it would've expanded into a colony. But then the Solar Cataclysm happened, an enormous solar flare engulfed the planet Earth and superheated the atmosphere. The moon base was spared by its position on the far side of the moon. With Earth and its moon as a shield the station was spared from the worst of the radiation, or so they thought at the time.

NASA had thought it best to have a skeleton crew on the base to test out its botanical, hydroponic, and atmospheric capabilities. Ironic thing was that the rest of the crew had suffered radiation poisoning and had died days after the solar cataclysm. Why he had been spared could be attributed more to dumb luck than anything else. Thomas had been in the shielded under carriage of the moon base tending to the botanical garden. Had they not been a week behind schedule and had a solar greenhouse constructed he would've been among the first to die. "Small favors." He thought then, now he looked at it as more of a curse than a favor.

At least he wasn't alone, technically anyway. He had BOB. The moon bases computer was designed to interact with each of the personnel as one of their own. BOB was a breakthrough in computer programming. Bridging Organizational Battology, in simpler terms BOB was an endless dictionary of useless information and conversation. At the time Thomas had laughed at the name and wondered if the programmer had a degree in full-of-shitness. Now he looked at BOB as his one and only friend.

"The atmospheric conditions have improved Doctor Jones. It appears the radiation levels on earth have dropped to normal."

"A lot of good that'll do us..." Thomas remained quiet as the movie continued to play. He had held out hope that someone else had survived, but if they had the chance they could communicate with him were astronomical. "Nice choice of words Doc," he mumbled to himself on considering his thoughts. He then turned his attention to the readouts on the main

control panel. He was a botanist, but he did understand the basics of those readings. "Any signs of life?"

"Yes. Abundant in the rural areas."

He wasn't surprised, at least not totally. A lot of the animals would've been inside shelter, and may in fact been strong enough to avoid any radiation sickness, at least for the moment. Thomas Jones always wanted to be an astronaut, it had always been his dream to travel through the stars and to see what other worlds awaited them. Now he just wanted to watch the movie.

"Save your readings, we'll analyze them later. I have plenty of time," Thomas instructed.

"Yes Doctor Jones," Bob answered.

LORD OF THE AMAZON



By Etheridge G. Lovett

"Ringo—tell us... How long do you think it'll take before we get to our research destination?" Dr. Wayne Bristol inquired, his voice competing with the rotating sound of the helicopter blades.

"According to my coordinates, we should arrive there shortly," Ringo answered.

"Wow—the great Amazon rainforest is so vast... I can't believe the enormity of it all... There are giant trees everywhere you turn," Dr. Alice Richardson expressed as she gazed at the luscious green jungle below. "Ringo, tell me,

what's it like exploring down there in the rainforest?" she asked.

"To be honest, I really don't know much about exploration conditions down below. Hiking through the Amazon rainforest is all Greek to me. I spend much more time in the air than on the ground. If there's anything you want to know about flying, I'm the man to tell you," Ringo said.

"I know you've probably heard several interesting stories from people who'd hiked through the great Amazon rainforest... Come on—tell us what you know, Ringo. I promise; we won't tell anyone," Wayne mused.

"There's only one true story that I can tell you... Whenever I fly anywhere near the area where you're about to go exploring, I always have navigational and electrical problems with my equipment. If you hadn't paid me a comfortable amount to bring you out here, I swear I wouldn't be flying this old helicopter in this direction. I'm telling you, the area we're about to enter is a really weird area... Most pilots with common sense avoid it like the plague... They often call it the devil's triangle of the Amazon rainforest," Ringo informed.

Ah come on, Ringo... don't tell me that a big strong man like you is all spooked by old native tales from the Amazon rainforest," Wayne joked, laughing.

"Spooked is putting it lightly my friend... I don't want to frighten you and Dr. Richardson but you don't know of the many strange foreboding stories that come out of this place each year. Tales of tall dark shadows moving about, people vanishing into thin air, unexplained forces, and the list goes on and on... I personally believe that there are dark forces at play down there beyond those trees and I don't want to have anything to do with it," Ringo admitted.

"I don't know Ringo... I think you may be reading too much into it... Perhaps you're drinking far too much wild Amazon juice," Wayne mused.

Alice glanced over at Wayne, shoving him in his ribcage with her elbow. "Don't say such silly things," she whispered over to him.

Ringo looked at the two archeologists in his rear view mirror, saying, "Go ahead... make jokes... but a wise old native Amazon dweller told me a year ago that it's not the rainforest that you should be worried about, but the dark forces and creatures lurking around in it."

The moment Ringo finished his statement something struck the side of the helicopter with a loud thud, causing the aircraft to rock back and forth in the heavens. The skies began to darken. Everyone held on tight as the emergency buzzer sounded and the red emergency lights flickered. When Ringo looked down at his gages, he noticed that they were spinning radically out of control. He sent up a quick prayer as he kissed and rubbed the string of rosary beads strung around his neck.

"What's happening? Are we going to crash?" Wayne shouted with distress growing on his slender face.

"I don't know— this happens whenever I reach this area, but it was never this bad... I never encountered a storm brewing up so fast," Ringo said, turning on his emergency radio.

"May day— May day— this is research team one... I repeat... research team one; requesting immediate emergency assistance— my aircraft's out of control— I'm experiencing major mechanical problems— we're about to crash into the jungle—can you read me!" Ringo shouted several times into his radio, anxiously waiting for a reply. Only static was heard emitting from the receiver. Ringo tossed the receiver off to the side in frustration.

"Damn it!" Ringo shouted with distress written all over his face. He shouted back to his two passengers, "Hold on tight—I can't keep us in the air any longer—we're going down!"

The young college professors strapped themselves in tight and held on to the thick safety harnesses attached to their seats.

Ringo flinched with each burst of lightning flashing from the ominous storm enveloping the aircraft. Heavy thunder followed. It sounded as if an army of giant chariots were being driven across the heavens. Sweat beaded from Ringo's forehead like water on the side of a cold drink. Ringo struggled to keep his UH-1 Huey helicopter in the air, but the aircraft continued to lose altitude, plummeting towards the damp, Amazon rainforest below. With a sliver of luck remaining, the helicopter landed upon the cluster of leaves and branches of several towering Canopy Trees, breaking its sudden descent. Held up by thick vines, large leaves and some branches; the aircraft dangled upside down, twenty feet off the ground.

"Alice—can you hear me—are you okay?" Wayne questioned in a panicky voice.

Wayne's voice jarred Alice from her unconscious state. She heard him and replied in a whisper, "Yeah—I'm okay."

"Ringo—Are you okay up there?" Wayne questioned, shouting over towards the pilot's cockpit. There was no reply. Only the fierce rumbling thunder from the black ominous clouds above and the mating calls of the Amazon creatures filled their ears.

"Ringo—can you hear me!" Wayne shouted once more. There was no response.

"I don't think he made it," Alice whispered, tears forming in the lower rim of her big brown eyes.

"I smell fuel... The helicopter could blow at any minute... we got to get out of here... come on!" Wayne shouted, unhitching his seatbelt. He dropped to the roof of the helicopter, crawling over to help Alice out of her seat.

"Grab all the important gear and supplies we'll need. We can toss them out of the main side door and get them once we've climbed out of the helicopter," Wayne said.

They crawled about, grabbing a large bagged-up tent, a machete and several flares, tossing them out of the open door of the helicopter down towards the jungle's floor in order to climb out of the disabled aircraft. Wayne grabbed a rope that Ringo had stored beneath his seat. He tied the rope on the railing of the seats and then tossed the opposite end of the rope out of the side door of the helicopter.

"We can't just leave like this... Let me check on Ringo one last time," Wayne said to Alice. He frantically crawled towards the pilot's cabin. When he reached Ringo, he saw him dangling upside down in his seat; his glossy brown eyes stretched wide open in a chilling death stare, with a broken tree branch piercing through the center of his chest. Blood drained from Ringo's chest, mouth and nose like watered-down tomato paste.

"Damn it!" Wayne shouted, quickly turning his head away to block out the gruesome image.

"What's wrong? Is he dead? Tell me the truth—is Ringo dead?" Alice shrieked, crawling towards Wayne.

"Stay back Alice—you don't want to see this... Ringo didn't make it... I'm afraid he's gone," Wayne said in a subtle voice.

Alice began weeping profusely over Ringo's unexpected demise. Wayne reached over, gently closing Ringo's eyes. He then grabbed the compass, map, and the hunting knife attached to Ringo's utility vest, saying in an almost whisper, "Let's get the hell out of this dangling tomb."

The rain shower fell upon Wayne and Alice as they carefully climbed down the rope, landing on the jungle's floor below. They ran as fast as they could away from the strong fumes of the leaking fuel permeating the area. No sooner than they were safely out of the area of the downed helicopter, it erupted in a blinding explosion. Flames engulfed the helicopter causing it to crash and burn on the ground below, lighting up the one area of the rainforest. The torrential rains beat heavily upon the burning aircraft as Alice and Wayne watched from a distance.

"Come on... We'd better use the remaining sunlight to set up a tent before night falls. When the sun goes down, this place becomes darker than soot. We must protect ourselves from the mosquitoes and the elements," Wayne said.

"It's just so difficult to accept that Ringo died so suddenly like that... I can't believe it," Alice said in a broken voice as she continued crying.

Wayne placed his arms around Alice shoulders, comforting her as he said, "I never witnessed a storm strike up so swiftly like that one did... Ringo will certainly be missed... Come on Alice, we'd better set up camp before nightfall set in on us."

Alice was so hurt and num over Ringo's death, she didn't respond. She continued weeping. Wayne took her by the hand, guiding her towards a clearing in the jungle up ahead.

"This would be a great place to set up our tent. I'll set up camp while you rest a while," Wayne said. He grabbed the gear and began erecting a tent in the clearing. Once the tent was erected, they climbed in and unzipped the thick sleeping bag from the plastic container. They rolled out the dry sleeping bag, placing it on the floor of the tent to use as a mattress. Wayne glanced over and noticed the look of sadness and fear growing on the face of Alice.

"Alice, I'm so sorry I drug you out here on this godforsaken trip... I promise you, I'll figure a way out of this jungle by this time tomorrow." Wayne held Alice in his arms as they both rested beside each other, drifting off to

sleep under the creatures of the jungle, sending out their mating calls. The next morning, the sun peeked over the horizon of the Amazon rainforest like a burst of light streaming from a quasar. Wayne was the first to awaken as he unzipped the door of the tent and gazed outside. His blue eyes were immediately fixated upon the bright rays of the morning sun, beaming through the large green leaves of many towering canopy trees like the luminous fingers of a giant angel. Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, Wayne exhaled, followed up with a morning stretch. Despite the sun's efforts of trying to gain daytime dominance, the jungle held fast to its many shades of darkness like a hoarder to his or her possessions. As if a hidden mystery, one section of the jungle remained darker than that of the rest.

"Alice, wake up... It's a perfect day to find our way out of this place," Wayne said.

Alice emerged from the tent, stretching and yawning. Her eyes were still reddened and swollen from a long night of weeping. "Let me get my things," Alice said in an almost whisper.

Leaving the tent behind, they began their trek through the jungle, using Ringo's compass.

"Look over there," Wayne said, pointing at a group of spider monkeys playing in a cluster of trees. As Alice and Wayne watched the monkeys frolic about in the rays of the gleaming sunshine, Wayne caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure lurking about near the darkest area of the jungle. At one point, the strange figure seemed to stop, pulling back the leaves and foliage in the distance as if peering at them.

"Wow —Alice— did you see that?" Wayne asked, pointing.

"See what?" Alice inquired.

"I could've sworn I saw something or someone moving around over there in that area," Wayne said, as he continued to point at the darkest area of the jungle.

"Perhaps it's a team of rescuers looking for us... They may have seen the helicopter go down last night. The fire of the crash certainly burned bright enough to draw the attention of someone," Alice said.

"The question is; who is that someone, or something? Come on, let's investigate that shaded area," Wayne said.

They went inside the tent and grabbed their gear and walked in the direction of the shaded area of the jungle.

"Maybe they're members of a local tribe we haven't read about, curiously watching us from afar. That would be an exciting find," Wayne said, swinging his machete back and forth to clear a foot path ahead.

"I can't believe it... This rising humidity is almost unbearable and it's still morning time... Imagine what the humidity level will be by noontime," Alice said, wiping beaded sweat from her forehead. She took a gulp of cool water from her canteen, closing the lid.

"If I were you, I'd drink that water sparingly if you want to get out of this jungle alive. We must preserve as much water as possible. We still need to trek out of this botanical hell-hole once we investigate the area up ahead," Wayne said, swinging his machete from side to side. Large sliced leaves and vines dropped before him with each swing of his machete as an opening appeared. His eyes widened when his sight fell upon a cave several yards away with strange large markings aligning its entrance. Seeing a quick bright flash of light, Wayne walked towards the opening of the cave.

"Wayne, please be careful," Alice warned as she watched Wayne peek into the dank cave to study the markings etched upon the main entranceway.

"The writing is ancient Latin and Sumerian text. There's another set of unknown letters here as well. I can make out some of the Latin and Sumerian letters but the unknown text I cannot," Wayne said. He rubbed his fingers along the letters as sand fell from the crevices of the writing. Once he cleared away the black sand, Wayne gasped, saying, "The Latin and Sumerian text gives a warning of an *Ancient Lord of the Amazon*. The rest of the text seemed to be covered by the unknown text."

"All ancient tribes in this region believed in many gods... Perhaps the writing refers to one of them... Let's jot down the coordinates of this great find and revisit the cave later with a team of excavators several months from now. Maybe there's some long lost, priceless treasure or artifacts hidden away inside this old cave. For now, let's study the map and begin our trek out of this creepy jungle while it's daylight," Alice said.

"You're absolutely right about that... We could always return with a team to learn more about this cave later. I'm sure it's not going anywhere anytime soon," Wayne said,

writing down logistical information, as well as copying some of the text in his tablet.

After gathering as much data as needed, they turned to walk away from the cave. The moment they made the first step, a terrible earthquake struck, rattling the rainforest with fierce intensity. The strength of the earthquake caused several towering canopy trees to topple over, barring Alice and Wayne's way. From a clear blue sky, powerful lightning bolts flashed from the heavens as heavy rains began to fall. Wayne and Alice were shocked at the unusual weather pattern and sudden earthquake. They instinctively fled inside the mouth of the cave for shelter and safety from the storm and the unexpected chain of events.

"This is incredible! The earthquake and storm struck up out of nowhere... What the hell is going on out here?" Wayne questioned, holding Alice close for safety as they huddled near the door of the cave. The deep rumbling of the ground abated, but the storm continued to rage on.

In the distant pitch black darkness of the cave, Alice and Wayne heard a distinct child's voice saying, "Don't be afraid... Come with me... You'll be safe in here if you follow me."

From the shadows of the cave, a young *Yanomamo* boy emerged, with shiny jet black hair, large black eyes and deeply-tanned skin, wearing only animal skin to cover his genitals. He stood smiling with a cherubic face, saying in English, "Come with me... You'll be safe if you follow me—Come—Hurry."

Before Wayne could respond, the barefoot boy turned and fled into the darkness of the cave.

"Hey there— little boy—Stop—we won't harm you!" Wayne shouted running after the boy. Alice ran only steps behind Wayne. Bright flashes of lightning from the storm outside, was the only light feeding into the dark cave. Each lightning flash lit up their images as they ran further into the cave. Although they increased their running speed, the child remained a few steps in front of them. The boy suddenly turned one corner and vanished in the darkness. Wayne was shocked at how quick the boy had vanished only mere inches away from him. He strained his eyes in the darkness, waving his hand about in an attempt to locate the boy, but he was gone.

"Hey boy—I know you're hiding in here somewhere... We'll see if you can hide from the light of these," Wayne said, reaching into his pocket, pulling out several flares. He

popped the flares, tossing them about in a semicircle. The bright red light emitting from the flares lit up the cave.

"Oh—my—God!" Alice shrieked; grabbing her digital camera to take pictures once her eyes fell upon a being, approximately eight feet tall, sitting upon an intricately carved throne-like pedestal. The pungent odor of the creature filled their nostrils as they cautiously approached. The creature's skin was thick in appearance, ash gray. Its eyes were large and black as those of an owl. His head was large at the top, slightly elongated in the back. He had a small hole where his nose belonged. His mouth was small; well defined. His neck was long and much slender than that of a human. His body appeared quite muscular, although he sat lifeless, stiff, still. His hands; clutching the armrest of his throne, were longer and broader than those of a normal man. Partially covered in thick spider webs and thin vines; the being sat high and poised like a great king ruling over thousands of subjects. Surrounding him were treasures from many ancient lands and kingdoms from around the globe. In the center of its chest, a shrewdly-crafted spear was lodged as if it was tossed at him with great force, bringing him down to his mortal end.

"Remarkable... I wonder—what on earth is this thing?" Alice asked, snapping her last photo. She then gazed upon the deceased being sitting before her, analyzing every conceivable detail.

"Are you asking me what it is? I'm trying to figure that question out as well... Whatever this being is or was, it's certainly not from this planet. Look at its anatomy structure... I've never seen a human being that resembles this creature... It looks like an ancient, alien-like nephilim of some kind," Wayne interjected, drawing closer to the creature to get a better look. As he drew closer to the being; the flares suddenly dimmed, then went completely out, sending the chamber into sheer darkness. A cold breeze raced past the two archeologists. The hairs on the back of Wayne and Alice's neck stood up on end as their hearts raced. The sound of something heavy walking about in the pitch darkness, and deep whispering voices, filled their ears. Fear gripped their innermost being as the cave became arctic cold.

"Oh—my—God—what on earth is happening?" Alice questioned in a panicky voice.

"Alice, listen to me... don't be afraid... Follow the sound of my voice and give me your hand," Wayne said, reaching out to grab Alice's hand. When their hands met, a light blue flame appeared before them. Seconds later, the flame

changed into that of a towering luminous being with radiant yellow eyes. Its ghostly appearance lit up the cave, filling every nook and crevice with light. Wayne and Alice were stunned at what they were seeing. They instinctively backed away from the glowing being.

"Who are you?" Wayne questioned, holding Alice in his firm embrace.

The spiritual entity glanced over at the towering being sitting on the throne, pointing at the kingly image as it said in a deep, disembodied voice, "He and I; are one."

With their fear growing, Wayne and Alice backed further away from the being.

"I am the *Lord of the Amazon*, spirit of the ancient star traveler who was killed in this starship many years ago by those who once inhabited this rainforest," the entity said.

Only then did Alice and Wayne realize that the large cave-like structure that they were standing in, although aligned with thousands of tangled vines, thick spider webs and a thin layer of black sand; was actually the inner chamber of a great starship. Wayne glanced down at the piles of golden goblets, swords, daggers, crowns, rubies and diamonds.

"The treasure... How did you gain control of so much earthly treasure from around the world if what you say is true?" Wayne asked.

"Born with the natural ability to fly like your birds, I soared around your world while unseen, taking whatever I wanted. These treasures are meager souvenirs I took from battling many great kings and their greatest warriors. I've bravely fought them all in the darkness of the night... The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Vikings, and many others... I'd planned to take the treasure back to my home planet and cherish them as trophies of war. Thousands of your mightiest kind; have died by my skillful hands... So it is quite ironic that after all of my victorious battles against the strongest of earth, a local native village boy tosses a single spear right through my heart, bringing me down to my mortal end upon this wretched planet, to spiritually roam these chambers," said the alien ghost.

"We mean you no harm... What can we do to help you?" Alice asked with a frightened look on her face.

"Hundreds of years ago in this jungle, I made a blood pact with the dark spirits of your world, vowing that if they allow me to live forever that I will bring them endless souls. The

blood pact was honored, and many lives were sacrificed to them. Much blood has spilled within this chamber, within my glorious starship... I have been given the spiritual powers over the skies and the grounds of the rainforest in this area in order to lure your kind here for centuries, to satisfy my blood pact. You ask what I need of you... Your souls are what I need of you in order to sacrifice to the dark spirits of earth, the ones I know only as the *fallen ones*... Only then, can I continue to live on in the Amazon rainforest," the alien spirit said, laughing aloud as its light began to suddenly dim.

Darkness once again, took hold of the chamber. Deep whispering voices and scratching sounds were heard echoing throughout the chamber. Only the sporadic lightning flashes from the terrible storm outside the cave, was seen down one of the distant hallways. Wayne knew that this was their only way out of the starship.

Alice suddenly unleashed a blood-curdling scream in the pitch darkness.

"Alice—Come towards my voice and take my hand—follow me—run!" Wayne shouted, grabbing Alice's hand, pulling her towards the flashes of lightning down the hallway, the only exit out of the haunted starship. With each stride, they ran, guided only by the constant flashes of lightning up ahead. Every so often, they'd feel something growling near them and clawing at their legs as they swiftly ran.

When they approached the mouth of the cave, it began to close. With one great leap, Wayne and Alice jumped through the opening of the cave before it slammed shut. Landing on the rain-soaked forest, they staggered to their feet and fled further through the jungle, many yards away from the mysterious cave. Trees toppled down all around them, missing them by mere inches. Spider monkeys shrieked aloud while scurrying off through the trees of the rainforest for safety.

"Whatever that thing is, it's powerful and deadly... Hurry Alice— Run!" Wayne shouted, pulling Alice onward. They ran until they reached a safe distance away from the darkened area of the jungle.

"Hold it—my legs are throbbing with pain... I can't run any further... Let me rest here for just a moment," Alice demanded, gasping to breathe.

"Okay... Okay... We can rest here only for a minute or so," Wayne said, also gasping for air as he leaned against a nearby tree.

"No one will ever believe us when we tell them what happened," Alice said, breathing laboriously.

"Why shouldn't they believe us? I have the solid evidence right here," Wayne said, pulling a golden Egyptian dagger from his pocket.

A look of shock formed upon Alice's face once she saw the dagger.

"Regardless of your possession of the dagger, I'm telling you, no one will ever believe you," Alice said, gazing upon the priceless artifact.

"Why not... This Egyptian dagger was no doubt held by Pharaoh, Tutankhamen himself... Now it's all mine... This is clear evidence that there's a secret treasure trove of wealth hidden away in the bowels of the Amazon rainforest, and we, my dear, have the exact location. All we need to do is to make sure we bring a good excavation team, several highly armed men, and several priests from the Vatican to join us when we return. There's no telling what other dark forces are operating inside that cave that caused the strange weather and calamity on the ground. I don't think just one ghostly entity causes so much natural catastrophe," Wayne said, handing the dazzling dagger to Alice to review.

"I hear what you're saying but I'm telling you that they'll never believe you," Alice said in a whisper, looking at the jewels aligning the precious dagger.

"Come on Alice... Cheer up... We'll be rich soon... Why shouldn't they believe me when I show them the dagger?" Wayne questioned.

Alice viciously lunged towards Wayne, plunging the dagger in his chest then twisted it twice. Blood gushed from Wayne's gaping chest wound like a broken faucet.

Alice then changed into the ghostly apparition, *Lord of the Amazon*.

With a look of shock and dismay upon his face, Wayne's body lost its strength. His legs weakened and buckled as he dropped to his knees, then to the floor of the jungle upon his face in death. Dark spirits came up through the damp ground, surrounding Wayne's corpse, dragging it off into the shadows of the jungle. The dark forces; the *fallen ones*, were well pleased with their latest sacrifice.

Lifting the golden, bloody dagger up high towards the thunderous clouds, the ancient

Lord of the Amazon laughed aloud as he vanished. Only the rumbling sounds of distant thunder above and the animals' constant mating calls remained.

FEATURED POEM

By Sadiq Alkoriji

"Dry Land"

We've been repeating the same story;

We cannot work in winter.

It might take sometime

But you will get used to it.

We know all along that we will be

tempted into action,

The snow witnesses our insatiable eyes

The fire we set licks its running shadows

Smell of burning desires takes shelter

in the white sheet of the bed.

Let's not talk about fatherhood,

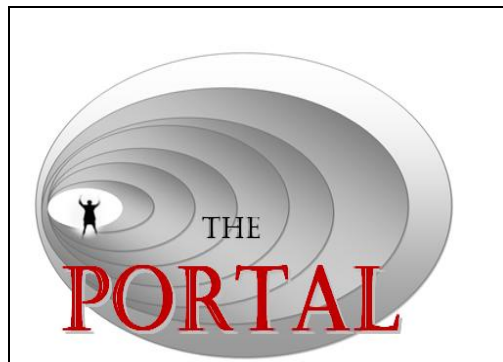
The train whistled but never stopped;

That's what we like to say

In times of silence.

**HAVE A
HAPPY NEW
YEAR**

**FROM THE
WRITER'S CLUB!**



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